

Yes, But

Sketches · 9-character play · 4 women, 3 men, 2 either · 28 min · Beginner

One Saturday in June, at the town hall, Camille is conducting weddings, as every week for the past twelve years. But today, at every ceremony, someone answers “yes, but”: two witnesses who have never met, a bride with conditions, a daughter who doesn’t want to watch her parents marry again. And Marco, the receptionist, has applied for a transfer to a town by the sea.

The wedding room of a neighbourhood town hall in France, one Saturday in June, from ten in the morning to four in the afternoon.

Casting

CAMILLE (No gender marker, Adult) fifty-something, a town councillor for twenty years, has conducted the Saturday weddings for twelve.

MARCO (Male role, Adult) 56, town hall receptionist for twenty years, has kept things formal with Camille since the very first day.

SAM (No gender marker, Young adult) 27, signs the register for the quarter-past-ten bride, has known her since nursery school.

INÈS (Female role, Young adult) 26, sister of the quarter-past-ten groom, and his witness.

ELENA (Female role, Adult) 35, getting married at half past eleven.

RAFAEL (Male role, Adult) 38, her husband-to-be, makes lists.

MILA (Female role, Adult) 45, Rosa and Victor’s daughter, witness at their second wedding.

ROSA (Female role, Senior) 74, divorced from Victor in 1993, marrying him again today.

VICTOR (Male role, Senior) 77, Rosa’s former and future husband.

SCENE 1: THE WITNESSES

(Ten o'clock. The wedding room: a table, a register, a bouquet in a bucket. Marco is lining up chairs. Camille is going over some index cards.)

MARCO. There's the dance tonight, in the square.

CAMILLE. I know. They've hung paper lanterns right outside my office. I had to crawl under them on all fours.

MARCO. I was wondering if you...

CAMILLE. If I?

MARCO. If you liked dancing.

CAMILLE. Yes. But I've got the register to finish, three weddings, and my neighbour bringing my drill back at eight.

MARCO. Your neighbour returns a drill on a Saturday night?

CAMILLE. My neighbour is extremely organised.

MARCO. There'll be a band. The trumpet player from the brass band, and his daughter on accordion.

CAMILLE. The one who played the wedding march backwards, last spring?

MARCO. She's come on a lot.

(Marco straightens a chair that was already straight. Sam appears at the door, an envelope in hand.)

SAM. Hello. Is this the right room for Nora and Paul's wedding?

CAMILLE. At quarter past ten. You're early.

SAM. I'm signing for Nora. I wanted to have a look first. Where to stand, where to sign, where to cry.

MARCO. The crying tends to happen in the second row. Witnesses go here, one on the left, one on the right.

(Inès runs in, a shoe in her hand.)

INÈS. They're not here? I ran all the way from the metro. I broke a heel on the stairs.

SAM. Not yet. Which side are you?

INÈS. Paul's side. I'm his sister. Witness. And you?

SAM. Nora's side. Since nursery school. We had chickenpox together.

INÈS. Oh. So you're Sam.

SAM. Paul's told you about me?

INÈS. He said: "You'll see, Sam's really very..." And he never finished the sentence. He just smiled. I found that suspicious.

SAM. Nora gave me exactly the same smile. When she talked about you.

(A pause. Inès and Sam look at each other, then look at Camille.)

CAMILLE. I don't know anything. I just marry people.

(Inès's phone buzzes.)

INÈS. "Car broke down. On our way. Keep the room busy."

SAM. Keep the room busy?

MARCO. There are forty guests in the corridor, and an aunt who's already asked twice where the toilets are.

CAMILLE. I can't let forty people in to stare at two empty chairs.

MARCO. I could offer them coffee. My machine makes a terrible racket, it'll keep them entertained.

CAMILLE. Go on, then. And you two, since you're here, let's save some time. Have you prepared something to read?

SAM. A little piece. About Nora.

INÈS. Me too. About Paul. But I'm not reading it in front of someone I don't know.

SAM. Me neither.

CAMILLE. Then get to know each other. You've got five minutes.

(Marco goes out. Sam and Inès stand behind their chairs. Camille settles at the end of the table and fills in the register.)

INÈS. Right. You go first.

(Sam unfolds a sheet of paper.)

SAM. "Nora says yes to everything. Yes to karaoke, yes to the stray cat, yes to the twenty-two-kilometre hike in sandals. For twenty years, I've been the one who said: wait. Today, for the first time, I don't want to tell her to wait."

INÈS. That's lovely.

SAM. It's too long.

CAMILLE. It isn't too long.

SAM. Thank you. Your turn.

INÈS. "Paul never says yes straight away. He says: I'll think about it. He thought about it for three years before he bought a sofa. When he rang to tell me he was getting married, I asked: have you thought about it? He said: no. First time ever."

SAM. Now that's lovely.

INÈS. I learned it by heart on the metro. That's why I missed a step.

SAM. So Nora says yes too fast...

INÈS. And Paul never says yes at all.

SAM. They're made for each other.

INÈS. Or made to drive each other mad.

SAM. Do you think it works, though? Two people who aren't alike?

INÈS. My parents were very alike. They split up over the same flaw.

SAM. Which one?

INÈS. They both wanted to be right.

SAM. I've been right my whole life. With Nora. I said wait, and I was right. It's very lonely, being right.

INÈS. Today you're allowed to be wrong. It's a wedding, nobody's going to check.

(Camille looks up from the register. Marco comes back, a cup in his hand, and goes to look out of the window.)

MARCO. Excuse me. Your couple's broken-down car, is it red, with white ribbons on the bonnet?

INÈS. Yes.

MARCO. It's parked across the road. Has been for twenty minutes. They're eating crisps.

SAM. They haven't broken down.

INÈS. They left us the room. On purpose.

SAM. It's a trap.

INÈS. It's a trap with ribbons on.

(A pause.)

INÈS. We could get our revenge. We walk out, they get married without witnesses.

CAMILLE. Impossible. You need two witnesses at least. Without you, there's no wedding.

SAM. Then we stay. But after the ceremony, we never speak again. That'll teach them.

INÈS. Yes. But after the meal. There's a seating plan, they're bound to have put us side by side.

SAM. After dessert, then.

INÈS. After the first dance.

SAM. Do you dance?

INÈS. Badly. Do you?

SAM. Very badly.

INÈS. Fine. We stop speaking after the last dance.

SAM. Noted.

(Inès puts her broken shoe back on. Sam offers an arm. Inès takes it. Inès and Sam go out to fetch the couple.)

MARCO. You see, it's not that complicated. "Do you dance?" "Badly."

CAMILLE. Marco, let the guests in.

MARCO. Yes. But you owe me an answer.

Yes, But

CAMILLE. I gave you one. I said yes.

MARCO. You said "yes, but".

(Marco opens the doors. A burst of voices and heels. Blackout.)

SCENE 2: THE CONDITIONS

(Half past eleven. Camille is leafing through a file. A sheet slips to the floor. Camille picks it up and reads it.)

CAMILLE. "Transfer request. Marco Ferri. Granville Town Hall." Granville?

(Marco comes in with a pen in a case.)

MARCO. The signing pen. I've filled it. What's...

CAMILLE. It was in the Rafael and Elena file. Between two birth certificates.

MARCO. I put it there so I wouldn't have to look at it.

CAMILLE. Granville. By the sea.

MARCO. I'm fifty-six and I've never seen the sea in winter.

CAMILLE. Since when?

MARCO. I applied in March. They answered on Thursday. There's a post on the front desk, in September.

CAMILLE. You never said a word.

MARCO. You never asked. In twenty years.

(Elena and Rafael come in, hand in hand. Marco takes back the sheet and puts it in his pocket.)

MARCO. The half-past-eleven couple.

CAMILLE. Good morning. Stand just there. Is the family behind you?

RAFAEL. The whole family. My mother's in the front row. She's wearing a hat.

ELENA. You can see the hat from here.

(Rafael takes a folded sheet of paper from his jacket.)

RAFAEL. I've made a list. The ones who are going to cry. My mother, obviously. My uncle, if he's been drinking. Your cousin Ana: she cries at

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every wedding, even ones on television.

ELENA. Rafael. Put the list away.

RAFAEL. I'm putting it away.

(He puts it away.)

CAMILLE. I'm going to read you a few articles of the law, and then I'll ask you the question. Just one.

(Camille reads in a low voice, turning the pages. Rafael nods at every article. Elena never takes her eyes off Rafael.)

CAMILLE. Rafael, will you take Elena, here present, to be your wife?

RAFAEL. Yes.

CAMILLE. Elena, will you take Rafael, here present, to be your husband?

ELENA. Yes, but.

(A silence. Rafael turns to her.)

ELENA. Sorry. It just came out. I meant to say it after the signing.

CAMILLE. But?

ELENA. Yes, but I'm keeping my name.

RAFAEL. We talked about it. You're keeping your name.

ELENA. I wanted it said. In front of witnesses.

CAMILLE. It's been said. Elena, will you...

ELENA. Yes, but we stop going to your mother's every Sunday.

RAFAEL. Hello, Mum.

ELENA. Every other Sunday.

RAFAEL. Every other. Fine. Then I've got some "buts" of my own.

CAMILLE. Rafael, you've already said yes.

RAFAEL. I'm withdrawing it. Temporarily.

CAMILLE. That's not how it works.

RAFAEL. I'm putting it on hold.

Yes, But

(Marco takes a little notebook out of his pocket.)

MARCO. Shall I take this down?

CAMILLE. Marco.

MARCO. In case of a dispute.

RAFAEL. The cat stops sleeping on my pillow.

ELENA. The cat sleeps wherever it likes, it's a cat.

RAFAEL. Then on your pillow.

ELENA. Fine.

MARCO. Cat: bride's pillow.

ELENA. You put your shoes away. All of them. Not just the ones people can see.

RAFAEL. Fine. And you stop finishing my...

ELENA. Sentences. Fine.

(Laughter from the front row. Rafael rolls his eyes.)

MARCO. Name, Sundays, cat, shoes, sentences. I've got half a page left.

RAFAEL. Holidays. One year the sea, one year the mountains.

ELENA. And in the mountains, you carry the rucksack.

RAFAEL. Even on the way back?

ELENA. Especially on the way back.

RAFAEL. And when it snows, I wake you up.

ELENA. Even at five in the morning?

RAFAEL. Especially at five in the morning. That's when it's most beautiful.

MARCO. The sea... The sea's nice.

(Camille looks at Marco. Marco turns the page.)

CAMILLE. May I say something? In this room, I've conducted four hundred and twelve weddings. The couples with conditions, I don't worry about them. They talk to each other. The ones who worry me are the ones with nothing to say. The ones who wait for the other one to guess. For years, sometimes. For

Yes, But

twenty years.

(Marco stops writing.)

RAFAEL. What about you, do you have conditions?

CAMILLE. Me, I ask the question. I never answer it.

MARCO. Noted.

ELENA. There's a real one. One real condition.

RAFAEL. I know.

ELENA. When you're scared, you make lists. Shopping, bills, holidays in a spreadsheet. This morning you made a list of the people who were going to cry. It's still in your pocket. I want you to tell me when you're scared. Before the list.

(A pause.)

RAFAEL. I'm scared.

ELENA. Now?

RAFAEL. Since we got to the town hall. Since the car park, actually. Since January, if we're being honest.

ELENA. So am I.

RAFAEL. Then my real condition is that you stay. Even on the days I make lists.

ELENA. Yes.

CAMILLE. Is that a yes with no "but"?

ELENA. That's a yes.

RAFAEL. And I'm taking mine back. Yes.

CAMILLE. Then in the name of the law, you are joined in marriage. You may sign.

(Marco holds out the pen. Elena and Rafael sign, then two witnesses come up from the front row and sign in turn. Marco tears the page out of his notebook and gives it to Rafael.)

MARCO. A gift from the town hall. For the fridge.

Yes, But

RAFAEL. Thank you. I'll write it out neatly.

ELENA. Rafael.

RAFAEL. I'm joking. I'm scared, that's all.

(Elena and Rafael go out to applause. From the front row, someone throws petals at them. Marco picks them up.)

CAMILLE. Granville.

MARCO. They want an answer before Monday. It's me they're asking. Not you.

CAMILLE. And if someone asked you to stay?

MARCO. Who?

CAMILLE. Someone. With a condition. Like them.

MARCO. Then that someone would have to say it. Out loud. In front of witnesses, even.

CAMILLE. Yes. But it's midday, and I've still got a wedding at four.

MARCO. You've always got a wedding.

(Marco goes out with the petals. Camille stays by the open register. Blackout.)

SCENE 3: THE BRIDE'S DAUGHTER

(Two o'clock. The room is empty. Camille is eating a sandwich on the edge of the table, the register open alongside. Mila comes in without knocking.)

MILA. Hello. Are you the one doing the four o'clock wedding? Rosa Lenoir and Victor Lenoir.

CAMILLE. That's me. They have the same surname, I thought it was a mistake.

MILA. It isn't a mistake. They've been married before. From 1976 to 1993. I'm their daughter. Mila.

CAMILLE. And their witness, according to the file.

MILA. According to the file. I've come to ask you a favour. There must be a document missing. A certificate, a signature, a stamp. Something that means it all has to be put off. Till the autumn. Or for ever.

CAMILLE. The file is complete. Your mother even sent her birth certificate twice.

MILA. She always does everything twice. She's marrying my father twice.

CAMILLE. You don't want them to marry again.

MILA. I want them to think about it.

CAMILLE. At seventy-four and seventy-seven, they've had time to think.

MILA. They've had thirty-three years. I was twelve when they split up. For six years, I packed my suitcase every Sunday night. One week at hers, one week at his. Two toothbrushes, two pairs of pyjamas, two birthdays, two Christmas trees. And in March they ring me, the way you'd announce a holiday: "We're getting married again, darling, you'll be our witness." As if the thirty years in between were just something in brackets. As if you could simply close the brackets.

(A pause. Camille puts down the sandwich.)

CAMILLE. What do you want me to do?

MILA. Ask them the real question. Why now.

CAMILLE. I ask one question. Just one. And people answer yes or no.

MILA. Or "yes, but".

CAMILLE. That's a new one. This morning I had an eleven-minute "yes, but". With a cat in it.

MILA. You think that's funny.

CAMILLE. I think it's alive. Listen. I marry twenty-five-year-olds who think it's for ever. And about once a year, seventy-five-year-olds who know nothing is for ever, and who come anyway. They're the ones I like best.

MILA. You like them best because you weren't the one packing the suitcases.

(A silence.)

CAMILLE. That's true.

MILA. And can a witness say no?

CAMILLE. A witness says nothing. A witness watches, and signs at the end.

MILA. Then I've been their witness my whole life. I watched. I never signed anything.

(Marco comes in, an office phone in his hand, the cord stretched all the way to the door.)

MARCO. Sorry. Granville rang back. They don't want the answer on Monday any more. They want it tonight. They've got another candidate.

CAMILLE. Tonight.

MARCO. Before eight o'clock.

(Marco sees Mila.)

MARCO. Hello. Are you the Lenoir daughter? Your parents are in the lobby.

MILA. Already? The wedding's at four.

MARCO. They're early. Very early. Your mother's brought sandwiches for everyone. Your father asked me three times if his tie was straight. It was. And your mother asked me twice if you'd arrived yet.

MILA. What did you tell her?

MARCO. That I hadn't seen anyone. I didn't know if you wanted to be seen.

MILA. Thirty years late and two hours early. That's them all over.

MARCO. Shall I tell them to wait?

MILA. They're good at it.

(Marco goes out, dragging the phone cord behind him.)

MILA. Is that him?

CAMILLE. Who?

MILA. Granville.

CAMILLE. Marco has run the front desk for twenty years. He's applied for a post in Granville, by the sea. If he says yes tonight, he leaves in September.

MILA. That's not what I asked. And nobody's trying to keep him?

(A pause. Camille closes the register.)

CAMILLE. Twelve years I've been marrying people in this room. And he's always there, at the back, by the door. He puts the chairs away. He lends his pen. He always has a handkerchief for the ones who cry, and another one for the ones who didn't think they would. I've never said anything. Because as long as nothing's said, nothing gets spoiled.

MILA. That's exactly what my mother used to say. The year they split up.

CAMILLE. Ah.

MILA. Do you want some advice from someone who doesn't believe in marriage?

CAMILLE. Yes.

MILA. Don't let him pack his suitcase. I know all about suitcases.

CAMILLE. And you? Are you going to let them get married?

MILA. You told me there wasn't a single document missing.

CAMILLE. Not one.

MILA. Then I'll be their witness. Yes. But I'm not making a speech.

CAMILLE. Nobody's asking you to.

MILA. My mother is. She posted me three templates. With spelling mistakes.

(Mila takes an envelope out of her bag, looks at it, puts it away. Mila leaves. Camille looks at the door, picks up the sandwich again, doesn't eat. Blackout.)

SCENE 4: SECOND TIME AROUND

(Four o'clock. Rosa and Victor stand in front of the table, Mila beside her mother. Marco by the door, the pen in his hand. Camille opens the register.)

CAMILLE. Rosa Lenoir, Victor Lenoir. Good afternoon.

ROSA. Good afternoon. We were a little early.

CAMILLE. Two hours.

VICTOR. We were worried about the traffic.

ROSA. He lives two streets away.

VICTOR. There's traffic everywhere these days.

(Rosa hands Camille a cardboard folder.)

ROSA. All our papers. In duplicate.

CAMILLE. You've already sent them to me. Twice.

MILA. She always does everything twice.

ROSA. That way, we're sure.

CAMILLE. I also need two witnesses. I can only see one.

ROSA. The woman from the bakery was meant to come. She couldn't shut the shop.

VICTOR. On a Saturday, I ask you.

CAMILLE. We'll see when it's time to sign. Before we begin, I have a question that isn't in the law. Someone asked me to ask it.

MILA. There's no need.

ROSA. What question?

CAMILLE. Why now?

(Rosa looks at Mila. Mila looks at her shoes.)

VICTOR. Because I fell down the stairs, in February.

ROSA. He fell down the stairs.

VICTOR. Broke my hip. She came to the hospital. Nobody had told her, she heard it from the bakery.

ROSA. The bakery knows everything.

VICTOR. At the desk, the nurse asked her: "And who are you to him?" And she said: "His wife."

ROSA. It was quicker. Visiting hours ended at seven.

VICTOR. Thirty-three years later. Out of habit. And nobody contradicted her. She came every day for six weeks, and every day the nurse would say to me: "Your wife's here." So I thought: might as well make it true.

ROSA. And I thought that at my age, I didn't feel like lying to nurses any more.

CAMILLE. Thank you.

(Camille looks at Mila. Mila says nothing.)

CAMILLE. Rosa, will you take Victor, here present, to be your husband?

ROSA. Yes. But we keep separate flats.

VICTOR. We talked about this, Rosa.

ROSA. I want it said. In front of the town hall. You keep your flat, your

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television turned up too loud, your newspapers on every chair.

VICTOR. And you keep your plants that stare at me while I eat.

ROSA. On Thursdays, you come to mine for dinner.

VICTOR. And on Sundays, you come to me.

MILA. Just like me. One week at one place, one week at the other.

(A silence. Rosa turns to her daughter.)

ROSA. Mila.

MILA. No, it's good. Really. You've found the system. It took you thirty-three years, but you found it.

VICTOR. Sweetheart...

MILA. I said I wasn't making a speech.

ROSA. Nobody's making you.

(Mila takes an envelope out of her bag. She pulls out three sheets of paper, looks at them, folds them up again.)

MILA. Mum sent me three templates. The first one begins "Love is patient". The second one begins "Dear friends". The third one is a recipe for clafoutis. I think she sent the wrong page.

ROSA. I've been looking everywhere for that recipe.

MILA. Here. So I'll say my own. It's short. When I was twelve, the two of you told me, in the kitchen: "We love you, but we can't live under the same roof any more." I spent thirty years thinking the "but" wiped out the beginning of the sentence. Earlier today, I realised it doesn't. Both halves were true. So, Dad, on Thursdays, you'll turn the television down. And Mum, you'll stop doing everything twice. Except this.

(A pause. Rosa takes Mila's hand. Victor takes out a handkerchief. Marco hands him a second one.)

CAMILLE. Rosa, let me start again. Will you take Victor, here present, to be your husband?

ROSA. Yes. No buts. Well, except for Thursdays.

CAMILLE. Marco, will you...

(Silence. Everyone turns to look at Marco.)

Yes, But

MARCO. Yes.

ROSA. I beg your pardon?

VICTOR. I think it's my turn.

CAMILLE. Victor. Sorry. Victor, will you take Rosa, here present, to be your wife?

VICTOR. Yes. And so will he, apparently. But I've got a condition too.

ROSA. You didn't have one on the phone.

VICTOR. I thought of it on the bus. I want us to dance. In 1976, your uncle sat on the record player. We never danced.

ROSA. We danced at Mila's school fête.

VICTOR. You trod on my feet for the whole song. That doesn't count.

MILA. It counted for me. I was eight, I watched you dance right to the end.

(A pause. Victor and Rosa look at their daughter.)

CAMILLE. In the name of the law, you are joined in marriage. You may sign.

(Marco comes over with the pen. Rosa takes it, then puts it down without signing.)

ROSA. No.

MILA. Mum.

ROSA. I'm not signing until that sentence is finished. "Marco, will you" what?

CAMILLE. It was a mistake.

ROSA. I made a mistake in 1993. I know what one looks like. It doesn't look like that.

VICTOR. She's right. She's often right, it's exhausting.

ROSA. I waited thirty-three years to marry again. I can wait two minutes.

(A pause. Camille comes round the table and stands facing Marco.)

CAMILLE. Marco, will you not go to Granville?

MARCO. Yes. But...

CAMILLE. But?

MARCO. But I need a reason. For the letter. They always want a reason.

CAMILLE. Reason: without you, the town hall will never know where the chairs are kept.

MARCO. That's a bit thin.

CAMILLE. Reason: someone here would like to go to the dance tonight. Can't dance. Can't say so. And has taken twenty years to finish a sentence.

MILA. Now that's a reason.

MARCO. Then I'm staying.

VICTOR. Can we sign now?

ROSA. Wait. Are you two always this formal with each other?

MARCO. For twenty years.

CAMILLE. Twenty years, and not once my first name. "Good morning." "Sorry." "The signing pen." Never my first name.

ROSA. Oh no. That's my condition. I'm not signing until he's said it.

(A pause. Marco puts the pen down on the table.)

MARCO. Camille.

(A silence.)

CAMILLE. Again.

MARCO. Camille. Will you...

CAMILLE. Yes. But the rest at the dance.

(Rosa signs. Victor signs. Mila takes the pen, hesitates, signs.)

CAMILLE. We're still one witness short.

ROSA. Him. He knows how to say yes, we all heard him.

MARCO. Me? Twenty years I've been handing out the pen. I've never signed.

VICTOR. There's a first time for everything.

(Marco signs. Through the window, music rises from the square: the dance is starting.)

Yes, But

ROSA. Victor, do you dance?

VICTOR. Badly.

ROSA. So do I. I've been waiting fifty years for this.

(Rosa and Victor go out arm in arm, Mila behind them. Marco holds the pen out to Camille. Camille takes the pen, and Marco's hand with it. The music swells. Blackout.)



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