

La Comédiathèque

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Nicotine

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Nicotine

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To work or not to work, that is the question.

During a break for electronic cigarettes, a few workaholics exchange hazy remarks.

The cast size and gender distribution are highly variable with around forty male or female roles. The same actor may play multiple roles.

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What appears to be a terrace. Two characters, either men or women, arrive. They start smoking and chat while watching the wisps of smoke coming from their possibly electronic cigarettes.

Yael – Did you know that particles can be in two different 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 having the gift of ubiquity! You could be waiting in line at Tesco with your partner on a Saturday morning and, at the same time, lying in bed with your lover in a charming little hotel in the countryside.

Alex – And when you get back, the fridge would be full. We'd be completely blameless.

Yael – You wouldn't even need an alibi.

Alex – Could we still talk about infidelity?

Yael – Adultery implies coexistence. You can't be unfaithful to partners known before or after marriage. However, quantum physics describes a state of matter where the very notion of time is suspended.

Alex – So particles are never cheated on. It's an interesting thought.

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

Alex – This doesn't sound very Catholic.

Yael – It seems that God doesn't rule over the infinitely small. Quantum physics is like a generalized orgy of particles.

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

Yael – You're right... We are more subject to the law of maximum annoyance.

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 – It's true that smokers are increasingly looked down upon.

Yael – That's why I'm quitting 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 – One can choose not to get married, but one can't choose not to have a mother-in-law.

Yael – Unless you marry an orphan...

Alex – Preferably one abandoned on the steps of a church, so you don't have to visit a graveyard and lay chrysanthemums on All Saints' Day...

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 – It's a friend of Einstein who questioned the laws of quantum physics.

Alex – So, he had a mother-in-law?

Yael – I'll explain it another day. Oh, I can't forget to get gas for the car, or I'll be stranded on the highway picking up my mother-in-law.

They leave. A man arrives (Anthony), followed closely by a woman (Clara). They exchange glances but clearly don't know each other, and quickly look away. The man takes out an electronic cigarette. The woman does the same. The man pretends to look for something in his pockets, then approaches the woman.

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

Clara looks puzzled.

Clara – But, it's an electronic cigarette, right?

Anthony – True, sorry about that. Now that I've quit smoking, I guess I'll need to update my flirting methods a bit.

Clara – If I may say so, you should have updated them since the late '80s. Don't you think?

Anthony – Actually, I was just trying to make you laugh. But it seems it missed the mark.

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

Anthony – I'm also good at being funny unintentionally, you know. Making people laugh comes naturally to me. Sometimes, I even understand my own jokes after I've made them. How long has it been since you quit...?

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 – Although, it is kind of absurd.

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 we take a break?

Clara – I was about to suggest that. After all, that's why we're here, right?

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 one in three people meets their partner at work.

Anthony – Can you imagine going home together to our little apartment in the suburbs and asking each other how our day went – when we've worked in the same office all day?

Clara – We work in the same office?

Anthony – I didn't catch your attention, fair enough. But if you haven't noticed, maybe you need glasses.

Clara – I'm just pulling your leg again. It's impressive that we can still surprise each other, even after working together in the same 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 prefer dating an unemployed guy over an office colleague. You wouldn't even have enough to pay the rent on your little apartment in the suburbs where you thought of inviting me to spend happy days with you.

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

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

Clara – Prince Charmings are rarely listed as unemployed.

She puts away her electronic cigarette.

Anthony – We could still vape together.

Clara – Perhaps we'll meet again another time.

Anthony – Just a reminder, we work in the same office. It's unlikely we'll never see each other again.

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

Clara leaves. Anthony stands puzzled for a moment. He smokes a bit more and then leaves too.

Two characters, either men or women, arrive. They light up cigarettes, possibly electronic. An uncomfortable silence ensues.

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 set himself on fire... One could deduce he had a certain 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... You'd agree that with that level of clumsiness, we could still call it a failed act, right?

Casey – It's true that lighting a cigarette while filling the gas tank with a jerrycan... It's suicidal.

Jordan – Especially when it happens on the side of a highway. (*A moment passes*). Did it happen before or after the truck hit him?

Casey – Before what?

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

Casey – I think it was after. He started running as if he wanted to cross the highway. The truck driver tried to swerve, but couldn't.

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

Casey – It was a fire truck. You could say he had some luck in his misfortune. He got first aid immediately.

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 – Mmm... He'll take his secret to the grave...

Jordan – But you were right earlier. If we had suspected anything, 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 after running out of gas on the highway while going to pick up his mother-in-law, he'd be here smoking a cigarette 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 median 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. 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 call me here. Yes, I know it's a mobile, but at this hour, you know very well I'm at the office. Listen, we'll discuss this later, okay? And between us, there are plenty of fish in the sea, right? Well, I really have to hang up. I can't talk here, I'm in a meeting... No, I'll call you back...

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

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 plaza. But the company has been outsourced to Romania.

Crystal – That's something I can't wrap my head around. Our companies are outsourced to Romania, and Romanians come here looking for jobs.

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 kicked 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 – Oh, really...?

Patricia – She rescues all the stray cats in the neighbourhood. The problem with alley cats is that they're not very homely. Sooner or later they end up running away across the rooftops.

Crystal – Just like men.

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

Crystal – I collect guys who are a bit lost. The ones who don't seem to know where they live. I fix them up a bit. I pamper them. They start purring. But I can assure you that they too, sooner or later, after coming in through the door, end up leaving through 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. The other woman smokes a bit more and then leaves as well. A character, man or woman, arrives (The CEO). They take off their shoes, loafers or high heels, and approach the edge of the stage, as if at the edge of an abyss, considering jumping into. Another character, man or woman (Angel), arrives behind the CEO and stands there, puzzled.

Angel – Mr. President...

The other turns around.

CEO – Sometimes I wonder if it wouldn't be better off stopping. Don't you?

Angel – Stopping smoking, you mean?

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

Angel – I don't know, Mr. President...

CEO – It's the crisis, my friend. The shoe market is in free fall. The company is on the edge of the abyss. There's just one step left to take.

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

CEO – A stir? You feel a stir, do you? But that's a fever, my friend. A fever!

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

CEO – Have you heard of Empedocles' sandals?

Angel – Empedocles' sandals? No, Mr. 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, Mr. President?

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

Angel – Very well, Mr. President. (*His mobile phone rings*) Excuse me for a moment, Mr. President... Yes? Yes, yes... Listen... I can't talk to you right now... (*Lowering his voice, moving away a bit*) I'm with the CEO... (*While he speaks, the CEO discreetly walks away, leaving his shoes behind.*) Alright, I'll call you back in five minutes...

Angel puts away their phone and, not seeing the President anymore, stands there, puzzled for a moment. Angel leans toward 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. Hey, could you sell all the shares we have in... (*Alan, another character, arrives and he stops*) Wait, I'll call you back...

Ellis leaves. The other one remains alone on stage.

Alan – With or without 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...

Alan leaves. They smirk slightly but don't respond. He exits.

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

Emily – I've seen him once or twice.

Jessica – He thinks he's something, doesn't he?

Emily – You can say that again.

Jessica – Does he think he's Alain Delon or what?

Emily – Of course, he's not Alain Delon, 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 Alain Delon, but still...

Jessica – Let's be realistic, it's unlikely we'll ever see Alain Delon 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 Alain Delon dead?

They exit. The CEO returns accompanied by another executive, a man or a woman. The CEO is barefoot.

Morgan – It's incredible. The company's stock dropped 20% in two hours!

CEO – Yes, I know.

Morgan – You don't seem worried...

CEO – A stock drop is also a buying opportunity. I bought 10% of the company when the shares were at their lowest. (*Checks his phone.*) In fact, our shares just regained 15%.

Morgan also looks at their phone screen.

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

CEO – Baseless, as you can see. You see, I've never felt better!

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 – It's a miracle, my friend. Believe me, God exists.

They exit. Two other characters (male or female) arrive. The second one is laughing and remain 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 vacation?

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

Max – You got fired?

Pat – Better than that!

Max – You won the lottery?

Pat – I have a very rare genetic condition. The doctors were struggling for months but finally diagnosed it. There was a one in twenty million chance it would happen to me. Can you believe it? I'm going on extended sick leave tonight.

Max – Ah, I understand your hilarity. It's much better than winning the lottery, indeed.

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 – Can you imagine me telling a client: so, here you have this model in solid oak. It's a bit more expensive, of course, but it's the best we currently offer in terms of coffins... And then bursting out laughing right after saying that!

Max – It's true that in the funeral business, constant laughter could be considered a professional hazard... And you really can't hold it back?

Pat – I'm telling you, it's genetic. It's a very rare orphan disease. There's no 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. The other one leaves, looking upset. Two women arrive.

Isabel – Why is he laughing so much? He's sick...

Carmen – There's really nothing to laugh about.

Pat prefers to leave. 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 – Yeah, yeah, totally. Absolutely. Yeah.

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. 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 else could we possibly export?

Sam – I don't know.

Kim – Maybe our senators and general councillors.

Sam – It's true that unlike oil, we're not short on those.

Kim – Senators are the only energy that's both fossil and renewable.

Kim – And what kind of products do you import?

Sam – A bit of everything. But we specialize 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 how we haven't yet thought of guillotining a few of them...

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 a fictitious 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 be owned by pension funds, but now that they've abolished pensions...

Sam – So we're all working for her?

Kim – Yeah.

Sam – I hope she's worth it...

Sam leaves, followed by Kim. Two other characters arrive (male or female).

Jo – Do you have news about him?

Nic – He's dead.

Jo – Damn. So it wasn't so benign after all. I didn't know you could die from laughter.

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 went up to the seventh for... Anyway, I decided to take refuge on the top floor. By the time the fire spreads up here, maybe they'll come rescue us by helicopter.

Nic – You watch too much TV...

Mat – Oh my God, I left all my files in my office! Considering how badly the company is doing, with the stock price plummeting...

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 as soon as we were in daycare.

Jo – Yes... But we kept our mouths shut.

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 discreetly smoke a joint in the bathroom. Just like when I was in middle school. But back then, the only smoke detector was the lunch lady... Now, the lunch lady is Big Brother, with sensors everywhere. That's where we're at. We still have to hide to smoke. At our age.

He lights up the joint and smokes.

Ben – What a mess... I wasn't expecting to win the lottery, you know? I don't play. And besides, winning the lottery... It's really just a matter of chance. Something you didn't do anything to earn. Just a little push from fate. Just a bit of luck. Enough to make life a little easier... Not too much, so you can still think: Okay, I got a bit of luck, but I still deserved it. But luck doesn't exist. There are no miracles. Or maybe I had my chance, and I didn't seize it. So I smoke. To see life in pink. Piaf also took a lot of things, right? But she managed to turn "La Vie en Rose" into 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. Priority right. 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 – 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 – In the South... If you're going to do it... You know the song. If I have to end up in poverty, it'll be less painful in the sun.

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 American TV shows, and then I'm leaving.

Ben – I'll come down with you...

Charlie – To the South?

Ben – No, to the elevator, to start with.

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

John – How's it going?

Sarah – It's going.

John – Want to go see a movie?

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 – Yeah, I don't know..

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 – To the right of the power plant. That tower with the roof covered in antennas. 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. The CEO returns 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 take retirement as a detox cure.

CEO – Retirement shouldn't exist. In fact, it almost doesn't anymore. 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 – Sure, you don't have the same energy as a twenty-year-old, and you cost us a lot more, but... We could find you a small menial job paid at minimum wage to finish your career on earth. Or even volunteer work. How about working in the cafeteria? We're short-staffed in the dishwashing 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.

He takes him in his arms and hugs him for a moment.

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, Mr. President.

The CEO starts to walk away.

Dany – Mr. President!

CEO – Yes?

Dany – God will give you the treatment you deserve.

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 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 – Want to grab 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. Two more 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'll be at peace. But then you realize that when you've solved those problems, new ones come up. And there will always be more problems to solve. Time passes, and at a certain age, you start thinking that one day, all these problems won't be yours anymore. Because you simply won't be here. I think I've reached that age. It doesn't bring serenity, but it allows for a certain distance. Did you know the Pope 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 so interested in religion. Do you believe in God?

Al – No. And you?

They leave. Two more characters arrive.

Mok – Did you hear that? The Pope is dead.

Zac – The Pope?

Mok – The Pope.

Zac – And what did he die from?

Mok – Lung cancer.

Zac – I didn't know the Pope smoked.

Mok – Apparently, he smoked in secret.

Zac – Tobacco, it's really terrible.

Mok – Fidel Castro or Winston Churchill, it's the same. If they hadn't smoked so much and had done more sports, maybe they'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* after 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? We're from the fucked-up breed. That's how it is.

They leave. 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 – Litigation... (Seeing Blanca's puzzled look) Debt collection, that sort of thing.

Blanca – Cool. Do you like it?

Gina – Since I was a child, I've dreamed of harassing poor over-indebted people and extorting their last savings to pay off their credit for things they don't need.

Blanca – I see...

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

Blanca – Bank advisor... It should be illegal to call people who are salespeople "bank advisors." We're not here to give advice; we're here to sell products.

Gina – Yes... My internet provider calls me every evening to check if I need anything... In fact, he's the only one who 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 – 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. Anthony returns. 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 would it be because of you?

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 – Especially since I'm working as a temp. My assignment 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 their employees with nurseries. Well, the owners of this tower offer employees a memorial garden for the ashes of the deceased.

Clara – A memorial garden...

Anthony – Or rather, a memorial terrace, if you prefer. The relatives of deceased can scatter the ashes from the top of the tower. Or if not, the boss takes care of it.

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

Anthony – With housing prices in the city... Given how expensive real estate is in the city... And this way, our dearly departed smokers get to feel like they're on a break.

Clara – A permanent break.

Anthony – Tobacco has certainly contributed to the final solution of the pension problem...

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*) “I'm not here, but you can leave me a message”... “Change is now”... “Tomorrow I'll quit smoking”...

Clara – Enlightening...

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 – It's true that this place is very romantic, but we might not want to linger 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 – Sure. But I warn you, I never sleep over 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. It's over. I'm quitting. I don't know why I'm telling you this. Anyway, tomorrow will be without me. I hesitated for a long time, and then I finally decided. It's never the right time, is it? It's not easy to find a good reason to keep going every day. But believe me, it's even harder to stop here, without a reason. I don't know how those people manage, leaving behind a little note. A resignation letter. What do they still hope for? A little understanding? I'm leaving in silence. What could I say to them? What could they understand? I don't even understand myself. Life doesn't understand me anymore. And if they answered me? What can you possibly say to the absent? I'm leaving without a word. Without notice. I'm making way. Because, of course, I'll be replaced. So will you. Don't kid yourself. In the crowd, no one is irreplaceable. When you're gone, it will be someone else. Here or elsewhere. A little later or right after. It's your life that wants this. The lives of others... *(He/she stubs out the cigarette or puts away the vape.)* No, if I could tell them something before I go, I'd just say: don't worry, I'm going to blend into the crowd. I'm no longer here. I'll be the multitude. *(A pause)* It's not death. It's just a new life beginning...

The character leaves.

A woman arrives, dressed as Mrs. Claus. She lights a cigarette or starts vaping. A man arrives in turn. He first sees her from behind and is a bit surprised by her Santa Claus costume. He's even more surprised when the woman turns around and he sees that she's Mrs. Claus.

Man – Hello...

Mrs. Claus – Hi.

Man – You...?

Mrs. Claus – I'm here for the Christmas tree.

Man – The Christmas tree...?

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

Man – Oh yes, that's right... The Christmas tree... I didn't even know they still did that... With all these secularism laws...

Mrs. Claus – You don't have any children...

Man – No time, unfortunately. Maybe in twenty or thirty years... If my company's health insurance agrees to cover the cost of freezing my sperm until retirement. And you...?

Mrs. Claus – I work every other year for the Works Council. The rest of the year, I do theatre. But you know, theatre...

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

Mrs. Claus – 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 Works Council has decided to celebrate Christmas only in odd years to save money?

Mrs. Claus – It's because of gender parity.

Man – Gender parity?

Mrs. Claus – To fight sexism, the Works Council decided that every other year, Santa Claus would be a woman.

Man – Oh, I see...

Mrs. Claus – When you think about it... There's no reason that only male actors should expect to find a side job during the holidays.

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

Mrs. Claus – For us, with Christmas trees, store promotions, private parties... it's a very important seasonal activity. Last year, it's what helped me to save my job.

Man – As Mrs. Claus...

Mrs. Claus – As an actress!

Man – Of course...

The man starts vaping as well.

Man – And do you have any children?

Mrs. Claus – I have thousands...

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

Mrs. Claus – I'm Mrs. Claus! All children are my children.

Man – Right...

They smoke for a moment.

Man – And... is there a Santa Claus?

Mrs. Claus – Don't tell me that at your age, you're still asking that question?

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

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

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

Mrs. Claus puts out her cigarette or puts away her vape.

Mrs. Claus – I have to go back... I need to finish decorating the tree... And then I have an hour on the train to get 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.

Mrs. Claus – I haven't even told you where I live yet.

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

Mrs. Claus – The magic of Christmas...

They leave together. Music of choice. All participants return to the stage, as zombies, for a Michael Jackson's "Thriller"-style choreography, revisited as a flash mob.

The End.

About the author

Born in 1955 in Auvers-sur-Oise (France), Jean-Pierre Martinez was first a drummer for several rock bands before becoming a semiologist in advertising. He then began a career writing television scripts before turning to theatre and writing plays. He has written close to a hundred scripts for television and as many plays, some of which have already become classics (*Friday the 13th*, *Strip Poker*). He is one of the most produced contemporary playwrights in France and in other francophone countries. Several of his plays are also available in Spanish and English, and are regularly produced in the United States and Latin America.

Amateur and professional theatre groups looking for plays to perform can download Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays for free from his website La Comédiathèque (<https://comediatheque.net/>). However, public productions are subject to SACD filing.

Other plays by the same author translated in English:

Comedies for 2

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
Preliminaries
Running on empty
The Costa Mucho Castaways
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
Cheaters
Crash Zone
Fragile, Handle with care
Friday the 13th
Ménage à trois
One small step for a woman, one giant leap
backward for Mankind

Comedies for 4

A Cuckoo's nest
A hell of a night
Back to stage
Bed and Breakfast
Casket for two
Crisis and Punishment
Family Portrait
Family Tree
Four stars
Friday the 13th
Gay friendly
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
Quarantine
Strip Poker
Surviving Mankind
The Deal
The perfect Son-in-Law
The Pyramids
The Smell of Money
The Tourists

Comedies for 5 to 6

All's well that starts badly
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
Crisis and Punishment
Critical but Stable
In lieu of flowers...
King of Fools

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
Offside
Open Hearts
Save our Savings
Special Dedication
Stories and Prehistories
The Jackpot
The Performance is not cancelled
The Worst Village in England
Welcome aboard!
White Coats, Dark Humour

Collection of sketches

Enough is Enough
Him and Her
Lost time Chronicles
Open Hearts
Sidewalk Chronicles
Stories to die for

Monologues

Happy Dogs
Like a fish in the air

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