

La Comédiathèque

Four stars

Jean-Pierre Martinez



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Translation by the author

Four passengers with nothing in common set off on a sightseeing trip into space. They manage to get along, more or less, until mission control reports an oxygen leak and orders an emergency return to Earth. There's just one problem: not enough air for all four of them. Unless one passenger agrees to sacrifice themselves, everyone will die. They have one hour to discover who has what it takes to be a hero...

Characters

Edward
Igor
Kimberley
Natalie

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Act 1

The main cabin of a spacecraft. Since this is a comedy, the set can have the cheerfully kitsch look of a low-budget science-fiction film. The back wall may be covered with a painted star field, as seen through a panoramic window. On one side is the ship's radio, shaped like a telephone, with a flashing red light; on the other, a small red emergency axe behind glass marked 'Break glass only in an emergency'. The fourth wall also represents a window, giving the passengers a spectacular view of Earth, the Moon and the stars as the spacecraft rotates. Stage right leads to the flight deck and laboratory; stage left to the cabins. Edward stands facing the audience, gazing out in wonder.

Edward – Incredible! Look, Kimberley! You can see Texas!

Kimberley appears to be looking for something. She glances distractedly in his direction.

Kimberley – Ah, yes... It's really tiny...

Edward – You can make out the Gulf of Mexico, the Mississippi Delta, even the marina at Corpus Christi... You can almost see my yacht! That's where it's moored...

Kimberley – You could see it on Google Earth, Edward. If only I could find my phone...

Edward – It's amazing... You know modern maps are accurate, unlike medieval ones that didn't even show America. But here we have proof with our own eyes!

Kimberley – Don't tell me you paid a fortune for this flight just to check that America really exists!

Edward – Look! You can even see Puerto Rico! *(He approaches the window.)* Oh, no... That's a fly speck on the glass...

Kimberley *(glancing over)* – And what's that sticking out like a...?

Edward – Florida.

Kimberley – Funny... You can't see any borders from up here.

Edward – What did you expect? Dotted lines, like on a road map? They say you could once see the Berlin Wall from space.

Kimberley – Shame it's not there any more.

Edward – There's still the Great Wall of China. Now that's built to last...

Kimberley – Yes...

Edward – And what about you? Why did you take this trip then?

Kimberley – It was the first prize in a competition run by a television network.

Edward – And you won! Congratulations!

Kimberley – You had to name the contestant who'd been voted off a reality show the night before.

Edward – And to think this little trip cost me a million dollars...

Kimberley – Well, there was a draw afterwards... More than a million people got the right answer. To be honest, though, I'd rather have won second prize.

Edward – What was that?

Kimberley – A Ford Fiesta.

Edward – Oh yeah...

Kimberley – Brand-new, mind you! All the extras: electric windows, a radio, air conditioning... It's hot in here, isn't it?

Edward resumes contemplating the spectacle before him.

Edward – It's extraordinary! No need to watch the weather forecast. I can tell you right now that a huge cyclone is going to hit Nicaragua in about an hour. And it's going to cause absolute havoc. Fascinating, isn't it?

Kimberley, still preoccupied with her search, looks around the cabin, everywhere but towards the window.

Kimberley – I had it in my hands a minute ago. It can't just have flown away...

She comes face to face with Igor, the commander, emerging from the flight deck.

Kimberley (*flirtatiously*) – Ah, Igor!

Igor – Are you looking for something, Kimberley?

Kimberley – Yes. My iPhone.

Igor (*handing her the phone*) – I found it floating against the ceiling in the toilet. There's a small fault in the artificial-gravity system in that part of the ship. I'll try to fix it...

Kimberley – Ah, thank you, Commander!

Igor – Unfortunately, it wasn't the only unidentified flying object in there... But what were you going to use it for?

Kimberley – To make a phone call, of course!

Igor – Ah, I don't think that's going to be possible, Kimberley.

Kimberley – On planes you only have to switch your phone off during take-off, don't you?

Igor – Yes, but this is a spacecraft. You can switch it back on, but I doubt you'll get a signal at an altitude of 180 kilometres. If you do, tell me which network you're with...

Kimberley – Oh, no... So we can't make calls for the whole... It's worse than being at the theatre!

Igor – Sorry...

Kimberley – Don't tell me we're completely cut off from the world!

Igor – Not entirely... Let's just say that if your phone did ring up here, the caller probably wouldn't be from Earth...

Kimberley's phone starts ringing, and she answers, puzzled.

Kimberley – Hello? (*Realising her mistake.*) Oh, it's my alarm. I forgot to change the time.

Igor – To be fair, it's hard to decide what time it actually is when you're orbiting Earth.

Kimberley – But what if there's an emergency? We couldn't even call the fire brigade?

Igor points to the wall terminal of the onboard radio.

Igor – In an emergency, we can contact mission control on the ship's radio. But if you want to change an appointment with your hairdresser, I'm afraid that will have to wait until we get back to Earth...

Kimberley sighs.

Kimberley – I don't even know what to wear tonight... Is it a formal dinner?

Igor – I certainly intend to wear clothes. After that, it's entirely up to you...

Kimberley (*flirting again*) – Oh, Commander...

Natalie arrives and passes by Kimberley as she exits.

Natalie (*coolly*) – Hello, Kimberley. Everything all right?

Kimberley (*imitating E.T.*) – Phone home...

Kimberley leaves.

Edward – Look, from this side, we can see the moon!

Igor watches Kimberley leave, his eyes lingering on her backside. Natalie notices.

Natalie – I've just seen another moon on this side... (*To Igor.*) What did the shampoo girl want?

Igor – Your hairdresser's number. Don't worry, I didn't give it to her. She'd have to get past me first...

Natalie doesn't have time to respond.

Edward – So, Igor! It's the commander's dinner tonight, isn't it? What have you got lined up for us? It's New Year's Eve! We can't be expected to eat another packet of freeze-dried food with lukewarm water...

Igor – Don't worry, Edward. We've planned a proper New Year's Eve feast: freeze-dried turkey with chestnuts, accompanied by our finest Russian champagne... served lukewarm.

Edward (*sighing*) – At the price I paid for this four-star trip, I was expecting French caviar at the very least!

Igor – You should have brought some of your famous sausages, Edward...

Edward – I brought a whole suitcase, actually! But they said I was over the baggage allowance. It was either the sausages or my DVD player and my complete collection of The Simpsons...

Natalie – And since you have good taste...

Edward – Well, in the meantime, to work up my appetite, I'll take another spin in the zero-gravity room. I never get tired of it...

Igor – I can understand that... (*Aside to Natalie.*) It's the only room where he isn't a complete dead weight...

Edward – Spider-Pig, Spider-Pig, does whatever a Spider-Pig does! So, Natalie, how's the research coming along?

Natalie – God didn't create the world in a day... Give me another week to work out how he did it.

Edward – What are you working on again?

Natalie – The Big Bang.

Edward (*sceptically*) – Ah... Well, if you patent it, let me know. (*He leaves, humming the Spider-Pig tune from The Simpsons.*) Spider-Pig, Spider-Pig...

Igor – He made his fortune in processed meats.

Natalie – He's funny.

Igor – He's annoying.

Natalie – He's worth a billion dollars. And without rich people like him willing to pay astronomical sums to see Earth from above, I couldn't carry on with my research...

Igor – Imagine: the mystery of creation might be solved thanks to the sponsorship of a sausage company...

Natalie – And without television funding, you'd be flying holidaymakers to Cancún instead of piloting a spacecraft... What are they planning this time?

Igor – They're developing a new reality-show format. A house full of contestants in zero gravity... Or perhaps Temptation Island on the Moon.

Natalie – Moon of Temptation. Sounds promising... So that's why Kimberley's here?

Igor – They want to find out whether a brain with an IQ below sixty can survive zero gravity. They can't risk the lives of future contestants...

Natalie – They could have tested a real turkey instead.

Igor – At least we'd have had her for New Year's Eve dinner.

Natalie – Well, you might still get your wish...

Igor – I'm not sure she's my type.

Natalie – You seemed rather interested earlier...

Igor (*teasing*) – Jealous?

Natalie – Do you really think you're my type?

Igor – At least I haven't got much competition tonight... Unless Mr Spider-Pig is exactly what you're looking for...

Natalie (*smiling*) – Tell me your Star Trek version of Temptation Island hasn't started already...

Igor is about to respond when the wall terminal of the onboard radio, shaped like a telephone, starts flashing red.

Igor – Oh, excuse me... (*He picks up the receiver.*) Captain Spock, speaking... (*Natalie starts to leave, but notices the worry on Igor's face and stays.*) Yes... Yes... Okay... No, no... Keep me informed...

Igor hangs up the receiver.

Natalie – A problem?

Igor – Mission control has detected a leak in the oxygen supply...

Natalie – Is it serious?

Igor – We don't know yet. They'll call back as soon as they have more information. Meanwhile, I need to switch to the backup system...

Kimberley returns, wearing a very revealing evening dress.

Kimberley – Do you think I can wear this tonight?

Igor, preoccupied, doesn't seem to pay attention to her anymore.

Igor (*to Kimberley*) – Excuse me, I've got a small problem to deal with... (*Aside to Natalie.*) No need to worry the tourists just yet...

Igor leaves. Kimberley seems disappointed.

Kimberley – He didn't even look at me... It's as though I'm invisible to him. Do you think I'm invisible?

Natalie – Your dress certainly is...

Kimberley – Isn't it a bit...?

Natalie – Oh, it's a lot... But Christmas and New Year's Eve only come once a year. It's the one week when a woman can dress up as a Christmas tree and then as a hooker. You might as well make the most of it...

Kimberley – You don't like it...

Natalie – Did I say that?

Edward returns, still humming.

Edward – Spider-Pig, Spider-Pig... That was fantastic! Though I'd rather do it before stuffing myself with turkey.

Kimberley calls out to him.

Kimberley – And you, Edward, what do you think of me?

Edward – Oh, no, I wasn't talking about you! I'd never be so rude...

Kimberley – My dress!

Edward – Oh, yes, it's... Would you like to walk on the ceiling with me? I bet it's even more fun with two people...

Igor returns, sparing Kimberley from having to respond. Natalie notices that he looks even more preoccupied.

Natalie – Everything all right, Captain Spock?

Kimberley (to Edward) – I thought he was the commander. And that his name was Igor...

Igor – Everything's fine. I've connected the backup ventilation system...

Edward – The backup system?

Igor (reassuring) – Just a minor technical issue, but it'll be resolved any minute now... Don't worry, we'll be able to celebrate New Year's Eve as planned.

Edward – Good. But tell me, Commander, since we're orbiting the Earth almost as fast as the Sun... Well, you know what I mean... When exactly does midnight happen up here?

Igor (with an ominous undertone) – Believe me, Edward, this will be the longest New Year's Eve of your life...

Edward – What a crazy trip... Well, it's something you only do once in your life.

Natalie – You have no idea how right you may be...

Edward – It's true that it's a bit hot here, isn't it? *(To Kimberley)* You're right, you should have taken the Fiesta. At least it had air conditioning...

The ship's radio starts flashing again. Igor exchanges a glance with Natalie and picks up the receiver while she tries to distract the tourists by pointing towards the audience-side window.

Natalie – Look, we're flying over China!

Igor (on the phone) – Yes...?

Natalie – We can even see the Great Wall!

Edward – Where is it?

Kimberley – I don't see anything...

Natalie – But yes, there!

Edward – Oh, yes, perhaps...

Igor (*on the phone*) – No...?

Edward – Oh, yes, there it is!

Kimberley – I still don't see anything. I'm really starting to wonder why I came here.

Igor (*on the phone*) – Okay...

Igor hangs up the phone and exchanges a worried look with Natalie.

Edward – It's the best day of my life!

Natalie – Yes... And maybe the last...

Igor (*to Kimberley*) – Come along, Kimberley! You haven't done your daily exercise session in the zero-gravity room. Remember, it's part of the programme...

Kimberley (*sighing*) – Walking on the ceiling like a fly makes me feel sick. I'm not a fly! Why do I have to do it?

Edward – I'll come with you. You'll see, it's great fun! (*He leaves with Kimberley, humming.*) Spider-Pig, Spider-Pig, she can walk on the ceiling...

Igor is left alone with Natalie.

Natalie – So?

Igor – It's a bit more serious than expected...

Natalie – You have to tell me the truth, Commander. I may be here to do research, but I'm also this spacecraft's co-pilot.

Igor – The main oxygen system is beyond repair. We'll have to rely on the backup.

Natalie – How long will it last?

Igor – Four hours.

Natalie – That's enough to get back to Earth if we leave now, but not enough to celebrate New Year's Eve up here. The tourists will be disappointed, but it's not a disaster. Edward will get a refund, and Kimberley will get her Fiesta...

Igor – It's not that simple, unfortunately...

Natalie – I thought as much. Otherwise, why the mournful look? What else is wrong with this flying wreck? If it's those alien objects in the toilets, I already know about them...

Igor – The emergency oxygen supply was designed for only three people...

Natalie (*horrified*) – Is this a joke?

Igor – Would I look like this if it were a joke?

Natalie – But... why?

Igor – You said it yourself: this ship is a wreck. The propulsion unit came from a scrapped American shuttle, the cabin from a space station the Europeans had abandoned... and this emergency module was cobbled together from an old Russian Soyuz capsule.

Natalie (*appalled*) – Which was designed for three people... How could they let four of us come aboard?

Igor – Spider-Pig paid a million dollars for his ticket. Without him, there wouldn't have been enough money for the flight... and you wouldn't have been able to carry out your research.

Natalie – So you knew!

Igor – I told you. It was our only chance to make this trip. If you had known, would you have given up this unique opportunity to verify your theories on the Big Bang?

Natalie – No.

Igor – No. Because if your research succeeds, you'll probably win a Nobel Prize. Would knowing have made any difference?

Natalie – Maybe not to me. But those two aren't Nobel Prize candidates. They had a right to know.

Igor – Well, if they had known, they wouldn't have come...

Natalie – Spider-Pig would have gone to a luxury resort in Bora Bora instead...

Igor – And the blonde would have taken the Fiesta. With air conditioning...

Natalie – Wonderful... And what do the brilliant organisers back on Earth suggest?

Igor – Nothing. Apparently, we're on our own. But the equation is simple: enough air for three people for four hours. Either all four of us suffocate before we reach Earth, or one of us stops breathing. For good...

Natalie – And how do we do that?

Igor – With a cyanide capsule, for example.

Natalie – Sorry?

Igor – The first-aid kit came from the Soyuz capsule too. It was their contingency plan.

Natalie – Wonderful... Now we just need someone philosophical enough to volunteer for hemlock.

Igor – I have a small idea, but you might not like it...

Natalie – Go ahead...

Igor – A little powdered cyanide mixed into the freeze-dried turkey would go down nicely. She wouldn't notice a thing...

Natalie – She?

Igor – The turkey.

Natalie – Are you joking, Commander?

Igor – Would you prefer Spider Pig?

Natalie – That would be murder, Commander! Even if we could live with it, we'd still be breaking the law.

Igor – But sending four people into space in a wreck with only three lifeboats is perfectly legal...

Natalie – Saving our lives is one thing. But ending up in prison—or having that on our conscience for the rest of our lives...

Igor – All right, then. What do you propose?

Edward and Kimberley return in high spirits, singing a playful tune.

Kimberley – Hurt me, Johnny, Johnny, Johnny, send me up to heaven...

Edward – I wouldn't hurt a fly...

Kimberley – Hurt me, Johnny, Johnny, Johnny... I'm not a fly!

Edward – So, Commander? Isn't it time for drinks? I'm starving!

Kimberley – Me too, I'm as hungry as a wolf.

Natalie (*to Igor*) – We can't hide the truth from them much longer... Without causing unnecessary panic, of course...

Igor – Telling those two idiots that one of them is excess baggage, without causing a panic? I'd like to see you manage that...

Natalie (*embarrassed*) – I can always try...

Igor – If you manage that, you deserve a Nobel Prize in psychology...

Fade out.

Act 2

A piercing scream from Kimberley in the darkness, followed by breaking glass. The lights come on. Natalie and Igor are trying to revive Kimberley, who has fainted. Edward stands over them, eyes wide, holding the small axe he has just taken from its glass case.

Igor (to Natalie) – Looks as though you'll have to settle for the Nobel Prize in physics after all...

Edward (threatening them with the axe) – I don't know what's stopping me from splitting both your skulls open!

Igor – Perhaps the fact that we're the only two people who can fly this ship back to Earth...

Edward – I could kill just one of you! Like you, for example...

Igor – Are you capable of that, at least?

Edward – I made my fortune running a slaughterhouse...

Igor – I'm not a sheep. But do try. I could always claim self-defence...

Natalie – Do you really think this is the right time?

Edward – Oh yeah? And when will be the right time? When we're all dead from suffocation?

Igor – You're using up all our air, Edward. Why don't you stop breathing? That would solve the problem.

Natalie – She's coming round.

Igor – Pity. That would have solved the problem too...

Kimberley – Tell me this is a nightmare... And that I won the Fiesta...

Natalie – I'm afraid not, Kimberley. You've won the jackpot...

Edward – No air-conditioned Fiesta for you. Just a flying coffin with strictly rationed oxygen.

Kimberley – So it's true? We're all going to die!

Natalie – Not all of us, I assure you.

Igor – At least you can still look on the bright side...

Kimberley – Is there any solution then?

Edward – Yes. (Sarcastically) The capsule...

Kimberley – There's an escape capsule? Then we're saved!

Edward – A cyanide capsule! Haven't you understood? There's one person too many. And we have an hour to decide who it is.

Kimberley – Oh, my God! I knew I shouldn't have left Earth. I should have listened to my mother. A woman's place isn't in space! This must be divine punishment! Remember Icarus...

Edward – Who is that again?

Kimberley – He's from Greek mythology! He tried to fly up to the heavens, but the gods melted his wings as punishment...

Igor (*to Natalie*) – Tell them God doesn't exist! You're the one researching the Big Bang. You know the world wasn't created by an old man with a beard!

Natalie – Someone still had to light the fuse for the Big Bang...

Igor – Unfortunately we haven't got time for philosophy. So what do we do? Draw lots?

Edward – Oh no! That would be too easy!

Igor – If you started by putting down that axe...

Edward puts down the axe reluctantly.

Edward – You're the captain! You got us into this mess, and you knew the risks all along. On a ship, the captain goes down with the vessel—but only after getting the passengers into the lifeboats!

Igor – Come back down to Earth, Spider-Pig!

Edward – Gladly! And don't you dare call me Spider-Pig!

Igor – This isn't a disaster film, Edward!

Kimberley – Yet we're on the Titanic...

Igor – I was following orders.

Edward – That's what the guards said at the death camps...

The two men are on the verge of confrontation. Natalie intervenes.

Natalie – There's no point getting worked up. You're only wasting what little oxygen we have left... And Igor is right: it won't help to find someone to blame. Even if we did, the death penalty has been abolished in most democratic countries.

Edward (*pointing towards the audience-side window*) – We could wait until we're flying over China or the United States...

Natalie – The real culprits are back on Earth. And we all knew this flight was riskier than a week at a beach resort.

Kimberley – I spent a week in Havana last year. Came back with an upset stomach...

The other three look at her somewhat puzzled.

Edward – All right, forget the trial. What do we do instead? (*Silence.*) Perhaps we could work out which of us humanity would miss the least?

Igor (*sarcastically*) – I take it you consider yourself indispensable.

Edward – I run a company with more than two hundred thousand employees around the world.

Igor – And you think your sausage empire couldn't manage without you? The shareholders would simply appoint another managing director.

Edward – And what about you? Do you have reasons to believe you're more indispensable than me?

Igor – For a start, I'm the one who can pilot the ship.

Natalie – Me too...

Edward – There you are, then! One of you can do the driving and the room service. The other one can go. (*To Natalie.*) Why not you?

Igor – Do you really think you're more useful to humanity than a future Nobel Prize winner?

Edward – Why not?

Igor – You're right. If there were a Nobel Prize for sausages, you'd be a certainty.

Edward – My sausages feed almost a third of humanity. (*To Natalie.*) What is it you study again?

Natalie – The origin of the world.

Edward – What's the point?

Natalie – None.

Edward – And have you found the answers to your questions?

Natalie – No.

Edward – Even if you might win a Nobel Prize, I don't see how that makes you more useful than the rest of us.

Natalie – I never said that...

New silence.

Edward (*to Kimberley*) – And what about you?

Kimberley – What about me?

Edward – Give us one good reason why the world would be worse off if you never returned to Earth...

Kimberley (*pathetically*) – I have two cats and a canary waiting at home... Not to mention my mother...

Natalie – Enough! We won't solve this by deciding whose life is worth more. It's monstrous! I may not have discovered much, but at least I know no life is worth less than another.

Edward – Excellent. Let's vote!

Kimberley – What?

Edward – You were talking about democracy earlier. There's something noble about sacrificing yourself for others, isn't there? So let's vote on who deserves that honour!

Natalie – I don't agree!

Edward – You don't have to vote. This is a democracy. But we can still vote for you. Otherwise it would be too easy...

Edward takes out a notepad and a pencil.

Edward – Everyone writes down one name, folds the paper, and Natalie counts the votes. Igor?

Igor – Do you swear to abide by the outcome of this vote?

Edward – I swear.

Igor – Very well. I will make sure of it...

Edward writes a name on a piece of paper, tears it off, folds it and puts it on the table. He hands the pad and pencil to Igor.

Edward – Your turn.

Igor – So, you are so sure of your popularity?

Edward – And you?

Igor writes down a name and passes the pad and pencil to Kimberley.

Edward – And I promise you this, Kimberley: if we both survive, I'll buy you that Fiesta myself.

Igor gives him a murderous look. Kimberley hesitates, then writes a name on a piece of paper, tears it off, folds it, and places it on the table.

Edward – Natalie, would you do us the honour of counting the votes?

Reluctantly, Natalie takes a paper and reads.

Natalie – Igor... (*She takes another slip.*) Edward... (*She opens the third.*) Kimberley... (*Relieved.*) No one has a majority...

Igor (*to Edward*) – I voted for you. You voted for me. So who voted for Kimberley?

Kimberley – I did...

Natalie – Are you volunteering to sacrifice yourself?

Kimberley – I made a mistake. I thought we were voting for the one person we wanted to save...

Sad looks from the other three.

Edward – Well, that settles nothing!

Igor – Then we'll all die. (*He checks his watch.*) In about two hours...

Edward – By the way, why are we here discussing instead of starting the descent as soon as possible?

Igor – Because the ship won't be in the right position for re-entry for another half-hour.

Natalie – If we tried earlier, we'd bounce back into a higher orbit and be condemned to circle Earth indefinitely.

Edward – And they sold me this one-way ticket as a pleasure cruise...

Igor – So we've got roughly half an hour to decide which of us is made of the right stuff.

Natalie – It's a Greek tragedy. If none of us is prepared to die, we all die. Our choice is to die alone and save the other three, or die pointlessly along with them...

Kimberley – Or keep quiet and hope someone else volunteers...

Natalie – We won't solve it by choosing a scapegoat. Whoever dies to save the others has to volunteer.

Edward – Perfect... A candidate...

Silence.

Natalie – I'll do it.

The other three are taken aback. But Edward is the first to react.

Edward – Splendid. That's settled, then. And thank you. Although, as you said, it was that or all four of us dying...

Igor (to Natalie) – Why would you do that? Do you think you're Jesus Christ? You don't even believe in God!

Edward – Nobody asked you! If she's willing... Natalie, I promise I'll pay for your funeral. Do you have any special requests?

Igor – Shut up, Edward. Natalie, you're not sacrificing yourself for a sausage salesman and... another sausage.

Kimberley – What sausage?

Natalie – Who says I'm not sacrificing myself for you?

Igor – I'm not worth it, believe me.

Natalie – Call it pride. If I must die, I'd rather go out in style. It's the Cyrano in me...

Igor – I won't let you.

Natalie – And how do you plan to stop me?

Igor – I've got the key to the medicine cabinet. And if anyone sacrifices themselves, it'll be me.

Edward – You two aren't going to fight about it now...

Natalie – Are you willing to sacrifice yourself for me? Why?

Igor – Because you're worth it...

Edward – One thing's certain: you can't both die. One of you has to fly this thing home. (*Indicating Kimberley.*) I've only got a licence to drive trucks, and this young lady would struggle to park a Fiesta...

Kimberley – I object!

Edward – Excuse me, I take back what I said about the Fiesta.

Kimberley – I won't let Natalie or Igor die for us.

Edward – Oh, don't you start! We were getting somewhere...

Kimberley – How could we live with ourselves afterwards?

Edward – We'd manage, believe me! (*Checking his watch.*) And we've only got fifteen minutes left!

Igor – So what do you suggest?

Kimberley – Leave it to chance. It's the only fair way.

Edward – Fair, perhaps. But risky...

Natalie – I wonder if Kimberley is right after all. If everyone agrees...

Edward – Do I have a choice?

Igor – Not really...

Kimberley – We just need something to decide it for us.

Igor – I'd suggest Russian roulette, since we're in a Soyuz capsule. But firearms aren't allowed aboard. Besides, a bullet could go through someone's head and puncture the hull. Then we'd all lose our air. Rather defeats the purpose...

Kimberley – We have an axe...

Natalie – And how exactly do you play Russian roulette with an axe?

Silence. They think.

Edward – We could play poker! I've got a pack of cards... Every round is worth a litre of air, and the loser stops breathing...

Kimberley – I don't know how to play poker.

Natalie – Neither do I.

Edward – I'll teach you! You'll see, it's very simple...

Igor – Don't try to trick us. Poker isn't a game of pure chance.

Edward – Do you have a better idea?

Igor – Maybe...

Igor is about to leave. Edward intervenes.

Edward – Where are you going?

Igor – For refreshments. Didn't you say I was in charge of room service?

Edward – We should stay together. How do we know you aren't planning something?

Igor – You have my word. You'll have to take it. Unless you intend to stop me leaving... physically.

They glare at each other, and Edward eventually steps aside.

Edward – Fine. We're civilised people, after all...

Igor leaves the room. New silence. Natalie looks at the stars through the window.

Natalie – It may sound strange coming from an astrophysicist, but I'd never really taken the time to look at the stars like this. Just for their beauty...

Edward (*indifferent*) – Oh, yes...

Natalie – I wonder if the answer isn't there, after all...

Kimberley – The answer?

Edward – To what question?

Natalie – The origin of the universe. What if the answer isn't scientific but purely aesthetic? What if God is an artist?

Edward shrugs. Kimberley also looks at the starry sky.

Kimberley – It's true, it's beautiful.

Natalie (*to Edward*) – You came here to see the stars up close too, didn't you?

Edward – Yeah...

Natalie – When we set off on this journey, we knew we were already halfway to heaven...

Kimberley – Oddly enough, I don't even regret missing out on the Fiesta now. Even if I die tonight, at least I'll have seen this... I've never felt so alive.

Natalie – We're all going to die one day. If we remembered that every morning, it might help us live. After all, even stars die. One day, the Sun itself will go dark.

Kimberley – So we are just stars among other stars?

Natalie – Four stars, yes. And one too many...

Edward – Four stars for this wreck? One too many, that's for sure...

Natalie (*looking back at the stars*) – One star too many... But which one? Perhaps that's the mystery of the universe: everything in constant motion, like an enormous puzzle that never quite fits together... because there's always one piece left over.

Edward – Where the hell has that idiot got to?

Igor comes back carrying a tray with four glasses of champagne.

Igor – Shall we raise a glass to the New Year?

Edward – You think this is the time?

Igor – One of these glasses contains cyanide.

Silence from the other three.

Edward – You know which one! You poured them!

Igor – That's why I'll take the last glass. After you, Edward...

He holds the tray out to Edward, who hesitates.

Edward – Do you really know which one it is?

Igor – No. Otherwise there'd be no fun in it.

Edward reluctantly takes a glass. Igor then offers the tray to Kimberley, who hesitates as well.

Kimberley – I can't drink champagne. It makes me gassy...

Igor – Sorry...

Kimberley reluctantly takes a glass. Igor offers the tray to Natalie, who takes a glass without hesitation. Igor takes the last glass. They all come closer and raise their glasses to toast.

Igor – To the health of the survivors!

They all drink their glasses in one gulp.

Kimberley – Nice and cold... Haven't we got any peanuts?

Fade to black.

Act 3

They are all seated around the table. The atmosphere is heavy.

Kimberley – I thought a rocket would be much noisier. Can you hear that silence? It's almost deafening when you're not used to it...

Edward – Just as well. Otherwise we might think we were already dead.

Kimberley – It's even quieter than my grandmother's village. Nothing ever happens there...

Natalie – Sound doesn't travel through a vacuum. That's why we can't hear anything outside.

Kimberley – In her village?

Natalie – In space!

Igor – And yet the universe is anything but quiet. Some of the stars we see may already have died in immense nuclear explosions. If God exists, I suspect he looks more like Dr Strangelove than Santa Claus...

Kimberley – So stars die too...

Igor – Yes. And they die in silence.

Silence.

Edward – Can't we play some music... It's getting creepy, isn't it?

Natalie – The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me...

Edward – That's more or less what I was trying to say.

Natalie – It's Pascal.

Edward – Pascal?

Igor – A philosopher. He expressed the same idea you just had—only rather more elegantly...

Kimberley takes another bite from her plate.

Kimberley – Actually, this freeze-dried turkey isn't bad at all...

Edward – That's given me an idea. Dehydrated sausages! Much easier to transport, especially for export. (*He shows the size with his fingers.*) A tiny, shrivelled sausage, like this. Then, just before dinner, you add a little water and... there you are! A giant sausage!

Kimberley – The chestnuts would be better fresh, though.

Igor – What do fresh chestnuts look like?

Kimberley – Like the ones in candied chestnuts?

Edward – Or roasted chestnuts, surely?

Natalie – I still don't feel any symptoms. How about you?

Kimberley – Neither do I...

Igor – The poison takes time to work.

Edward – How much time?

Igor – About fifteen minutes, I'd say.

Kimberley – Is cyanide painful?

Igor – I've never taken any. Before today, that is...

Natalie – Why do you say that? You told us you didn't know which glass was poisoned.

Igor – Call it... a hunch.

Natalie – If I remember correctly, cyanide poisoning causes convulsions, then loss of consciousness and a deep coma...

Edward – You never mentioned all those side effects...

Natalie – Given how poisonous it is, the main side effect is death, usually from cardiac arrest...

Everyone swallows hard.

Igor – It was the poison of choice among the Nazi leadership. Göring used cyanide to avoid execution after the Nuremberg trials.

Edward – Killing yourself to avoid being executed... I'm not sure I see the advantage.

Natalie – Anyway, one of us will be dead in a few minutes. I suggest we each say what we'd change about our lives if we make it back to Earth. We can't just go on as before, can we?

Igor – All right... You first.

Natalie – Well... I'd go back to that ridiculously expensive shop where I saw a pair of shoes to die for...

Edward – Is that all?

Natalie – I thought the price was outrageous. But this adventure has taught me how important frivolity can be. What about you, Edward?

Edward – First, I'm never leaving the ground again. The stars look just as lovely from Earth. Get too close and you burn your wings, like that friend of yours... (*The other three look puzzled.*) Icarus!

Natalie – Ah, yes... And then what?

Edward – I'd set up a foundation...

Igor – You?

Edward – Why not? Like Bill Gates!

Natalie – What would your foundation do?

Edward – Oh, I don't know... End world hunger, for instance...

Igor – Ah, yes, that's... That's good.

Edward – I haven't always been so wealthy, you know. I wasn't born with a golden spoon in my mouth, as the saying goes.

Kimberley – Isn't it supposed to be a silver spoon?

Edward – Quite right... Just a silver spoon in my case. My father belonged to the younger branch of the family, so when my grandfather died I inherited only a fifth of his fortune. Still, it was a reasonable amount... And then my uncle died, and I inherited his processed-meat empire.

Igor – So you had a terribly deprived childhood...

Edward – If I became the king of sausages, it was because I wanted to feed the whole of humanity. In my own way, I'm an idealist too...

Igor – And to think nobody spotted the revolutionary in you... If you die, we'll put up a statue in your honour. (*To Kimberley.*) What about you?

Kimberley – I'd go back to studying languages.

Natalie – You were a student?

Kimberley – Is that so hard to believe?

Natalie – No, I mean... Foreign languages?

Kimberley – I wanted to be an interpreter. But I gave it up when I entered the Miss Oklahoma competition...

Edward – You were elected Miss Oklahoma?

Kimberley – I might have been! But I had to withdraw just before the final. An ex-boyfriend put an old low-budget film I'd made online. A youthful mistake...

Edward (*excited*) – Really...?

Igor – So you speak several languages?

Kimberley – Japanese and Mandarin fluently, and my Russian's pretty good too.

Igor – If I'd known, I'd have asked you to help me with the medicine cabinet earlier. I had a terrible time finding the cyanide. The labels were in Korean... I think.

Kimberley – I know a little Korean too. It's a beautiful language. Very musical.

Edward – Particularly South Korean, I imagine.

Kimberley – Oh, why is that?

Edward – The southern accent! It's bound to be more musical, isn't it?

Kimberley – Yes...

Natalie – And what about you, Igor?

Igor (*looking unwell*) – I don't think this is the time for me to make plans for the future...

Kimberley – Oh, my God! Are you having contractions? I mean, convulsions...

Igor – I'll leave you to enjoy the rest of New Year's Eve... (*He gets up with difficulty and hands Natalie a letter.*) Here. I wrote you a little note, just in case... (*She takes it numbly.*) Read it when I'm gone. I don't like saying goodbye...

Natalie (*deeply upset*) – I'll come with you.

Igor – No, thank you. I'd rather go alone... I wish you all a safe journey.

Kimberley – You too...

He leaves the room, and the other three remain petrified.

Edward – It's always the best ones who leave first.

Natalie gets up, takes Igor's empty glass, examines it and brings it to her nose.

Natalie – There was no cyanide in his glass.

Edward – How do you know?

Natalie – Cyanide has a faint smell of bitter almonds. I've worked with it in the laboratory, and I have a very good sense of smell...

Kimberley takes the glass and smells it too.

Kimberley – I think I know that smell too! My hypoallergenic soap smells just like it!

Edward (*alarmed*) – So it was just the turkey that upset his stomach, and one of us three is still going to die?

Natalie smells the other three glasses.

Natalie – There was no cyanide in any of the four glasses.

Kimberley – But he really looked very sick...

Edward – What does that mean?

Natalie – It means he took the poison before pouring the drinks. Deliberately. You saw how he behaved—he knew he was going to die. Why else would he have written that letter?

Kimberley – But... why?

Natalie – He sacrificed himself for us. Of his own free will. But he didn't want us to know...

Edward – Why would he do that? It doesn't make any sense!

Natalie – Probably so we could live with ourselves. He wanted us to believe chance had saved us, not his suicide. And true heroes don't seek glory...

Kimberley – My God...

Edward – What a man...

Natalie – Yes...

Edward – And what does the letter say?

Natalie – I prefer to read it later, if you don't mind...

Edward – But it might be important... He was the pilot, after all. They could be instructions for landing...

Natalie reluctantly opens the envelope and begins to read silently, under the intrigued gaze of the other two.

Kimberley – So?

Natalie – It's a kind of last will...

Edward – Did he leave us something? That's really generous of him...

Kimberley gives him a reproachful look.

Natalie – More of a moral testament...

Edward – Ah, moral... And then?

Natalie – He wants you to name your foundation after him...

Edward – What foundation? (*The others stare at him.*) Oh, yes, of course... The... the foundation...

Kimberley – Oh my God...

Natalie – You too, Kimberley, he would like you to keep your promise...

Kimberley – My promise?

Natalie – That you'd go back to your studies. He's leaving you the money in his savings account to help you do it...

Edward – How much?

Natalie – Fifteen thousand euros.

Edward – Oh yes, quite a sum...

Kimberley – There's a note for you too, Natalie...

Natalie – A few instructions for landing, yes. Second gear grinds a little, and...

Edward – And...?

Natalie (*overcome with emotion*) – The rest is personal...

Edward and Kimberley exchange an embarrassed look as they see Natalie on the verge of tears. Suddenly, the wall terminal of the onboard radio starts flashing red again. Natalie, in a daze, mechanically answers the call.

Natalie – Hello...? (*Appalled.*) No...? And you're only telling us now? All right, I'll call back...

Edward and Kimberley give her a questioning look.

Edward – What's happening now?

Natalie – They've repaired the leak in the main oxygen system...

Edward – Meaning?

Natalie – We have enough oxygen for everyone to get back to Earth safely.

Kimberley – Great! (*Realising.*) Oh my God! Igor...

Natalie hurries towards the door.

Natalie (*as she exits*) – I'll see if there's still time to save him...

Edward and Kimberley are left alone.

Edward – This whole operation's a disgrace. Just wait until we get home! They sold us a luxury trip, like the Orient Express, and what did we get? Second-hand parts! The propulsion system from an American shuttle, the cabin from a European space station, Russian oxygen equipment...

Kimberley – And a North Korean medicine cabinet.

Edward – The Tower of Babel, that's what this rocket is! I want my money back. Still, the main thing is we're alive! We've made it, Kimberley! Can you believe it? You don't look pleased...

Kimberley – Poor Igor...

Edward – That's what happens when you try to be a hero... Good thing we didn't volunteer too quickly.

Kimberley – Still... What courage... And he was handsome, that's true...

Edward – And I'm still here! Very much alive! (*Brightly.*) So you were in an adult film when you were younger? Well, Kimberley, you're full of surprises... And you speak all those languages!

Kimberley – Thank you.

Edward – This experience has made me think, Kimberley. Grow up, even. In fact, I have a proposition for you. I need someone I can trust to run...

Kimberley (*enthusiastically*) – Your foundation?

Edward – What foundation?

Kimberley – Your foundation against world hunger!

Edward – Oh, that... No, I meant... Well, it's much the same. I need a sales manager to develop the Asian market...

Kimberley – The Asian market...?

Edward – You'd make a wonderful ambassador for my sausages in that part of the world.

Kimberley – You think so...?

Edward – You speak almost as many languages as the Pope, and you're much better-looking. Appearances matter these days! How can the Vatican hope to expand into China with an old, wrinkled fellow who looks like a dehydrated sausage?

Kimberley – A dehydrated sausage?

Edward – More than a billion potential customers, all eating noodles and dumplings! Imagine converting them to sausages! We'd make a fortune!

Kimberley – Mmm...

Edward – Speaking of advertising, I had a brilliant idea while we were looking at the stars...

Kimberley – Oh, yes...?

Edward gestures grandly towards the Moon.

Edward – A giant laser on a satellite, projecting my sausage logo onto the Moon—with my name in enormous letters! Imagine the publicity! The whole planet would see it. That's global marketing for you!

Kimberley, taken aback, doesn't have time to respond. Natalie returns, devastated.

Natalie – He's lying unconscious on his bunk. I can't wake him... So I've decided to join him...

Edward – What do you mean, go join him?

Kimberley takes a tube of tablets from Natalie's hand and puts it on the table after glancing at it.

Kimberley – Oh, my God... She's taken a cyanide capsule too...

Edward – Then we're all going to die! (*Kimberley looks at him in surprise.*) Who's going to fly us back to Earth?

Natalie – Sorry, I hadn't thought of that... Goodbye. Be happy together. I'm going to join the man I love. For eternity... But first I need to stop off at the toilet.

Natalie leaves.

Edward (*despairing*) – This ship's put us through everything...

Kimberley – Still, it's quite moving, isn't it...?

Edward – What?

Kimberley – Igor... Natalie... He agreed to die to save her, and she's going to join him in death. It's wildly romantic!

Edward – It's just plain stupid, if you ask me.

Kimberley – It's like Shakespeare! What a declaration of love! Would you die for me, Edward?

Edward – At this point, I don't think I have a choice. We're all going to die anyway.

Igor comes back at that moment, staggering, with a medication tube in his hand as well.

Kimberley (*stunned*) – Now they're turning it into Romeo and Juliet...

Igor – I don't understand... I swallowed two cyanide capsules, and all I feel is a bit sleepy...

Kimberley examines the tube in Igor's hand.

Kimberley – This isn't Korean... It's Vietnamese! (*She studies the label.*) And it isn't cyanide. It's a sleeping pill... It expired in 1973.

Edward – No wonder it hardly works. But we're saved! He can fly us home—as long as we can keep him awake for another hour...

Igor – Where's Natalie?

Kimberley (*embarrassed*) – Well, you see...

Edward – Can you still fly this thing? If not, show me the controls before you fall asleep again. It can't be that difficult. I got my truck-driving licence in the army, remember?

Igor – What happened?

Kimberley – We're saved, Commander. They managed to fix the main ventilation system. We can go back home...

Igor – And Natalie? Tell me the truth!

Kimberley – Well...

Edward – One gone, ten more to choose from!

Kimberley – As she thought you were dead...

Igor notices the tube Natalie left on the table and picks it up.

Igor – Don't tell me that...

Kimberley – Unfortunately, yes, Igor... But you can at least be sure of one thing. She loved you too...

Igor – Oh, my God... I'd rather just end it too...

Igor raises the tube towards his mouth.

Edward – Oh, no! Not again! This is getting ridiculous!

Kimberley takes the tube from Igor and examines the label.

Kimberley – Edward's right. I wouldn't take that if I were you... (*Igor and Edward look at her.*) It's not Korean either. It's Tibetan. (*She checks the label.*) And it isn't cyanide. It's a powerful herbal laxative...

Edward – Expired?

Kimberley – Unfortunately not...

Edward – With those zero-gravity toilets...

Kimberley – It'll be a tidal wave...

Natalie comes back at that moment.

Natalie – Does anyone know where they keep the spare toilet paper? (*She sees Igor.*) Igor! You're alive!

Igor – Yes, Natalie! It's a miracle! We're saved! I've only taken a sleeping pill! And you're going to have a terrible case of traveller's diarrhoea!

Natalie – But that's wonderful!

Igor – I love you, Natalie. I have since the moment I first saw you. Will you marry me?

Natalie – Yes, Igor... (*She moves to kiss him as the others watch fondly.*) But excuse me just a moment. I'll be right back...

She rushes off, clutching her stomach. Igor promptly falls into a deep sleep again.

Edward – I think it'll take both of them to get this heap of junk back to the garage...

Kimberley, on the verge of tears, seeks refuge in Edward's arms.

Kimberley – Oh, dear... After everything that's happened, I think my heart might burst...

Edward (*moved*) – You're right... It's made me realise how short life is. And after everything we've been through together... Kimberley, will you marry me?

Kimberley – You'd marry me? Even after my mistakes when I was younger?

Edward – We've already been through the worst. Now comes the best! I promise you the Moon, Kimberley!

Kimberley – The moon?

Edward – If you marry me, you'll have my name! Remember the laser? The name of the sausage king, written across the Moon in enormous letters! Will you be my queen?

Kimberley – And could I still have my Fiesta?

Edward – As a wedding present! With all the extras—even a cigarette lighter and a built-in sausage grill!

Kimberley – Oh, Edward... Then yes! I'll marry you...

They are about to kiss when the ship's radio flashes red. They exchange worried looks. Edward picks up the receiver.

Edward – Hello...? (*He listens gravely, then turns to Kimberley with a broad smile.*)
They've managed to unblock the toilets too!

Kimberley – Well, all's well that ends well...

Blackout.

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
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