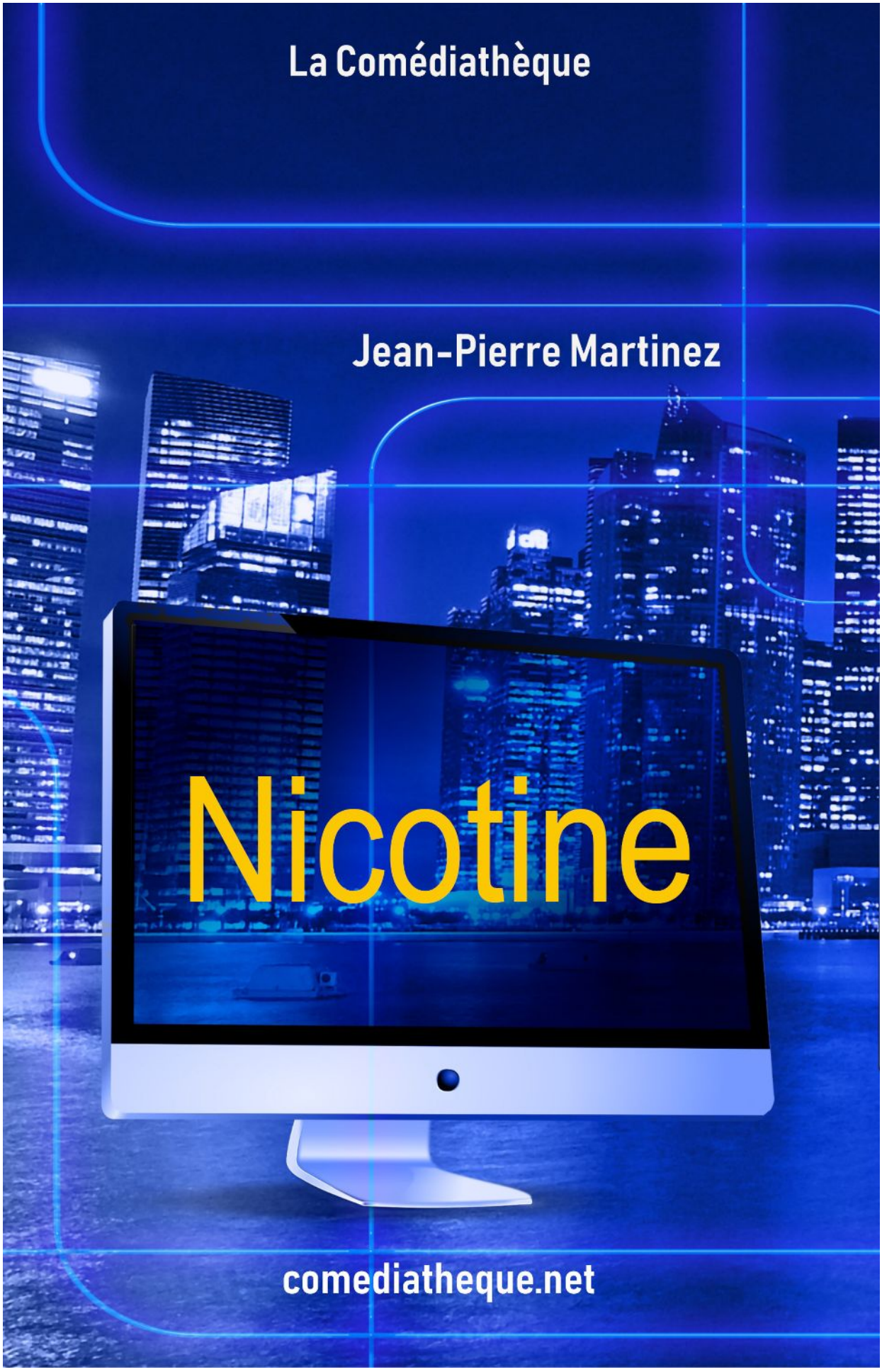

La Comédiathèque
Jean-Pierre Martinez
Nicotine
comediatheque.net

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Nicotine

Jean-Pierre Martinez

Translation by the author

To work or not to work, that is the question.
Over the course of a smoke break, electronic or otherwise,
a few work addicts exchange some hazy thoughts.

Cast

A flexible cast of approximately forty characters, of any gender.
The same performer may play several roles.

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1. The Particles

Something resembling a terrace. Two characters, of any gender, arrive, start smoking or vaping and daydream as they watch the curls of smoke or vapour drift upwards.

Yael – Did you know that particles can be in two places at the same time?

Alex – Particles?

Yael – Elementary particles! Photons, if you prefer. At least, that's what quantum physics says.

Alex – Are you sure you're not smoking something stronger than nicotine?

Yael – No, I assure you. I heard about it on the radio yesterday.

Alex – Well, it would be useful to be a particle, wouldn't it? I could attend that meeting scheduled for five today and still pick up my daughter from school at the same time.

Yael – Imagine being able to be in two places at once! You could queue at the supermarket with your partner on a Saturday morning and, at the same time, lie in bed with your lover in a charming little country hotel.

Alex – And when you get back, the fridge would be full. No one would suspect a thing.

Yael – You wouldn't even need an alibi.

Alex – Could we still talk about infidelity?

Yael – Adultery is a question of timing. You can't be unfaithful with someone you knew before or after your marriage. But quantum physics describes a state of matter in which the very notion of time is suspended.

Alex – So particles never get cheated on. That's something to dream about.

Yael – No more time means no more causality, and therefore, no more guilt.

Alex – That hardly sounds very Christian.

Yael – Apparently God doesn't govern the infinitely small. Quantum physics is a theory of one great universal orgy.

Alex – Unfortunately, my particles aren't governed by the laws of quantum physics.

Yael – You're right… We seem to be governed by Murphy's law instead.

Alex puts away his electronic cigarette.

Alex – Actually, I need to get back. I'm not sure my boss knows much about quantum physics. It's kind of funny, but he still thinks that when I'm on a break, I'm not really working.

Yael – That just shows how little he knows. If he only knew the kind of high-level conversations we have during a smoke break.

Yael also puts away his cigarette.

Alex – Smokers are becoming social outcasts, aren't they?

Yael – That's why I'm giving up smoking on Monday.

Alex – I've heard that before.

Yael – No, seriously, I mean it this time.

Alex – So why wait until Monday?

Yael – I have to pick up my mother-in-law tonight. She's staying with us for the weekend. And believe me, a weekend with my mother-in-law is not the best time to quit smoking.

Alex – I see…

Yael – Do you also have a mother-in-law?

Alex – You can choose not to get married, but you can't choose not to have a mother-in-law.

Yael – Unless you marry an orphan…

Alex – Preferably someone whose parents were never identified. Then you wouldn't even have to visit the family graves on memorial days…

Yael – That brings us back to quantum mechanics. A cat has to be either dead or alive. And it's the same with mothers-in-law…

Alex – A cat?

Yael – Haven't you heard of Schrödinger's cat?

Alex – No.

Yael – He was a friend of Einstein's who questioned the laws of quantum physics.

Alex – So he had a mother-in-law, did he?

Yael – I'll explain another time. Oh, and I must remember to put some fuel in the car. Otherwise I'll run out on the motorway while I'm collecting my mother-in-law.

They leave.

2. Old-School Flirting

A rooftop terrace. A man, Anthony, arrives, followed shortly afterwards by a woman, Clara. Their eyes meet, but they clearly do not know each other, and both quickly look away. Each takes out an electronic cigarette. Anthony pretends to search his pockets, then approaches Clara.

Anthony – Excuse me, do you have a lighter, please?

Clara looks puzzled.

Clara – But that's an electronic cigarette, isn't it?

Anthony – Of course, how silly of me. Now that I've stopped smoking, I'll have to update my methods of chatting women up.

Clara – If you don't mind my saying so, you should have updated them back in the late 1980s, shouldn't you?

Anthony – Come on, have a little sympathy. We men are such fragile creatures. Being a modern, liberated man isn't easy.

Clara – You sound like one of those old songs my mother used to listen to.

Anthony – I was only trying to make you laugh. Clearly that didn't work.

Clara – I see. So the thing with the lighter was a joke. In that case, bravo, very funny. A little heads-up like "Warning: joke" would've been nice.

Anthony – Sometimes I'm funny without even meaning to be. Making people laugh comes naturally to me. In fact, sometimes the women I'm talking to understand my jokes before I do. How long ago did you give up…?

Clara – Making jokes?

Anthony – Smoking.

Clara – Oh no, I've never smoked cigarettes. Not yet, anyway. I'm just vaping to try it out.

Anthony – To try it out?

Clara – To see if I really like it.

Anthony – Ah, I see…

Clara – And if I do like it, I'll start smoking real cigarettes, with real tobacco. Does that sound silly to you?

Anthony – Not at all.

Clara – And yet it's completely ridiculous.

Anthony – So, are you pulling my leg now?

Clara – Exactly. And in my case, believe me, it's completely intentional. I'm only funny when I decide to be.

Anthony – Well… Then we're even. I also appreciate a woman with a sense of humour, you know? And I have to admit, at first, I was worried you might be completely humourless.

Clara – I'm relieved to hear that. I was worried I'd already disappointed you. But tell me, when you talk about a woman's sense of humour, are you referring to her ability to laugh at your jokes, whether intentional or not?

He looks puzzled for a moment.

Anthony – How about a little break?

Clara – I was going to suggest the same thing. That is what we came out here for, after all.

Both vape separately.

Anthony – Anyway, it would never have worked out between us.

Clara – Is the break already over?

Anthony – We work at the same company…

Clara – They say a surprising number of couples meet at work.

Anthony – Can you imagine going home together to our little suburban flat and asking each other how our day went, when we've been working in the same office all day?

Clara – We work in the same office?

Anthony – All right, I obviously haven't caught your eye. But if you haven't even noticed we work in the same office, perhaps you need glasses.

Clara – I'm teasing you again. See? We can still surprise each other, even after sharing an office for three months.

Anthony – You've been here three months?

Clara – I'd prefer to take that as one of your unintentional jokes, or it might be a bit offensive. But I agree, in the long run, it would be unbearable.

Anthony – Well, then I see only one solution.

Clara – What's that?

Anthony – I quit.

Clara – I'm not sure I'd rather go out with someone who's unemployed than with a colleague. You wouldn't even be able to pay the rent on that little suburban flat where you were planning for us to live happily ever after.

Anthony – It's amazing how practical women can be.

She ostentatiously blows the vapour from her cigarette in his face.

Clara – Prince Charming rarely has a public transport pass or signs on at the job centre.

She puts away her electronic cigarette.

Anthony – We could still vape together.

Clara – Perhaps we'll meet again another time.

Anthony – In case you've forgotten, we work in the same office. We're bound to see each other again.

Clara – That's a good reason not to risk sleeping together.

Clara leaves. Anthony stands there, puzzled. He vapes a little longer, then leaves too.

3. A Twist of Fate

A rooftop terrace. Two characters of any gender arrive. They take out cigarettes or vapes. An awkward silence follows.

Casey – Did you know him?

Jordan – Yes, well… just by sight… I saw him around here occasionally during his smoke breaks… And you?

Casey – He worked in the office right next to mine.

Jordan – Mmm…

Casey – If we had suspected anything…

Jordan – Suspected what?

Casey – Well, what was going to happen to him.

Jordan – Mmm… And what could we have done?

Casey – I don't know… We could have tried something…

Jordan – Oh yeah? Like what, for example?

Casey – You're right, we couldn't have done anything.

Jordan – Exactly.

Casey – It's fate.

Jordan – So we have nothing to regret.

A moment passes as they smoke.

Casey – His wife decided to cremate him. That's what he wanted, it seems.

Jordan – Yes, of course…

Casey – Why? Did he mention it to you?

Jordan – He went up in flames… You might say he had a preference for cremation.

Casey – Mmm…

Jordan – And besides, for cremation, the hardest part is already done.

Casey – Well, he didn't set himself on fire deliberately. It was an accident.

Jordan – An accident… Although with that level of carelessness, you might call it an unconscious death wish.

Casey – Lighting a cigarette while filling your fuel tank from a jerrycan… That's suicidal.

Jordan – Particularly on the hard shoulder of a motorway. *(A pause.)* Was that before or after the lorry hit him?

Casey – Before what?

Jordan – Before he went up in flames like a torch.

Casey – Afterwards, I think. He started running as though he wanted to cross the motorway. The lorry driver tried to avoid him, but couldn't.

Jordan – Good thing the truck didn't catch fire too.

Casey – It was a fire engine. At least he was lucky in one respect: he received first aid straight away.

Jordan – Unfortunately, it was already too late.

Casey – What an idea to cross like that, without looking. Like a madman.

Jordan – Though, he was already engulfed in flames.

Casey – Who knows what he was trying to find on the other side of the highway.

Jordan – That… we'll never know…

Casey – Hmm… He'll take his secret to the grave… Or rather, to the urn.

Jordan – Perhaps the answer lies buried in the ashes.

Casey – You think?

Jordan – No, I'm joking.

Casey – I thought as much.

Jordan – Still, you were right earlier. If we'd known what was going to happen, perhaps we could have done something.

Casey – Like what?

Jordan – We could have tried to convince him to quit smoking.

Casey – Cigarettes… should be banned! Do you know how many people die every year because of tobacco?

Jordan – Well, he didn't die directly from the harmful effects of tobacco on his health…

Casey – If he hadn't lit a match over his jerrycan when he ran out of fuel on the motorway on his way to collect his mother-in-law, he'd be smoking here with us today.

Jordan – It's fate, I tell you. Well, shall we go?

They are about to leave.

Casey – They found a black cat on the central reservation of the highway. I wonder if that brought him bad luck.

Jordan – And the cat, did it survive?

Casey – The cat? We don't know if it's alive or dead.

Jordan – Maybe he tried to cross the lanes to save the cat…

They leave.

4. Stray Cats

A rooftop terrace. A woman arrives to smoke. Another joins shortly after. They exchange polite smiles. The second woman's mobile phone rings and she answers.

Patricia – Hello? I told you not to ring me here. Yes, I know it's a mobile, but at this time of day you know perfectly well I'm at work. Listen, we'll talk about it later, all right? And anyway, there are plenty more fish in the sea, aren't there? I really must go. I can't talk now, I'm in a meeting… No, I'll ring you back…

She puts her phone away and gives an awkward glance at the other woman, who pretends not to have heard a word.

Crystal – Are you new here? I've never seen you before.

Patricia – For a week now. I used to work on the ground floor. I'd go outside to smoke on the forecourt. But the company relocated abroad.

Crystal – That's something I can't wrap my head around. Our companies move abroad, and people from those same countries come here looking for work.

Patricia – And you?

Crystal – It's been fifteen years.

Patricia – Oh, really. So you like it here…

Crystal – Yes, well… When I first arrived, I didn't think I'd stay this long. After that, I didn't have the courage to look elsewhere. And now, I'm not sure anyone else would want me.

Patricia – I understand. A job contract is a bit like a marriage contract. If he hadn't thrown me out, I'm not sure I would have had the courage to look for something else. By the way, sorry about earlier…

Crystal – Was that your ex?

Patricia – My mother.

Crystal – Ah… It's much harder to get rid of a mother than an ex…

Patricia – That's probably why the term "ex-mother" doesn't exist… She lost her cat.

Crystal – So your mother really has lost her cat?

Patricia – How did you know?

Crystal gives a faint smile.

Crystal – Just a guess. You sounded as if you were trying to console someone.

Patricia – Sorry, I'm a bit slow today… She takes in every stray cat in the neighbourhood. The trouble with strays is that they don't like staying at home. Sooner or later they escape over the rooftops.

Crystal – Just like men.

Patricia – You seem to know what you're talking about…

Crystal – I seem to collect lost men myself. The sort who look as if they don't know where they live. It's my Mother Teresa side. I patch them up and spoil them a little. They begin to purr. But believe me, sooner or later they come in through the door and go straight out of the window.

Patricia – Yes… *(She discreetly looks at her watch)* I shouldn't stay too long, I'm still in my trial period…

Crystal – I need to get back too. But we could have a girls' night out for a drink one of these nights, right?

Patricia – Why not? I've been as free as a bird for a few days now.

Crystal – So there is an ex.

Patricia – But I had no trouble getting rid of that one. It seems men have a tendency to burn with love for me.

Crystal – You're very lucky…

Patricia – He was burned to death on the highway.

Crystal – I'm very sorry.

Patricia – Anyway, it would never have worked between us. He was married and a homebody.

Crystal – Life is unfair. The homebody type never lives with us… Well, see you later…

She leaves. Patricia smokes a little longer, then goes too.

5. Empedocles' Sandals

A rooftop terrace. A character of any gender enters: the CEO. They remove their shoes, whether loafers or high heels, and approach the edge of the stage as though standing beside a precipice and considering a jump. Another character, Angel, also of any gender, arrives behind them and stops in astonishment.

Angel – President…

The other turns around.

CEO – Sometimes I wonder whether we wouldn't be better off giving it all up. Don't you?

Angel – Stopping smoking, you mean?

CEO – Honestly, what's the point of all this?

Angel – I don't know, President…

CEO – It's a crisis, my friend. The shoe market is in free fall. The company is on the brink of disaster. One more step and we're over the edge.

Angel – I… You shouldn't be so pessimistic, President. We can still feel a bit of a stir.

CEO – A stir? You can feel a stir? That's not a stir, my friend, that's a fever! Do you believe in God?

Angel – Not particularly.

CEO – Well, this may surprise you, but I believe in God.

Angel – Really?

CEO – Only recently, mind you. I used to believe in nothing but the stock market. Then I saw the election results. There was only one possible explanation: divine intervention.

Angel – The election results?

CEO – Any election results! Our leaders must be appointed by divine providence. There's no other explanation.

Angel – I suppose that would explain a few things…

CEO – Presidents are chosen by the grace of God, just as kings once were. *(Solemnly)* God exists, my friend. And believe me, he has sworn to bring us down!

The CEO moves away from the edge of the stage, barefoot.

CEO – Have you heard of Empedocles' sandals?

Angel – Empedocles' sandals? No, President. But if you'd like, I can look into it.

CEO – Well, my dear, if one day you find my shoes on the edge of that volcano, you'll know where to find me.

Angel – Where's that, President?

CEO – Down below, my friend. In the fires of hell!

Angel – Very well, President. *(Angel's mobile phone rings.)* Excuse me a moment, President… Yes? Yes, yes… Listen… No, I can't talk right now… *(Lowering their voice and moving away a little.)* I'm with the President… *(While Angel is on the phone, the CEO slips away, leaving their shoes behind.)* All right, I'll call you back in five minutes…

Angel puts away their phone and, finding the President gone, stands there in bewilderment. Then Angel leans over the edge of the stage to look down.

Another character, man or woman, arrives and starts smoking as well. Angel turns around and is surprised to see them.

Ellis – Are you okay?

Angel – Uh… Yes, yes…

Ellis – What are you working on these days?

Angel – The… The Sandals of Empedocles, have you heard of them?

Ellis – I've heard a bit about them, yes.

Angel – And do you know who they belong to?

Ellis – The sandals of… Well, to him, right?

Angel – To whom?

Ellis – To Empedocles.

Angel – Ah yes, obviously.

Ellis – Why?

Angel – I don't know… A hunch… Don't tell anyone, but I have a feeling it's going to go up.

Ellis – Go up? Empedocles' sandals?

Angel looks at the shoes again.

Angel – On the other hand, we might soon have a leadership problem here. If I were you, I'd sell. This stays between us, of course…

Angel leaves. Ellis watches Angel go, intrigued. After a moment, Ellis notices the shoes, approaches, and examines them with perplexity. Then Ellis moves a bit closer to the edge of the stage and looks down. Ellis takes out their phone and dials a number.

Ellis – Yes, it's me. Listen, could you sell all the shares we hold in…

The CEO returns accompanied by another executive, a man or a woman. The CEO is barefoot. Ellis leaves.

Morgan – Unbelievable! The company's shares have fallen twenty per cent in two hours!

CEO – Yes, I know.

Morgan – You don't seem worried…

CEO – A fall in share prices is also a buying opportunity. I bought ten per cent of the company when the shares were at their lowest. *(Checks his phone.)* In fact, our shares have already recovered fifteen per cent.

Morgan also looks at the screen of their phone.

Morgan – Apparently, there was a rumour about the CEO's death…

CEO – Completely unfounded, as you can see. I've never been in better shape!

Morgan looks at him suspiciously.

Morgan – I understand… *(Notices the CEO is barefoot.)* But what happened to your shoes?

CEO – My shoes?

The CEO pretends to see his shoes, which he had intentionally left at the edge of the stage earlier.

CEO – Ah, there they are! I was afraid I had lost them forever.

The CEO approaches the edge of the stage and puts his shoes back on. Then pats the other on the shoulder.

CEO – A miracle, my friend. I told you God exists.

They leave.

6. With or without a Filter

A rooftop terrace. Alan enters.

Alan – With or without a filter…

Two women, one blonde and one brunette, arrive.

Alan – Blonde… or brunette.

The two women continue their conversation without paying attention to him.

Emily – So I told him, are you kidding me?

Jessica – And what did he say?

Emily – What did you expect him to say?

Jessica – Didn't he say anything?

Emily – And what did he tell you?

Jessica – The same thing.

Emily – I can't believe it!

Jessica – I assure you.

Emily – But it's incredible. Did he really say that to you?

Jessica – He left me stunned.

Emily – Oh yeah, of course, no surprise there. But who does he think he is?

Jessica – You have to put him in his place now and then, obviously, because if not…

Emily – Oh no, I swear, there are times…

Alan strikes a theatrical pose to declaim in a Shakespearean style.

Alan – To smoke… or not to smoke.

Finally, the two women notice him and exchange a look of mistrust.

Alan – That is the question… Ladies… Have a good day…

The two women manage a faint smile but do not reply. Alan exits.

Jessica – Who's that? Do you know him?

Emily – I've seen him once or twice.

Jessica – He certainly thinks a lot of himself, doesn't he?

Emily – You can say that again.

Jessica – Does he think he's James Dean or what?

Emily – Of course, he's not James Dean, right?

Jessica – Do you know where he works?

Emily – I think on the fifth floor.

Jessica – On the fifth? What do they do on the fifth?

Emily – I don't know… I suppose the same as on the sixth.

Jessica – Ah, I see. So he really thinks he's something…

They smoke for a moment.

Emily – Well, to be honest, he's not bad…

Jessica – I know, right.

Emily – He's not James Dean, but still…

Jessica – Let's be realistic, it's unlikely we'll ever see James Dean around here.

Emily – That's for sure…

They start to leave.

Jessica – And you say he works on the fifth floor?

Emily – I think so.

Jessica – Isn't James Dean dead?

They exit.

7. Nothing to Laugh About

A rooftop terrace. Two characters, of any gender, arrive. The second is laughing uncontrollably and continues to do so throughout the scene.

Max – You seem to be in a good mood. What's got you so happy?

Pat – Didn't I tell you?

Max – No. Are you going on holiday?

Pat – I'm leaving the company. For good.

Max – You got fired?

Pat – Better than that!

Max – You won the lottery?

Pat – I have an extremely rare genetic condition. The doctors were baffled for months, but they've finally diagnosed it. One chance in twenty million! Can you believe it? I'm going on long-term sick leave tonight.

Max – Oh, I see why you're laughing. Even better than winning the lottery, apparently.

Pat – But it's not a fatal disease, okay? It's just a condition that… makes me extremely euphoric all day.

Max – Ah, I see…

Pat – I can't stop laughing from morning till night.

Max – Obviously, in our line of work, that could be problematic.

Pat – Imagine me saying to a client: "Now, this one is solid oak. A little more expensive, of course, but it's one of our finest coffins…" And then bursting out laughing!

Max – In the funeral business, laughing all the time could certainly count as an occupational illness… And you really can't help it?

Pat – It's genetic, I'm telling you. An extremely rare condition. There's no known treatment.

Max – And your family, how are they handling it?

Pat – Very badly. We hadn't spoken in twenty years, and suddenly I'm laughing all day. My friends, the same. Everyone's convinced I'm mocking them.

Max – And right now, are you sure you're not making fun of me?

Pat – No, I swear I'm not.

The other puts away his e-cigarette.

Max – Well, enough joking around. I have to get back to work. And believe me, it's not making me laugh. So, have fun, okay?

Pat – But wait…

Pat laughs. Max leaves, looking upset. Pat follows.

8. Vested Interest

A rooftop terrace. Two women arrive. The second woman starts smoking or vaping.

Isabel – Sometimes, I swear, I feel like killing him.

Carmen – Who?

Isabel – The boss!

Carmen – Oh, right…

Isabel – You know he gets upset when I tell him I'm taking a smoking break?

Carmen – Maybe he's concerned about your health.

Isabel – Yeah, right. Who does he think he is? Even slaves on galley ships got to take a break now and then.

Carmen – You think so?

Isabel – Well, we're not slaves, after all!

Carmen – That's true. *(She offers her a cigarette)* Want one?

Isabel – No, thanks, I quit.

Carmen – You quit smoking?

Isabel – Yes… That's also why I'm a bit on edge, you know?

Carmen – And you still take your smoking break?

Isabel explodes.

Isabel – Oh no, not you too!

Carmen – What? What did I say?

Isabel – Just because I quit smoking doesn't mean I'm giving up my smoking break!

Carmen – Yeah, no, I didn't mean that.

Isabel – The smoking break is a hard-won right, damn it!

Carmen – Yes, yes, of course. Absolutely.

Isabel – Oh, you're all pissing me off!

She leaves. The other follows her.

Carmen – Wait, we can still talk…

Isabel – If this keeps up, I'll start smoking again. Is that what you all want?

They exit.

9. Import-Export

A rooftop terrace. Two characters, men or women, arrive. They start smoking.

Kim – What floor do you work on?

Sam – The fifth…

Kim – What company is on the fifth?

Sam – The same as on the fourth.

Kim – Ah, right. Import-export.

Sam – Lately, it's mostly import.

Kim – Yes. What could we possibly have left to export?

Sam – I don't know.

Kim – Politicians, perhaps?

Sam – We certainly have more than enough of them.

Kim – Unlike oil, they're a resource we never seem to run out of.

Sam – Some of them are practically fossilised already.

Kim – And yet they keep getting renewed.

Sam – I'm still not sure what half these elected officials actually do.

Kim – Elect one another, presumably. Too many politicians can be bad for democracy… Anyway, what do you import?

Sam – We import all sorts of things, but we specialise in financial products.

Kim – Financial products?

Sam – We import capital.

Kim – For what purpose?

Sam – To pay for the other products we import.

Kim – Ah, I see… But what do we use to pay for the capital we import?

Sam – Nowadays, there are more sophisticated terms for these kinds of products in financial jargon, but basically, we can call them IOUs.

Kim – So, essentially, we import everything we consume, and the only thing we export is our debt.

Sam – Exactly.

Kim – But why do all those countries that support us buy our debt?

Sam – So we can have the means to pay them. Otherwise, they wouldn't be able to export. It would lead to the collapse of the system.

Kim – I see… But then why don't all those poor countries consume what they produce instead of exporting it to rich countries that don't have the money to pay them?

Sam – Because they are poor countries, precisely. The standard of living is very low and inequalities are very high. No middle class, so no domestic market. And, of course, the workers can't afford to buy what they produce.

Kim – That's a bit paradoxical, isn't it?

Sam – That's how it is… Any economist will tell you that.

Kim – I wonder why we haven't thought of sending a few of them to the guillotine…

Sam – Oh wow… You're an anti-globalist, aren't you?

Kim – It's my Che Guevara side…

Sam – And you, what floor do you work on?

Kim – Thirteenth. I work for an NGO.

Sam – I thought this building only had twelve floors.

Kim – Yes, it does. But I work for an imaginary NGO.

Sam – Ah, I see…

Kim – Actually, I need to get back.

An elderly woman who looks very much like Death arrives.

Sam – Who's that?

Kim – The owner. You don't often see her around here…

Sam – The owner of this tower?

Kim – Of the tower, yes. And of all the companies it houses.

Sam – Even the fictional ones…

Kim – She's the majority shareholder in the holding company that owns it all. We used to belong to pension funds, but now that pensions have been abolished…

Sam – So we're all working for her?

Kim – Yeah.

Sam – I hope she's worth it…

Sam leaves, followed by Kim.

10. Died for Finance

A rooftop terrace. Two characters of any gender arrive.

Jo – Do you have news about him?

Nic – He's dead.

Jo – Damn. So it wasn't so harmless after all. I didn't know you could die laughing.

Nic – Actually, he died from exhaustion. He was overcome with laughter from morning till night. And even at night. He couldn't sleep. It was his heart that gave out. He didn't get to enjoy his sick leave for long.

Jo – And the doctors couldn't do anything to save him?

Nic – They tried everything to make him stop laughing. They even took him to the theatre. But the disease was already too advanced…

A faint fire alarm is heard. A third person arrives, panicked and in their underwear.

Mat – There's a fire on the ground floor!

Jo – A fire?

Mat – I work on the first floor, but I'd gone up to the seventh for… Anyway, I thought I'd take refuge on the top floor. By the time the fire gets here, perhaps they'll rescue us by helicopter.

Nic – You watch too much TV…

Mat – Oh no, I've left all my files in my office! What with the state the company's in, and the share price collapsing…

Jo – Well, if we all get burned alive…

Nic – If you want, we can have your company's logo engraved on your tombstone with the inscription "Died for the financial system."

Mat – You're right… If we make it out of this, I swear, I won't take all this so seriously anymore… After all, you only live once!

Jo – Except for cats, which have nine lives…

Nic glances at their phone to read the text message they just received.

Nic – I just got a text from a colleague who works on the first floor.

Mat – Have the firefighters been alerted?

Nic – It's just a fire drill.

Mat *(making the sign of the cross)* – Thank God!

Jo – Yes… We can almost call it a miracle…

Mat – I need to get back right away. My boss will wonder where I've gone.

Mat leaves.

Nic – We're quickly caught up by daily life…

Jo – Yes.

Nic – We should have rebelled while we were still in nursery.

Jo – We kept our mouths shut, of course.

Nic – Even Jesus should have rebelled from the cradle. He should have told his parents where to go, sent the Three Wise Men packing and escaped on the donkey.

Jo – And he actually had supernatural powers.

Nic – Yes. We don't.

Jo – And the rest of us kept quiet right from the cradle.

Nic – Then it continued with school.

Jo – We realized we were already bored full-time, but we thought it would get better once we finished our studies.

Nic – And then we started working and thought it would get better when we retired.

Jo – And that's when they abolished pensions.

They start to leave.

Nic – By the way, what do you think of the newcomer?

Jo – The newcomer?

Nic – Don't tell me you haven't noticed her…

They leave. A character arrives alone.

Ben – It wasn't a fire drill. It was me. I tried to smoke a joint discreetly in the toilets, just as I did at school. Back then, the only smoke detector was the person keeping an eye on us. Now it's Big Brother, with sensors everywhere. And here we are, still having to hide to smoke. At our age.

He lights up the joint and smokes.

Ben – What a mess… I never expected to win the lottery. I never even buy a ticket. And besides, winning the lottery is pure chance. You haven't earned it. Just a little nudge from fate, a bit of luck, enough to make life easier… Not too much, or you can still tell yourself: "I was lucky, yes, but I deserved it." Except there's no such thing as luck. No miracles. Or perhaps my chance came and I failed to take it. So I smoke. To see life through rose-tinted glasses. Edith Piaf took all sorts of things too, didn't she? And she still made "La Vie en Rose" a hit…

Another character arrives.

Ben *(offering his joint)* – Want some?

Charlie – Thanks, I've quit. *(Starts vaping)* What do you do?

Ben – Oh, various things. But overall, I'd say I'm mostly in a mess. And you?

Charlie – I'm… Well, I was an accountant. My boss just caught me with his secretary in the office restrooms.

Ben – Is it prohibited by your company's internal regulations to sleep with the boss's secretary?

Charlie – Only if the boss is already sleeping with his secretary.

Ben – I see. Right of first refusal. So, you're fired.

Charlie – Without notice. I have to clear out my desk by tonight.

Ben – And what are you going to do?

Charlie – You know what? I think this firing is an opportunity for me.

Ben – Oh, really? So, you're the positive-thinking type…

Charlie – I would never have had the courage to resign. I'm going to start my own business.

Ben – An accounting firm, then.

Charlie – When you get out of prison, you don't dream of becoming a guard. No, I'm going to open a restaurant. I don't know why, but I've always wanted to run a restaurant. Even though I don't know how to cook.

Ben – Oh, I see. Still, it can help when you want to get into the restaurant business…

Charlie – Are you in the restaurant business?

Ben – No, IT.

Charlie – No wonder you need to smoke that, then.

Ben – Computers and civil liberties. I work for the data protection authority.

Charlie – Technology and freedom… Those aren't words you often find together.

Ben – Sometimes I think I should forget about the technology and choose freedom on its own.

Charlie – I'm going to need a chef… Do you know how to cook?

Ben – I can make pasta.

Charlie – We could open an Italian restaurant.

Ben – Where are you going to set up this restaurant?

Charlie – Somewhere south, where it's warm… If I'm going to take the plunge… Well, you know what they say. If I end up broke, I'd rather be broke in the sunshine.

Ben – And, when you open a restaurant, at least you're sure you'll never starve.

The other prepares to leave.

Charlie – Alright, I'm going to pack up all my office stuff into a box, just like in television dramas, and then I'm leaving.

Ben – I'll come down with you…

Charlie – To the South?

Ben – No, just down to the lift, for a start.

They exit.

11. New Horizons

A rooftop terrace. A man and a woman arrive. They vape silently for a moment.

John – How's it going?

Sarah – It's going.

John – Fancy going to the cinema?

Sarah – Tonight?

John – Sure, tonight.

Sarah – Yeah, what's on?

John – I don't know, we'd have to check. I'll look later.

Sarah – Okay. If you want, after that, we could go out to dinner.

John – Well, I'm not sure…

Sarah – We could also eat at home. I did the grocery shopping.

John – Fine.

John moves closer to the edge of the stage and looks into the distance.

John – I never noticed that from here you can see the tower where we live.

Sarah – Really?

She moves closer.

John – Yes, look, just across the boulevard.

Sarah – I can't see it…

He points with his finger.

John – Just to the right of the power station. That tower with all the aerials on the roof. That's where we live!

Sarah – Oh, yes, you're right. That's funny.

John – Yes.

They watch the scene in silence for a moment.

John – I'm thinking about changing jobs.

Sarah – Oh, really? Why not…

John – It would break the routine a bit.

Sarah – But when you say changing jobs…

John – Oh no, I'll stay in the same field, don't worry.

Sarah – You mean changing companies.

John – A colleague just told me that a computer scientist position opened up at the company he works for.

Sarah – Oh, really? And where is that?

John – On the third floor.

Sarah – Oh, I see…

John – We can still take our breaks together.

Sarah – If you think it's better.

John – Come on, let's get back to it.

Sarah – Okay…

They leave.

12. Retirement

A rooftop terrace. The CEO arrives accompanied by another character, male or female.

CEO – So, my friend, what are you going to do now that you're retired?

Dany – Oh, you know, I'm not going to have time to get bored.

CEO – You think so?

Dany – I'll do everything I didn't have time for until now.

CEO – Oh, really? Like what, for example?

Dany – I don't know…

CEO – Go fishing?

Dany – Why not, yes…

CEO – I say you're going to get bored, my friend, you'll see.

Dany – Maybe a little at first.

CEO – Work is worse than tobacco in terms of addiction. You should never start. Once you do, it's too late.

Dany – Then I'll treat retirement as a course of rehabilitation.

CEO – Retirement shouldn't exist. In fact, it barely exists now. You might be the last one to enjoy this absurdity.

Dany – You think so?

CEO – Nowadays, people live past a hundred and die in good health. Do you feel old, my friend?

Dany – My God…

CEO – Of course, you haven't got the energy of a twenty-year-old, and you cost us a lot more, but… We could give you a little job at the minimum wage to finish off your career on this planet. Or even some voluntary work. How about the canteen? We're short-handed in the washing-up area.

Dany – Well…

CEO – But I'm kidding, my friend! You believe everything you're told, don't you? I have to say, you're not one to argue. *(The CEO approaches the edge of the stage.)* There's a magnificent view from here; I had never noticed…

Dany moves forward behind him with outstretched arms to push him. But the CEO turns around and interprets his gesture as an attempt to hug him.

CEO – Come on, my friend, no need to be so emotional.

The CEO takes Dany in their arms and gives them a long hug.

CEO – We're going to miss you. They don't make people like you anymore, fortunately. Enjoy your retirement; it's costing us enough as it is.

Dany – Thank you, President.

The CEO starts to walk away.

Dany – President!

CEO – Yes?

Dany – God will repay you.

CEO – Thank you, my friend.

The CEO leaves.

Dany – I didn't even get to tell him to go to hell.

He exits. Two characters, either men or women, enter and start vaping.

Taylor – Have you been working here long?

Sage – It's my first day. And you?

Taylor – Same here. And I think it might be my last.

Sage – Are you a temp?

Taylor – No, but I've just told my boss to go to hell.

Sage – You should have waited until the end of your probation period.

Taylor – Playing for time isn't my style. I'm impulsive.

Sage – So what are you going to do now?

Taylor – I might leave the country.

Sage – Oh yeah? Where to?

Taylor – I don't know. Maybe China.

Sage – Do you speak Chinese?

Taylor – I'll learn. China is where everything is happening now, right?

Sage – Yeah, maybe.

Taylor – Shall we have lunch together? I'll use up my last meal vouchers…

Sage – Sure.

Taylor – We'll eat Chinese.

Sage – That way you can start learning the language.

They leave.

13. A Touch of the Blues

A rooftop terrace. Two characters arrive and start smoking.

Fred – How's it going?

Al – Well… Actually, not so good…

Fred – What's going on? Personal problems?

Al – Well, no, that's just it. I have no personal problems. In fact, I have no personal life.

Fred – So what's wrong?

Al – I don't know… A feeling of emptiness… The sense that I'm not where I should be… I feel like while I'm here, my life is happening elsewhere. Without me. Have you ever felt that?

Fred – You're feeling a bit down. Maybe you should see a doctor. He'll give you something. You shouldn't stay like this, you know. It's not something to joke about.

Al – Well, I can reassure you right away. I haven't joked in a long time. In fact, I don't even remember the last time I laughed.

Fred – So what are you going to do? You're not thinking of doing something stupid, are you? I mean, like quitting?

Al – I don't know… Life is strange. At first you think you have problems, but you'll solve them one by one and then you can relax. Then you discover that whenever you solve one, another comes along. There will always be another problem to deal with. Time passes, and eventually you begin to realise that one day these problems won't be yours any more, simply because you won't be here. I think I've reached that age. It doesn't bring peace of mind, but it gives you a little perspective. Did you hear that the theatre director Patrice Chéreau has died?

Fred – Don't tell me that's what's got you feeling this way… Did you know him personally?

Al – No…

Fred – I didn't know you were interested in theatre.

Al – I never go.

They leave. Two more characters arrive.

Mok – Did you hear? Patrick Chéreau has died.

Zac – Patrice.

Mok – What?

Zac – Patrice Chéreau.

Mok – Lung cancer. Smoking really is terrible. Think of George Harrison. If he'd smoked less and exercised more, perhaps he'd still be alive.

Zac – And if Hendrix had played the violin in a philharmonic orchestra, he'd probably still be with us today.

Mok – I wonder what he'd be doing, really.

Zac – He'd be playing Scrabble in his retirement home with Jim Morrison, James Dean, and Janis Joplin.

Mok – You're right, that would be weird… Do you think it's worth quitting smoking?

Zac – But all those people we're talking about had already reached the peak of their art. We're still trying to figure out what we might be good at.

Mok – I think if we were geniuses, it would be known by now.

Zac – Cervantes wrote Don Quixote when he was over fifty. We still have hope.

Mok – So you have to be a genius to have the right to ruin your health, right?

Zac – What can you do? Some of us were born to get screwed. That's life.

They leave.

14. Ministry of Planning

A rooftop terrace. A man and a woman arrive.

Gina – You don't smoke anymore?

Alan – No, I've quit.

Gina – That's good.

Alan prepares a line of cocaine and snorts it.

Alan – Instead, I've gone back to cocaine.

Alan exits. Gina remains. Blanca arrives.

Blanca – Hi.

Gina – Hi.

Blanca – I can't quit smoking.

Gina – Me neither.

Blanca – It's the job. It stresses me out, so I smoke to unwind.

Gina – It's the job you should quit.

Blanca – Sure. But I wonder if I wouldn't have even more trouble quitting work.

Gina – Work is a hard drug. It should be banned.

Blanca – Yes. What about you? What do you do?

Gina – Debt recovery… *(Seeing Blanca's puzzled expression.)* Chasing unpaid bills, that sort of thing.

Blanca – Cool. Do you like it?

Gina – Ever since I was a little girl, I've dreamed of harassing people up to their ears in debt and squeezing their last savings out of them to pay for things they never needed in the first place.

Blanca – I see…

Gina – And you? Do you also work to make humanity happy?

Blanca – Financial adviser… It ought to be illegal to call bank salespeople "advisers". We're not there to give advice. We're there to sell things.

Gina – Yes… My water supplier rings me every evening to ask if there's anything I need. No one else does…

Blanca – Have you seen the number of home services companies springing up now next to electronic cigarette shops?

Gina – What are home services?

Blanca – Housekeeping, cooking, conversation…

Gina – So now, to talk to someone, you have to pay.

Blanca – Don't worry, with me it's free. For now.

Gina – There was a time when banks belonged to the state, along with some of the biggest public services.

Blanca – I'm too young to remember. I've heard stories.

Gina – Apparently there was even a government department for economic planning.

Blanca – Was that back in the days of the Iron Curtain, when the country was practically communist?

Gina – With a general as head of state.

Blanca – Even toll roads used to be a public service. At least you knew who was ripping you off.

Gina – We're living in strange times…

Blanca – Well, I have to get back to work. Thank you; talking with you has lifted my spirits.

They leave.

15. Last Cigarette

A rooftop terrace. Anthony arrives. Shortly after, Clara arrives.

Clara – Are you still here?

Anthony – No one is waiting for me at home. It seems you aren't either.

Clara – No.

Anthony – But this is the last time I'm working overtime. Just a few files to wrap up before leaving.

Clara – Leaving?

Anthony – I handed in my resignation today.

Clara – I hope it's not because of me.

Anthony – Why not?

Clara – To avoid working in the same company in the unlikely event that we end up having sex? In that case, it's a shame. It really wasn't necessary.

Anthony – Are you so sure that we'll never sleep together?

Clara – Mainly because I'm only a temp. My contract here ends tonight anyway…

Anthony – So, it turns out we're both unemployed.

Clara *(ironically)* – Nothing stands in the way of our love anymore…

He kisses her, and she lets him.

Anthony – I've updated my flirting methods a bit. And I've stopped with jokes.

Clara – I can see that… No more joking around.

Anthony – Let's say I'm a bit more direct.

Clara – I don't mind.

Anthony – It's starting to get dark. We'll soon be able to see the stars.

Clara notices something against one of the walls of the terrace that might remain invisible.

Clara – What are those plaques with inscriptions?

Anthony – Oh, you didn't know? It's true you're a temp. They're epitaphs.

Clara – Epitaphs?

Anthony – Some companies provide childcare facilities for their staff. The owners of this tower offer a memorial garden for their employees' ashes instead.

Clara – A memorial garden…

Anthony – Or rather a memorial terrace. The deceased person's relatives can scatter the ashes from the top of the tower. If they don't, the boss does it for them.

Clara – And this memorial terrace also serves as a smoking area…

Anthony – Space is expensive in the city… And this way our departed colleagues can carry on enjoying their smoke break.

Clara – A permanent break.

Anthony – Tobacco has certainly helped solve the pension problem once and for all…

Clara – And the cemetery has become an extension of the office. What's written on these epitaphs?

Anthony moves closer to read some of them.

Anthony – Let's see… *(Reading.)* "Snowed under right now. I'll call you back soon"… "I'm not here, but you can leave me a message"… "Change starts now"… "Tomorrow I'm giving up smoking"…

Clara – Very uplifting…

Anthony – Listen to this one, it sounds like an aphorism: "Unlike particles, testicles cannot be in two places at the same time"…

They exchange a look.

Clara – Romantic as this place is, perhaps we shouldn't stay too long.

Anthony – Can I smoke one last cigarette?

Clara *(decisively)* – If you want to come with me, now's the time.

Anthony – Okay. *(They head towards the exit)* Where do you live?

Clara – Just nearby. Do you want to have a drink at my place?

Anthony – Of course. But I should warn you, I never sleep with anyone on the first date.

Clara – There you go again with your jokes.

They leave together. A character (man or woman) arrives. They vape for a moment before addressing the audience.

Character – This is my last cigarette. That's it. I'm quitting. I don't know why I'm telling you. But tomorrow it'll all carry on without me. I hesitated for ages, then finally made up my mind. There's never a good time, is there? It isn't easy finding a reason to carry on every day. But believe me, it's even harder to stop without a reason. I don't know how some people manage to leave a note behind. A resignation letter. What do they hope for? A little understanding? I'm going quietly. What could I say to them? What could they possibly understand? I don't even understand myself. Life doesn't understand me any more. And if they replied? What can you say to someone who isn't there? I'm going without a word. Without notice. Making room. Because I'll be replaced, of course. So will you. Don't imagine otherwise. Nobody is irreplaceable in a crowd. When you're gone, someone else takes your place. Here or somewhere else. A little later, or straight away. That's how your life goes on. Other people's lives… *(The character stubs out the cigarette or puts away the vape.)* No, if I could tell them something before leaving, it would just be: don't worry, I'll disappear into the crowd. I won't be here any more. I'll become the multitude. *(A pause.)* It isn't death. It's just the beginning of another life…

The character leaves.

16. Mother Christmas

A rooftop terrace. A woman enters dressed as Mother Christmas. She lights a cigarette or starts vaping. A man follows. At first he sees her from behind and is surprised by what looks like a Father Christmas costume. He is even more surprised when she turns around and he realises that she is Mother Christmas.

Man – Hello…

Mother Christmas – Hi.

Man – You…?

Mother Christmas – I'm here for the Christmas tree.

Man – The Christmas tree…?

Mother Christmas – The company's Christmas tree. The one you work for, I assume.

Man – Oh yes, of course… The company Christmas tree… I didn't even know those events still existed, with all these rules about religion in the workplace…

Mother Christmas – You don't have any children…

Man – No time, unfortunately. Perhaps in twenty or thirty years, if the company health plan agrees to pay for freezing my sperm until I retire. And you…?

Mother Christmas – I work for the staff committee every other year. I'm a freelance performer. The rest of the time I work in theatre. But you know what theatre's like…

Man – Yes… One has to make a living… And don't you have a beard?

Mother Christmas – Would you prefer that I had a beard?

Man – No, no, you're… You're quite charming as you are… But why every other year? Christmas is every year. Don't tell me the staff committee has decided to celebrate Christmas only in odd years to save money?

Mother Christmas – It's because of gender parity.

Man – Gender parity?

Mother Christmas – To fight sexism, the staff committee decided that every other year, Father Christmas would be a woman.

Man – Oh, I see…

Mother Christmas – When you think about it, there's no reason why only male performers should be able to earn a bit of extra money over the festive season.

Man – I have to admit, I had never thought of that.

Mother Christmas – For people like us, company Christmas parties, department-store promotions and private functions are an important source of seasonal work. Last year they helped me keep my entitlement to performers' benefits.

Man – As Mother Christmas…

Mother Christmas – As a professional performer!

Man – Of course…

The man begins vaping as well.

Man – And do you have any children?

Mother Christmas – Thousands…

Man – Oh really? Maybe a mishap during the thawing of your eggs?

Mother Christmas – I'm Mother Christmas! All children are my children.

Man – Right…

They smoke for a moment.

Man – And… is there a Father Christmas?

Mother Christmas – At your age, surely you're not still asking that question?

Man – I meant, when you get home, is there a Father Christmas waiting for you at your cottage, with whom you share all the household chores according to strict gender equality rules?

Mother Christmas – Well, no. Since you want to know everything, no one is waiting downstairs with a sleigh. As far as I'm concerned, Father Christmas doesn't exist…

Man – It's funny, but unlike the first time I heard this, today I tend to think it's good news…

Mother Christmas puts out her cigarette or puts away her vape.

Mother Christmas – I have to get back. I still need to finish decorating the tree… And afterwards I've got an hour's train journey home…

Man – I have my car downstairs. I also have something to finish, and then I'm leaving. I can drop you off, if you want. It's on my way.

Mother Christmas – I haven't even told you where I live yet.

Man – But I already know it's on my way.

Mother Christmas – The magic of Christmas…

They leave together.

If the sketches are performed together, the collection may end with music of choice. Everyone returns to the stage as zombies for a Michael Jackson "Thriller"-style dance, reimagined as a flash mob.

The End.

About the author

Born in 1955 in Auvers-sur-Oise (France), Jean-Pierre Martinez first took to the stage as a drummer in several rock bands before becoming a semiologist in advertising. He then worked as a television screenwriter before returning to the stage as a playwright. He has written around a hundred scripts for television and 123 plays, some of which have become classics (*Friday the 13th, Strip Poker*). His plays have been performed in more than 100 countries and translated into around 50 languages.

Amateur and professional theatre groups looking for plays to perform can download Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays for free from his websites :

https://jeanpierremartinez.net/

https://comediatheque.net/

However, performance rights, which constitute fair compensation for the author's work, are a legal obligation. Whether you are an amateur or a professional, you must request authorization to perform the play and pay the corresponding royalties for the production.

Jean-Pierre Martinez is represented by the Society of Dramatic Authors and Composers (SACD).

To get in touch with Jean-Pierre Martinez and request authorization to perform one of his works, please use the contact form on his websites.

Jean-Pierre Martinez recently returned to music, writing original songs inspired by his poems and plays.

With **Jean-Pierre Martinez Music**, he extends that creative universe through original songs: short stories in musical form, humorous or melancholy, in which each song sometimes becomes a miniature theatrical scene.

https://jeanpierremartinezmusic.com/

Other plays by the same author translated in English:

Monologues

Happy Dogs
Like a fish in the air
Short Stories

Comedies for 2

A Thwarted Vocation
EuroStar
Heads and Tails
Him and Her
Is there a pilot in the audience?
Last chance encounter
New Year's Eve at the Morgue
Not even dead
Pentimento
Preliminaries
Running on empty
Russian Roulette at the Kremlin
The Costa Mucho Castaways
The Dressing Gown
The Joker
The Rope
The Window across the courtyard

Comedies for 3

A brief moment of eternity
A simple business dinner
An innocent little murder
Cards on the Table
Cheaters
Crash Zone
Fragile, Handle with care
Friday the 13th
Horizons
Ménage à trois
One small step for a woman, one giant leap backward for Mankind
The Ways of Chance

Comedies for 4

A Cuckoo's nest
A hell of a night
A Skeleton in the Closet
Back to stage
Bed and Breakfast
Casket for two
Crisis and Punishment
Déjà vu
Family Portrait
Family Tree
Four stars
Friday the 13th
Gay friendly
Hangover
Happy Hour
How to get rid of your best friends
Is there a critic in the audience?
Is there an author in the audience?
Just a moment before the end of the world
Lovestruck at Swindlemore Hall
One marriage out of two
Perfect In-laws
Quarantine
Requiem for a Stradivarius
Strip Poker
Surviving Mankind
The Deal
The Fishbowl
The Perfect Son-in-Law
The Pyramids
The Smell of Money
The Tourists
The Worst Best Man Ever

Comedies for 5 to 6

All's well that starts badly
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
Crisis and Punishment
Critical but Stable
Dead End Boulevard
In lieu of flowers...
King of Fools
The Castaways of New Year's Eve
The President's Draw
The Rebels
Traffic Jam on Graveyard Lane

Comedies for 7 or more

At the bar counter
Backstage Comedy
Blue Flamingos
Check to the Kings
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
False exit
In flagrante delirium
Just like a Christmas movie
Miracle at Saint Mary Juana Abbey
Music does not always soothe the savage beasts
Neighbours' Day
Nicotine
Of Vegetables and Books
Offside
Open Hearts
Reality Show
Save our Savings
Special Dedication
Stories and Prehistories
Such a lovely village
The House of Our Dreams
The Jackpot
The Performance is not cancelled
The Most Beautiful Village in France
The Worst Village in England
Welcome aboard!
White Coats, Dark Humour

Collection of sketches

Apocalypse
Backstage Bits
Blackouts
Don't panic!
Dramedies
Enough is Enough
Ethan and Eve
Every Colour under the Sun
For real and for fun
Funny Stories
Him and Her
Killer Sketches
Lockdown Shorts
Lost time Chronicles
Memoirs of a Suitcase
No Sense Off Limits
Now and then
Of Animals and Men
Open Hearts
Open Letters
Park Bench Shorts
Sidewalk Chronicles
Stage Briefs
Stories to die for

All of Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays can be downloaded

free of charge from his websites:

https://jeanpierremartinez.net/

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