La Comédiathèque

Miracle at Saint Mary Juana Abbey



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Miracle at Saint Mary Juana Abbey

Jean-Pierre Martinez

Translation by the author

The abbey's shop supports the sisters' charitable work, but their famous Saint Mary Juana Elixir is no longer selling. Then Sister Margaret adds a mysterious herb to the recipe, and demand suddenly soars. Has Saint Mary Juana performed another miracle?

Characters

Beatrice: Mother Superior
Teresa: Sister Treasurer
Agnes: Novice
Mildred: Volunteer
Harold: Volunteer
Edward: Parishioner
Victoria: Parishioner
Fred and/or Sam: Teenager(s), male or female
Ben and/or Jo: Dealer(s), male or female
Ramirez and/or Sanchez: Police officer(s), male or female

Flexible casting: 10–13 performers
13 characters: 2M/11F, 3M/10F, 4M/9F, 5M/8F, 6M/7F, 7M/6F
12 characters: 2M/10F, 3M/9F, 4M/8F, 5M/7F, 6M/6F
11 characters: 2M/9F, 3M/8F, 4M/7F, 5M/6F
10 characters: 2M/8F, 3M/7F, 4M/6F, 5M/5F
The teenagers, dealers and police officers may be of either gender;
each pair may be reduced to one character.

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The gift shop at Saint Mary Juana Abbey. Shelves display the nuns' liqueurs, biscuits, jams and religious souvenirs: candles, figurines and books. Pride of place goes to the famous Elixir of Saint Mary Juana. Sister Teresa is doing the accounts while Mildred, a volunteer, checks the shelves.

Mildred – We'll need to order more Saint Mary Juana bookmarks. They're selling like hotcakes.

Teresa – Even if we could multiply them like the loaves and fishes, at fifty cents apiece they wouldn't do much for our takings.

Mildred – Come on, Sister Teresa, we mustn't lose faith! *(A pause.)* Though I suppose you're right... We haven't exactly had a flood of customers this morning.

Teresa – Even our most faithful parishioners prefer to go to the shopping centre for their Christmas gifts.

Mildred – Just to buy things made in China, or goodness knows where... Everything we sell is made here by the sisters. Locally produced, as they say nowadays.

Teresa – Indeed, Mildred. Straight from the Creator to the consumer.

Mildred – Unfortunately, organic monastic products still have an image problem.

Teresa – And our bank account has a problem, full stop.

Mildred – Is it really that bad?

Teresa – We're not here to make a profit, of course. But if sales keep falling, we'll have to close the shop. Unless a miracle happens.

Harold enters, pushing a heavy crate of liqueur bottles on a hand trolley.

Mildred – Ah, Harold!

Harold – My dear Mildred. Good morning, Sister Teresa.

Mildred – Good heavens, that crate looks heavy!

Teresa – Fortunately, we've got a trolley to help us.

Mildred – A trolley? I hope poor Harold hasn't been doing all the heavy lifting.

Harold – Only the pushing. My back has gone on strike.

Mildred – What a useful little contraption!

Harold – There's no stopping progress.

Mildred – I didn't know we had one at the abbey.

Teresa – Edward gave it to us. He's one of our parishioners. He's just retired from running his grocery shop.

Harold – As far as my back is concerned, this trolley is a godsend. With my sciatica... Would you help me, Mildred?

Mildred – Of course, Harold.

Harold and Mildred struggle to lift the crate off the trolley and set it on the floor.

Mildred – Phew! It weighs a ton. What's in it?

Harold – The last batch made by our dear departed Sister Anne.

Teresa – May God rest her soul.

Harold – Sister Agnes will make the next batch.

Mildred – Sister Agnes?

Teresa – The sister who's taken over from Sister Anne at the distillery!

Mildred – Oh yes, of course. She arrived a few days ago, didn't she? We haven't had the chance to meet her yet.

Teresa – She's been spending every day up in the mountains gathering the herbs we use to make our liqueur.

Mildred takes a bottle and admires the label.

Mildred – Ah, the famous Elixir of Saint Mary Juana. Supposed to cure almost anything...

Harold – And restore all the vigour of our youth...

Teresa – Do you doubt it?

Mildred – I'm sure it has certain healing properties, but... my faith may be unshakeable, yet I have my doubts about an elixir of youth that's forty-five per cent alcohol.

Harold – If only it could cure my sciatica...

Teresa – This is no laughing matter, Mildred. The holy liqueur is the abbey's signature product. It used to be our bestseller.

Mildred – It's true that we haven't sold many since the last delivery. I'm not sure where we're going to put all this...

Teresa – A few years ago we sold at least two bottles a day.

Harold – We need to boost sales somehow. But it's supposed to be medicinal. People don't drink it every evening before dinner.

Mildred – Unless we could find a way of giving this rather old-fashioned product a new lease of life.

Harold – An elixir of youth that needs rejuvenating itself. Rather ironic, don't you think?

Mildred – Like mothballs. You put them in clothes to keep the insects away, and when you wear the clothes, you're the one who smells as though you've been dead for years.

Harold – You certainly don't smell of mothballs, Mildred. Quite the contrary, if I may say so.

Mildred – Thank you, Harold. You certainly know how to talk to a woman.

Harold – So much mystery surrounding that recipe... Whenever Sister Anne went up into the mountains to gather ingredients for her elixir, she reminded me of the druid in Asterix.

Mildred – Really, Harold. Sister Anne looked nothing like Getafix.

Harold – I wasn't referring to the beard.

Teresa – Children, please. Let's not be irreverent. Sister Anne has only just joined our Lord Jesus in heaven.

Mildred – *(Crossing herself.)* May she rest in peace. After all she did for this abbey, and for the poor people we help, I'm sure God will forgive her for having indulged a little too freely in that miraculous elixir. All in the name of testing its medicinal properties...

Harold – Yes. That may well be what brought about her end, actually.

Mildred – In a way, she gave her life to keep this noble institution going.

Teresa – But remember, the recipe for our sacred liqueur came from the founder of our order.

Mildred – They say she heard voices, and the recipe was revealed to her. Almost as if God himself had whispered it in her ear.

Teresa – And it is the sales of this divine elixir that have allowed our abbey to continue its mission until today.

Mildred looks toward the door.

Mildred – Ah, here comes Mother Superior. I don't know who she's brought with her...

Beatrice, the Mother Superior, enters followed by the young Sister Agnes.

Beatrice – Good morning, my children.

Teresa – Good morning, Mother.

Beatrice – My children, let me introduce Sister Agnes, who will be joining us as a novice. Before she passed away, Sister Anne passed the torch to her. From now on, Agnes will distil our elixir.

Teresa – Welcome to Saint Mary Juana Abbey, Sister.

Mildred – How heartening to see that, despite the shortage of vocations, some young women still choose the religious life.

Harold – Did you study botany, by any chance?

Beatrice – Sister Agnes has just graduated from HEC Paris.

Teresa – HEC?

Agnes – One of France's leading business schools.

Harold – Ah. That's quite an unusual qualification.

Agnes – For distilling liqueur, you mean?

Harold – For a nun, I meant. Even with youth unemployment as high as it is, graduates of elite business schools don't often enter convents.

Mildred – All roads can lead to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Agnes – I decided to become a nun after seeing the Virgin Mary.

Harold – Well, well...

Teresa – On a pilgrimage to Lourdes, perhaps? In the grotto, like Saint Bernadette?

Agnes – No. At the back of a lecture theatre, during a class on innovation management.

Harold – In the light of a projector, perhaps?

Beatrice – When the Blessed Virgin chooses to appear, she hardly asks us to pick the time and place.

Teresa – God is everywhere, after all. Why not in a lecture theatre at HEC Paris?

Beatrice – Let us take Sister Agnes's arrival as a sign that God wishes us to persevere in our mission.

Mildred – Of course...

Beatrice – In view of her business training, I've asked Sister Agnes to help revive sales of our products.

Harold – Excellent idea.

Beatrice – As well as working at the distillery, Sister Agnes will also help you in the shop. Please show her all the excellent work you've been doing. And if she has a few ideas for improvement...

Teresa – You can rely on us, Mother. If it's God's will, we're entirely open to innovation management.

Beatrice – I'll leave her in your hands. Christmas is approaching and I must finish arranging the Nativity scene.

Beatrice exits.

Teresa – Right... Shall I show you how everything works?

Agnes – Please. It's a lovely shop... Perhaps a little traditional.

Teresa – As Mother Superior said, this is a mission before it's a business.

Agnes – Of course, Sister. But we need money to carry out our mission, don't we?

Teresa – Exactly. Our sales pay the abbey's bills and fund our charitable work.

Agnes – Mother Superior mentioned that. You work against the drug cartels in Colombia, don't you?

Teresa – In our own modest way, yes.

Harold – Without weapons, hatred or violence, of course.

Mildred – We support fair-trade farming programmes in Latin America, so farmers can move away from growing poppies.

Agnes – A noble mission, indeed.

Teresa – Mildred and Harold are among the volunteers who help us with that work.

Mildred – I just like to make myself useful. And as I'm still single...

Teresa – I'll let Mildred show you our range. She knows the shop much better than I do.

Mildred – As you can see, there's quite a selection. Our specialities are the Saint Mary Juana candles and the famous elixir of youth, made with local herbs.

Agnes – Yes. Sister Anne entrusted me with the secret recipe just before she died.

Teresa – A secret passed down from sister to sister for generations.

Harold – Really? I had no idea that was the custom.

Mildred – When the herbalist sister feels her end approaching, just before receiving the last rites, she passes her secret to her successor. Fortunately, violent deaths are rare in convents.

Harold – So it's as closely guarded as the Coca-Cola formula.

Teresa – Unfortunately, our elixir doesn't sell nearly as well. It's a traditional product, and people seem to be losing their taste for tradition.

Harold – Maybe we could use it in cocktails.

Mildred – Cocktails... Now there's an idea. What do you think, Sister Agnes?

Agnes – Why not...?

Mildred – Harold, don't tell me you've never tried our holy liqueur!

Harold – Well, not that I can remember... *(He examines the bottle.)* The vintage look has its charms, I'll grant you, but...

Mildred – Have a taste. See what you think.

Mildred takes a bottle from behind the counter, pours a small glass and offers it to Harold. He downs it in one go, with a slight grimace.

Mildred – So?

Harold – Oh... That's certainly... distinctive. And people actually buy it?

Teresa – Less and less, unfortunately...

Agnes – I'm not surprised. We need to update the recipe, redesign the label... Have you got a website?

Teresa – You mean... for the abbey?

Agnes – For the shop, at least.

Teresa – Well... It didn't seem necessary until now.

Agnes – You need a social-media page at the very least. We could call it 'Friends of Saint Mary Juana'. What do you think?

Sister Teresa is taken aback by these revolutionary ideas. Victoria enters: an elderly woman, elegant and dignified, though clearly feeling her age.

Victoria – Good morning.

Mildred – Good morning, Victoria. How are you this morning?

Victoria – Oh, you know, at my age... I was at confession, as I am every Thursday, after my hair appointment. I thought I'd pop in and say hello.

Harold – Every Thursday? Have you really got so much to confess, Victoria?

Teresa – Come on, Harold...

Victoria – I could make do with once a month, of course...

Harold – To confession?

Victoria – The hairdresser! But it gets me out of the house.

Mildred – Perhaps you wanted to do some Christmas shopping, Victoria?

Victoria – Well...

Mildred *(aside)* – Here's your chance to practise your sales technique, Sister Agnes. I'll leave her to you.

Agnes – Good morning, madam. Can I help you find something?

Victoria – Well, I don't know this charming young lady...

Teresa – This is Sister Agnes, Victoria. She's joining us as a novice.

Victoria – Good Lord, my poor child! Why bury yourself in a convent at your age? That ought to be reserved for women who no longer have a chance to sin.

Mildred – Come on, Victoria...

Victoria – And what drove you to take the veil, dear Agnes? A broken heart?

Agnes – A vision of the Virgin.

Victoria – Oh, my poor child! At your age you should be getting to know young men, not the Virgin!

Agnes – You said you weren't feeling too well. Perhaps a little pick-me-up would help. You know our famous elixir of youth, I imagine?

Victoria – She's quite adorable, though...

Agnes takes a bottle and shows it to her.

Agnes – Here, they say it's good for everything.

Victoria – Oh, yes... My grandmother always kept a bottle of that sort of tonic in the cupboard.

Agnes – This one is supposed to be much more powerful.

Mildred – Let's not exaggerate. We don't want to be accused of misleading advertising.

Harold – It may not give you your youth back, Victoria, but it could make old age more bearable.

Agnes – Shall I put you down for a bottle?

Victoria – Well... I still have the bottle my grandmother left me when she died. Nobody drinks that sort of thing any more.

Agnes – Your grandmother's bottle may be past its best. Even miraculous elixirs have expiry dates.

Victoria – I'll take a bookmark for my prayer book instead. I've lost mine again. It's mainly to support your good works, of course.

Mildred – Yes, and it's also cheaper, isn't it?

Edward enters, an elderly gentleman who is smartly dressed, though showing his age.

Edward – Ladies and gentlemen. Sisters.

Harold – Hello, Edward. Just come from confession too?

Edward – No, from the bar. I've bought my lottery ticket, as I do every Thursday.

Harold – Good for you, Edward. A place in heaven is one thing, a place in the sun on earth is another. Fortune favours the bold! Doesn't it, Mildred?

Mildred – I've never understood gambling. Is it really Christian? Doesn't the Bible say we must earn our bread by the sweat of our brow?

Edward – Rest assured, Sisters, if I win the lottery I'll make a donation to your charities.

Agnes – In that case, we will pray to the Lord for fortune to smile upon you...

Harold – And thank you for the trolley you donated. It's spared my back, pending the miracle that cures my sciatica.

Edward – Hello, Victoria. You look very elegant today.

Victoria pretends not to notice him, though she has been stealing glances. She smiles and becomes rather coquettish.

Victoria – I've just come from the hairdresser's...

Edward – And if I may say so, this new colour suits you marvellously.

Victoria – Flatterer... But thank you anyway, Edward.

Edward – It's very... springlike. Those... orange highlights.

Victoria *(shocked)* – Orange, you think?

Edward – No, it's not really orange. I was just saying...

Victoria *(to Agnes)* – Do you think I have orange hair, my dear Agnes?

Agnes – Well, there are some rather... petrol-blue highlights, aren't there?

Victoria *(horrified)* – Petrol blue?

Agnes – Well... More like metallic blue...

Victoria *(to Harold)* – What do you think, then?

Harold – Metallic blue? I like it. It's the colour of my car.

Victoria – I'm going straight back to my hairdresser. She'll hear about this!

Agnes – Shall I keep that bottle aside for you, Victoria?

Edward – What's this? The famous Saint Mary Juana elixir! I didn't know they still made it.

Agnes – The classics never die.

Victoria – Oh, these miracle tonics... I've been taking them all my life. Just look at me.

Edward – The results are spectacular, my dear Victoria!

Victoria – You're going to make me blush, Edward...

Edward – Let me buy you this bottle.

Victoria – Thank you, but... I'm not sure if...

Edward – Perhaps you'll invite me round to share a little glass.

Victoria – Well, in that case... Why not?

Mildred – And there you have it. Your first sale.

Sister Teresa hands the bottle to Victoria in a small bag. Edward gives a note to Mildred.

Mildred – You must tell us whether it works!

Edward *(taking the bag)* – I'll carry that. May I walk you home?

Victoria – Certainly, Edward...

Edward – Your hair really does look lovely.

Victoria – Do you honestly think so?

They exit. Victoria, excited, forgets her handbag.

Mildred – Well, perhaps the elixir does bring lonely hearts together.

Harold – I'm afraid they'll both be dead before they finish the bottle.

Teresa gives him a reproachful look.

Teresa – Oh, Harold...

Harold – I didn't mean the liqueur would shorten their lives! Just that a glass a month won't do much for our sales.

Agnes – All the more reason to change our sales methods.

Teresa – Change... It's a strange word to hear within convent walls, Sister.

Agnes – Traditions matter, of course. But without income, the abbey won't be able to continue its charitable work.

Teresa – I'm afraid that's only too true.

Agnes – By the way... Could you tell me more about these charitable works, Sister?

Teresa – First, there's our programme helping farmers in Colombia escape the drug economy.

Mildred – And our after-school tutoring for disadvantaged teenagers here in town.

Teresa – We also give a few scholarships so the most promising can attend a Catholic school.

Harold – Private education is so expensive these days...

Teresa – But I'm afraid this year we won't be able to carry on. Unless there's a miracle...

Agnes's face lights up.

Agnes – A miracle? Then perhaps I can provide one!

Teresa – Sister Agnes, really... You seem rather carried away. A miracle is no small matter. You're not hoping to be beatified at your age, are you?

Agnes – I know how we can boost sales of our elixir, Sister!

Mildred – We're listening, Sister Agnes.

Agnes – I found a new herb in the mountains.

Mildred – There's no shortage of herbs up there.

Agnes – Not like this one. I've never seen it before, and I can't find it in any of the botany books in our library.

Harold – Careful. Some herbs are like mushrooms. Some can be poisonous.

Agnes – I added it to a new batch of liqueur. The result is mind-blowing, I assure you.

Teresa – Mind-blowing? In what way?

Agnes – It tastes much better, and the effect seems far stronger.

Harold – It's beginning to sound like a magic potion.

Teresa – Let's not rush into anything. The formula is centuries old. Changing it would be a major decision.

Agnes – Why don't we ask Mother Superior to join us for a tasting?

Teresa – Do you really think we can disturb her for this?

Harold – She herself encourages us to reform our methods!

Agnes – You can favour the Latin Mass and still be open to new ideas.

Harold – When they're good ideas...

Teresa – Well... Mildred, please go fetch the Mother Superior. She's in the chapel setting up the nativity scene...

Mildred – Very well, Sister.

Mildred exits.

Teresa – How do we go about it?

Agnes – I've brought a small sample of the new elixir.

Harold – A little vial... We're venturing into witchcraft. Luckily, they don't burn witches these days.

Teresa – So much for preserving tradition.

Agnes – Let's do a blind tasting.

Teresa – We're hardly going to blindfold Mother Superior!

Agnes – No, Sister. We simply pour the two versions into unmarked glasses and see which people prefer.

Harold – An excellent idea. May the best potion win!

They set everything up for the tasting session.

Teresa – I'm still not sure this is entirely Catholic...

Edward and Victoria return.

Victoria – How silly of me! I've forgotten my handbag.

Edward – The elixir can't have taken effect yet. I forget things myself sometimes.

Agnes – Edward, Victoria! Perfect timing. We were looking for guinea pigs.

Edward – Guinea pigs?

Teresa *(to Agnes)* – Are you sure it's completely harmless?

Agnes – Don't worry. I've tried it on myself — and just look at the result!

Teresa looks at Agnes, not entirely reassured. Mother Superior arrives with Mildred.

Beatrice – Well then, children. What have you got for me?

Agnes – First, everyone will taste a sample without knowing which formula it is.

Beatrice – Alright...

Agnes discreetly pours the first round, giving everyone a small glass. After a moment's hesitation, they taste the liqueur in reverent silence.

Harold – Yes...

Teresa – This is the traditional recipe, isn't it?

Mildred – It's not bad, but...

Victoria – It's certainly a cordial.

Edward – Still tastes a little medicinal...

Beatrice – Yes... It's the Elixir of Saint Mary Juana, after all.

Without a word, Agnes pours a second round. This time, faces brighten with appreciation.

Mildred – Ah, yes...

Harold – It feels less like drinking medicine.

Beatrice – How curious...

Edward – It's not bad...

Teresa – I taste a hint of apple.

Agnes – There's some apple in it.

Beatrice – But it must be just as beneficial as the old recipe.

Agnes – I only added a little...

Victoria – I'd like to taste it again, just to be sure.

Agnes – There's only enough left for one glass.

Beatrice – Oh yes, it's...

She passes the glass to Teresa.

Teresa – It's good.

She passes the glass to Harold.

Harold – Yes... You can feel the benefit straight away...

He hangs on to the glass, looking rather dazed.

Mildred – Pass it along, Arnold.

Harold – My name is Harold. Though I do feel a little muddled...

The atmosphere relaxes.

Agnes – Mind-blowing... yes, that's the word. I think I've just seen the Virgin Mary again!

Teresa – Again? But where?

Agnes – Right there, at the bottom of my glass.

Edward – I've seen the Virgin Mary at the bottom of a glass myself...

Victoria – At the bar?

Edward – More often at a Chinese restaurant, after a little sake.

Mildred – Anyway, Edward.

Everyone except the nuns bursts into laughter.

Beatrice – We should probably stop this tasting session now...

Teresa – I don't know what's happening. I seem to be having visions too.

Victoria takes out a mirror from her handbag and looks at herself.

Victoria – What colour is my hair now?

Edward – I would say... pink.

Victoria – That's what I thought.

Beatrice – It's wonderfully soothing. I haven't felt this good since... Oh, never mind what I was going to say.

Mildred – I think we've had rather too much of this miraculous elixir.

Agnes – It's thirty-eight per cent alcohol, after all.

Edward – Any more of your magic potion, Sister?

Agnes – Not a drop.

Teresa – Then I think we'd better get to bed.

Agnes – Before Vespers, sister?

Beatrice – You didn't expect to go dancing, I imagine?

Teresa – You'll find that in a convent we go to bed with the chickens.

Agnes – Chickens?

Edward – Ah, the eternal question: which came first, the chicken or the egg? The chicken, obviously. Eggs are hopeless conversationalists.

Mildred – I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about...

Agnes – And what about the tasting? What have we decided?

Beatrice – I haven't the faintest idea... My mind's gone rather hazy.

Agnes – We could take a vote.

Teresa – Better to give it some thought.

Mildred – Let's sleep on it.

Beatrice – Quite right. We'll decide tomorrow, when our heads are clearer.

Harold – Shall I walk you home, Millicent?

Mildred – It's Mildred...

They all dissolve into foolish laughter and stagger towards the door. Beatrice trips.

Teresa – Mind the step, Mother Beatrice!

Beatrice – What step?

Mildred – There wasn't one a moment ago...

Beatrice – Another miracle!

They exit.

Blackout.

Mildred enters with Harold and looks back at the doorway.

Mildred – No, there's no step after all...

Harold looks around the empty shop.

Harold – Strange. Sister Teresa is usually here before us.

Mildred – Perhaps the sisters overslept. I didn't hear the bell for morning prayers.

Harold – You were sleeping rather soundly yourself.

Mildred – How would you know that, Harold?

Harold – You do remember I walked you home last night?

Mildred – Oh, yes... perhaps. There was such a fog... Even inside the house. Funny weather for this time of year. Anyway, you walked me home. *(Uneasy.)* And then?

Harold – You were exhausted. I had to help you upstairs to your room.

Mildred – Don't tell me that...

Harold – I'm a gentleman, Mildred. Believe me, it took real heroism not to take advantage. You didn't want me to leave. Do you remember?

Mildred – No...

Harold – You were rather dazed. I wouldn't take advantage of that. But... may I still hope?

Mildred – My God...

Sister Teresa enters, somewhat dishevelled and looking guilty.

Teresa – Forgive me. This is the first time I've ever slept through the bell.

Mildred – I think we got rather carried away last night.

Harold – Oddly enough, I feel hungover without the headache. A genuine miracle of the elixir!

Sister Agnes enters with a crate of bottles.

Agnes – I distilled a few more bottles overnight. They'll be a sensation. Sales will go through the roof!

Teresa – Let me remind you, Sister, Mother Superior hasn't authorised the new formula yet.

The Mother Superior arrives.

Beatrice – Good morning, children. Forgive me for not waking to ring the bells.

Agnes – At least the new elixir certainly has sleeping properties.

Beatrice – I slept like a log. But I'm concerned about these unexpected side effects.

Agnes – Perhaps the dose was a little strong...

Teresa – What do you think, Mother?

Beatrice – I'm not sure...

Teresa – However, a decision must be made.

Beatrice – Mildred, what do you think?

Mildred – There's no denying the new elixir's extraordinary effects. But relaxation and lowered inhibitions together could be a dangerous combination.

Teresa – What if the Devil himself planted this sinister herb in our path?

Beatrice – Like the serpent tempting Eve in the Garden of Eden?

Teresa – I thought I tasted apple...

Moment of reflection.

Beatrice – You're right. Sisters, the best can be the enemy of the good. And the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Let's forget these dangerous innovations and keep the traditional recipe revealed to Saint Mary Juana by the Virgin herself.

Agnes *(barely concealing her disappointment)* – Very well, Mother...

Beatrice notices the crate Agnes has brought.

Beatrice – What's all this?

Agnes – I made a few bottles, just in case. But I'll destroy them, I promise.

Beatrice – Then the matter is closed.

Beatrice prepares to leave.

Agnes – Still, it seems a pity not to give the new recipe a chance.

Beatrice – I beg your pardon, Sister?

Agnes – After all, it's only a herbal liqueur, not cocaine from a drug cartel.

Beatrice – Are you questioning my decision?

Agnes – I'm simply saying that any institution which can't adapt is bound to suffer.

Beatrice – My dear child, the Church has built its identity on resisting change.

Teresa – That resistance has occasionally led to excesses, such as the St Bartholomew's Day massacre. But it has also preserved our traditions.

Harold – Traditions admired the world over.

The phone rings.

Agnes – You actually have a telephone here?

Teresa – Well, of course...

Teresa answers.

Teresa – Saint Mary Juana Abbey, good morning... No, Mary Juana is the name of the saint, not my name. I haven't even been beatified yet... The treasurer? Yes, speaking. Oh... I see. No... That's very unfortunate. It must be a misunderstanding. Yes, I'll deal with it at once. Thank you for calling. Of course. God bless Mutual Credit Bank.

Beatrice – Is there any problem?

Teresa – The bank. One of our cheques has bounced.

Beatrice – Which cheque?

Teresa – The cheque for young Zinedine's school fees. He was meant to enter a Catholic secondary school.

Mildred – He's bright, but he's been expelled from every state school in the area.

Agnes – If he drops out completely, he'll end up dealing drugs.

Harold – Or worse, playing professional football.

Beatrice – Well, then... We need to put money into the account.

Teresa – But with what money, Mother Beatrice?

Beatrice – Could we take out a small loan?

Teresa – Mother, that's against the principles of our order. And we've already taken out two loans. I doubt the bank will approve a third.

Agnes – Then there's no time to lose in turning the shop around.

Teresa – Unfortunately, our dear sister is not entirely wrong...

Edward and Victoria enter, much more lively than the previous day.

Edward – Morning, everyone!

Victoria – Is everyone doing well?

Mildred – Well, you certainly seem to be...

Edward – Oh yes, we're in great shape, aren't we, Victoria?

Victoria – It's been years since I felt this good. And you know what?

Teresa – What?

Victoria – I have a feeling your miraculous elixir deserves some of the credit.

Edward – Yes, I am absolutely convinced of that too.

Victoria – I slept like a log, and I don't have any aches anywhere. Well, almost...

Edward – It does wonders for your mood too. We're positively cheerful!

Victoria – Whatever the case, we'll take a few more bottles from you.

Mildred – Very well...

She takes two bottles from a shelf.

Victoria – Oh no, not that one. The new one!

Teresa – Well... *(In her best sales voice.)* What if I offered you two bottles of the usual elixir for the price of one?

Victoria – No way! We prefer the new formula.

Agnes – See for yourself, Mother... It seems to me that it would be worth...

Beatrice seems hesitant but then decides.

Beatrice – Give them a bottle of your new elixir... Since you've distilled a few... It would be a waste to throw them away...

Agnes – Thank you, Mother.

Edward – Just one? Can't we have two?

Agnes hands them a bottle.

Agnes – We've only just begun production. One bottle per couple for now, until further notice.

Victoria – It reminds me of wartime rationing.

Edward – You experienced rationing tickets, Victoria?

Victoria – Of course not! I'm far too young. My mother told me about it.

Agnes – For now it's the same price as the original. But that may not last.

Edward – As the saying goes, 'Never mind the bottle, as long as it lifts your spirits.' We'll take one for now. Put a whole case aside for us when you have more.

He hands over a banknote.

Victoria – Thank you, and... Merry Christmas to you all!

Mildred – Don't drink it all at once!

Edward and Victoria leave, laughing like schoolchildren. Beatrice turns to Agnes, who is beaming.

Beatrice – But it's only a trial...

Agnes *(regaining her seriousness)* – Yes, Mother...

Mother Superior exits.

Agnes – I'd better make a few extra bottles, just in case the trial takes off. We wouldn't want to run out.

Teresa – Don't get carried away. We have precisely two customers so far.

Agnes places the new bottles on the shelves.

Mildred – Sister Agnes?

Agnes – Yes?

Mildred – I know the new recipe is secret too, but... it is legal, isn't it?

Agnes – Legal?

Mildred – I mean... it's not something that could get us into trouble with the law? Like absinthe used to?

Agnes – I'm more worried about finding enough of the plant to keep making it.

Harold – Perhaps you should grow the plant yourself.

Agnes – Edward and Victoria make a good pair. Are they married?

Harold – Not yet. But they're both widowed. It's a promising start.

Fred and Sam enter, two teenagers dressed in a streetwear style. They can be played by actors of any gender; either part may be omitted if the production uses a single teenager. Everyone is surprised to see such unusual customers.

Mildred – Welcome, my children! You're in God's house here.

Fred – Thank you...

Fred and Sam browse the shelves.

Mildred – Are you looking for anything in particular?

Harold – It's quite normal at your age to have questions. About life, love... sexuality...

Fred and Sam give Harold a baffled look.

Mildred – And religion can sometimes provide answers. The Catholic faith, for example.

Harold – I can recommend some books if you like. We've a whole section.

Fred – Actually, my grandmother told me to come.

Teresa – Your grandmother?

Fred – Victoria.

Mildred – Ah, yes!

Sam – She mentioned a syrup you sell here.

Harold – Really?

Fred – Well, more of a potion. She told me what it did, and...

Agnes – Look at that! Word of mouth is already doing its work!

Teresa – But your grandmother was just here. She's already bought a bottle. Surely she doesn't need another?

Fred – It's for me. I've got a bit of a cold.

Mildred – A cold? Well, well...

Sam – And I've been coughing too. I don't know who gave it to me.

Sam puts on an exaggerated cough.

Harold – An orally transmitted disease.

Fred – We heard this liqueur of yours cures everything.

Mildred – Well, um...

Teresa – It's alcoholic, you know...

Sister Agnes takes a bottle from the crate.

Agnes – I've made an alcohol-free version for younger customers.

Teresa – Good heavens. You really have thought of everything.

Fred – Thank you, Sister. You've saved my life.

Agnes – Shall I wrap it?

Fred – No thanks. This is fine.

Agnes – Here's your bottle.

Fred hands a note to Agnes.

Fred – Thank you. I'm sure it'll do the trick.

Agnes – You're always welcome here.

Fred – I feel better already.

Sam – Well... thanks. Perhaps we'll see you again soon.

Mildred – That's right... Have a good day...

Fred and Sam leave with their bottle.

Harold – Even if its medical benefits are unproven, perhaps this alcohol-free elixir will bring the younger generation back to the faith.

Mildred – Another miracle of Saint Mary Juana.

Ramirez and Sanchez enter in plain clothes. They are police officers and can be played by either gender. They may be combined into one role.

Teresa – Business certainly seems to be picking up.

Ramirez and Sanchez browse the shelves.

Sanchez – These candles are rather nice. They'd make good Christmas presents.

Teresa – They're devotional candles bearing the image of our founder, Saint Mary Juana.

Ramirez – Saint Mary Juana? Well, well...

Mildred – Buying them as gifts, are you?

Ramirez presents her with a police badge.

Ramirez – Inspector Ramirez.

Teresa – Everyone is welcome in the house of God. Even police officers.

Sanchez – Hello, Sisters.

Harold – I imagine you need faith in your line of work too, especially these days.

Teresa – We're always here to listen, Inspector.

Ramirez – In fact, it's you I was hoping would tell me something.

Mildred – Well, well...

Sanchez – We suspect someone is growing cannabis illegally in the nearby mountains.

Teresa – Cannabis?

Agnes – Marijuana, Sister.

Teresa – Good heavens...

Ramirez – At this rate, the mountains will be one enormous drug plantation. Soon we'll have to burn the whole lot down.

Harold – First you'll have to find it. I imagine the growers are keeping a low profile.

Sanchez – Precisely why we're here. You sisters know these mountains. Perhaps you've seen something.

Teresa – Help you?

Ramirez – Anything out of the ordinary, perhaps?

Teresa – Drugs? I'm afraid I wouldn't even know what one looked like.

Sanchez shows Teresa a photo.

Sanchez – That's a cannabis plant. It doesn't grow wild around here.

Teresa examines the photograph, uncertainly.

Teresa – Sister Agnes might know. She spends her days collecting herbs in the mountains.

Ramirez shows the picture to Sister Agnes. She stares at it and freezes.

Ramirez – Well, Sister? Recognise it? Have a good look. This is a plant we're very keen to find.

Agnes is lost for words. Beatrice returns.

Sanchez – Is everything all right, Sister?

Teresa – She's fine, she's fine... It's just that... I'd completely forgotten... Sister Agnes can't speak.

Sanchez – Mute? Well, well...

Beatrice – More precisely... Sister Agnes has taken a vow of silence.

Teresa – That's right...

Ramirez – I see. We come across plenty of people who've taken a vow of silence in our work too. May I leave you the picture, in case her voice returns?

Mother Superior takes the photograph.

Beatrice – I am the Mother Superior. We'll ask Sister Agnes to answer your question in writing.

Ramirez – Thank you, Mother. If you learn anything useful, please contact the police station.

Beatrice – We certainly shall. The Church has always been a friend to the police, whatever the government.

Sanchez grabs a bottle of the new liqueur.

Sanchez – What's in this liqueur?

Teresa – Local medicinal herbs. It's a centuries-old secret, kept by the sisters entrusted with distilling our precious elixir.

Mildred – Which is precisely why Sister Agnes has taken a vow of silence. She alone knows the formula for Saint Mary Juana's Elixir.

Ramirez – I see. In our profession we call that omertà.

Sanchez – I'll take a bottle. Can't do any harm.

Beatrice promptly takes the bottle from him.

Beatrice – I'm afraid those are all reserved.

Sanchez – All of them?

Agnes – Christmas is nearly here. Our regular customers are very attached to our products.

Mildred – Perhaps a candle instead.

She places a candle in his hand.

Sanchez – A candle will do... How much do I owe you?

Mildred – It's on the house.

Beatrice – May God bless the police.

Ramirez – Thank you, Mother. I'm sorry to have disturbed the peace of your abbey. It's wonderfully restful here. To tell you the truth, I envy you.

Beatrice – Really?

Ramirez – We see so much unpleasantness in our work... Sometimes I imagine spending my last years in a monastery, far from violence and crime. Among kind, honest, trustworthy faces...

Beatrice – You would have to renounce the temptations of the outside world first, Inspector.

Ramirez – Yes, I suppose that's what would put me off in the end.

Teresa – Merry Christmas, Inspector.

Sanchez – See you soon, Sister.

The officers leave. An awkward silence.

Beatrice – Sister Agnes... Please tell me you haven't put marijuana into Saint Mary Juana's liqueur.

Agnes – I swear before God, Mother, I didn't know it was a drug.

Teresa – It's outrageous! We've even had to lie to the police.

Agnes – Only by omission, Sister. Strictly by omission.

Mildred – So that's what caused those astonishing effects. Last night, I was positively possessed by the Devil.

Harold – Possessed by the Devil? I hope you're not referring to me.

Agnes – So, what do we do?

Beatrice – What do we do? We stop production, of course!

Harold – There is one thing Jesus never said: 'Take this, all of you, and smoke it.'

Agnes – He did say 'Take this, all of you, and drink it.' And it is a liqueur.

Mildred – We do drink wine at Mass, but it's made from grapes, not cannabis.

Teresa – Sacrilege... What do you say, Mother?

Beatrice – We'll consign this diabolical brew to the flames.

Agnes – Of course...

Teresa – We're not turning this holy abbey into an illegal laboratory.

Agnes – Of course... On the other hand...

Beatrice – What now?

Agnes – Perhaps we should take this as a sign from God.

Beatrice – Don't tell me you've seen the Virgin Mary again. I think you've had enough of the elixir, Sister.

Teresa – A sign, you say?

Agnes – Saint Mary Juana... marijuana... You must admit it's an extraordinary coincidence.

Beatrice – What do you mean?

Agnes – The abbey is in financial trouble...

Beatrice – It's a drug!

Agnes – A relatively mild one, Mother. Didn't Marx say religion was the opium of the people?

Beatrice – I doubt he meant that as an encouragement to attend Mass.

Teresa – I should remind you, Sister, that in God's house we quote the Bible more often than Marx's Capital.

Agnes – Perhaps Saint Mary Juana is trying to help us.

Teresa – We help farmers in Colombia stop growing poppies, only to start growing cannabis here? That's certainly one way of looking at it.

Agnes – We could call it bringing production home.

Teresa – Mother Beatrice, the decision is yours.

Beatrice – I confess I no longer know what to think. Ever since I tasted that mixture, my mind hasn't been entirely clear.

Teresa *(crossing herself)* – Jesus, Mary and Joseph...

Beatrice – Mildred, you've always been sensible. What do you think?

Mildred – We certainly shouldn't rush into anything. Let us wait until this diabolical liqueur has worn off.

Beatrice – I'll go and pray. Perhaps the Lord will enlighten me.

Mother Superior leaves. Edward and Victoria return, dressed far more casually than before, almost as if they were off on holiday.

Edward – We've got wonderful news!

Harold – You've won the lottery?

Edward – Better! We're getting married!

Mildred – How lovely!

Victoria – I don't know what's got into us. For the first time in years, I feel as though my life is beginning again.

Edward – It's that miraculous elixir, I'm sure of it. And while I'm here, I'll take two or three crates.

Teresa – Two or three crates?

Victoria – We gave our friends at the retirement home a taste, and now everyone's asking for it.

Edward – It's quite extraordinary. They all want a bottle for Christmas.

Agnes – I'm afraid we've stopped making it.

Edward – Stopped? Why on earth?

Agnes – Well... We aren't entirely sure it meets every health requirement.

Victoria – Sanitary standards?

Edward – Just look at us! We've never felt better!

Agnes – We're not entirely sure yet, but...

Mildred – We ought to be careful. There might be harmful effects in the long term.

Edward – At our age, the long term is harmful enough by itself.

Victoria – All we know is that it makes us feel wonderful now.

Edward – At the retirement home they call it the liqueur that makes you laugh!

Agnes – The liqueur that makes you laugh? Really?

Agnes bursts out laughing, then stops when she sees everyone staring at her.

Harold – Don't mind her. She fell into a vat of it when she was little.

Victoria – They'll be so disappointed. Terribly disappointed.

Edward – We were all looking forward to sharing a little glass to celebrate the New Year.

Victoria – Why deny a few old people at the end of their lives such a modest pleasure?

Edward – Especially when every New Year could be our last.

All eyes turn to Teresa.

Teresa – Oh, give them a bottle, just to keep the peace. But it's the last one. And not a word to Mother Superior.

Agnes gives them a bottle. Edward and Victoria are delighted.

Victoria – Thank you, Sister.

Edward – God will reward you.

Agnes – While we wait for that, I'll take the money.

Edward slips a note into Agnes's hand.

Agnes – That's far too much!

Edward – Put the rest towards your good works.

Victoria – Merry Christmas!

Edward and Victoria leave. Awkward silence.

Harold – We haven't actually proved this liqueur is dangerous.

Mildred – And if it makes them feel better...

Agnes – Cannabis does have medical uses, you know.

Teresa – What uses?

Agnes – It can help some patients with advanced cancer, for example.

Teresa – Edward and Victoria haven't got terminal cancer! They're planning to get married!

Mildred – Perhaps under the influence of the drug. Imagine how they'll feel when it wears off and they realise what they've done!

Harold – Plenty of people marry without drugs. Though I must admit I'd favour compulsory breath tests before weddings.

Teresa – All right. Let's sell the stock Sister Agnes has already made. At least it might help get our bank account back into the black.

Agnes – A sensible decision, Sister.

Teresa – I'm not sure about that. But after this, we return to the original recipe.

Agnes – I promise.

Mildred – There's still one question.

Harold – What is it?

Mildred – Someone must have planted that field.

Teresa – That's what the police were saying.

Mildred – The growers won't be pleased when they discover someone's taken their crop.

Agnes – But it is an illegal drug.

Harold – So what?

Agnes – Surely stealing drugs from criminals is a good deed?

Mildred – Not if you steal them to profit from them yourself.

Agnes – We're selling them for the benefit of God.

Harold – So we'd be like Robin Hood — stealing from the poor to give to the rich.

Everyone gives him a sceptical look.

Ben and Jo enter. They are small-time dealers, of either gender, and their roles may be combined into one.

Mildred – What a busy day we're having.

Agnes – Is there anything I can do for you?

Ben waves a sprig of cannabis under her nose.

Ben – What do you think this is? A sprig of rosemary?

Teresa – Oh, you're with the police! Your colleagues were here earlier.

Jo – I'm not a police officer.

Agnes – Then what are you doing with that cannabis? It is illegal, you know.

Ben – I cultivate artificial paradises, and I don't appreciate people harvesting them without asking.

Mildred – Oh, I see...

Ben – Would you happen to know anything about this?

Teresa – But what makes you think that...?

Ben waves the sprig of cannabis in front of her.

Jo – We found this sprig by your chapel, just beside the still.

Teresa – You can't go in there! The abbey is holy ground.

Ben – You distil marijuana stolen from honest growers, and then you lecture us about morality?

Mildred – It's just a misunderstanding.

Teresa – Sister Agnes mistook the cannabis for dandelions.

Jo – Is that so? Someone might end up pushing up daisies.

Harold – I'm very sorry. But surely reasonable people like us can come to an arrangement. We're not savages.

Agnes – We had no idea the field belonged to anyone.

Teresa – The police are looking for it too. And they'll find it eventually.

Jo – Did you tell them where it is?

Teresa – Not yet...

Ben seems to soften a little.

Ben – Perhaps we can come to an arrangement after all. We're practically in the same business.

Teresa – The same business?

Jo – We spread happiness too, in our own way.

Mildred – What do you suggest?

Ben – A shared garden.

Harold – By which I assume you don't mean a vegetable patch.

Jo – You keep quiet, we grow the plants, and you get a share of the harvest.

Agnes – What percentage?

Ben – Ten per cent.

Agnes – That sounds reasonable. The tithe was ten per cent too, back in the Middle Ages. A traditional way of supporting the Church.

Teresa – Medieval peasants didn't grow cannabis.

Agnes – It's not genetically modified, is it?

Jo – Lebanese. One hundred per cent organic.

Teresa *(crossing herself)* – Lord have mercy...

Ben – Of course, we'd need somewhere rather more discreet.

Mildred – For what?

Jo – Our little artificial paradise. A monastery garden, say. Or a priest's vegetable patch.

Agnes – What about the cloister?

Ben – It would have to get plenty of sun.

Teresa *(overwhelmed)* – We'll think about it. Such an important decision...

Jo – And don't even think of calling the police.

Agnes – We are bound by the seal of confession, remember.

Ben – I still have a question to ask you.

Teresa – Yes?

Ben – What the hell are you doing with all that weed?

Teresa – It's a mistake, I tell you...

Agnes – Making liqueur.

Jo takes a bottle and looks at it.

Jo – Elixir of Saint Mary Juana...

Ben – Well, I take my hat off to you.

Jo – You know, this might even sell abroad.

Agnes – What a thought! We could solve our own financial problems and help the country's trade balance.

Teresa – I know you went to HEC Paris, Sister Agnes, but this abbey is not a start-up.

Mildred – And may I remind you that growing, selling and consuming marijuana is against the law.

Harold – At least for now...

Edward and Victoria return.

Ben – We'll leave you to your customers. Think over our offer.

Ben and Jo leave.

Teresa – Not a word to Mother Superior. It would kill her. And obviously, nothing to the police. *(Threateningly.)* We'll deal with this ourselves.

Harold – You're frightening me, Sister Teresa. You're not contemplating murder and a discreet burial beneath the cloister, I hope?

Teresa – Not if we can help it. I must go to the bank and deal with this overdraft.

Agnes – I'll come along. They also teach us how to talk to bankers at HEC Paris.

Teresa and Agnes leave.

Edward – Mildred, this elixir of yours is extraordinary.

Mildred – You haven't already drunk it all, have you?

Edward – No. But the residents at our home have become rather attached to it.

Victoria – Addicted, more like! We came to see whether you can keep up with demand.

Edward – We've even got orders.

Victoria – But we're not making a profit, mind you. We're not dealers!

Edward – The others can't do without it. Most have given up their usual sleeping tablets.

Harold – At this rate we'll save the abbey's finances and reduce the health-service deficit.

Mildred – Here. One last bottle, and off you go.

Edward slips Mildred a banknote and takes the bottle.

Edward – Thank you, Sister!

Mildred – My name's Mildred.

Edward – Thank you, Sister Mildred!

Edward and Victoria leave.

Mildred – I think we deserve a little drink ourselves after all that.

She pours two small glasses.

Harold – Not too much. We'd better be careful not to overdose.

Mildred – It's a mild drug. They wouldn't be allowed to sell it in a convent otherwise.

Harold – You're right. God wouldn't permit that.

They quickly empty the glasses.

Mildred – Goes down rather nicely, doesn't it?

Harold – It certainly does.

Mildred – This stays between us, of course.

Harold – Of course.

Mildred – Another drop?

Harold – Cheers. A little of what you fancy does you good.

She pours two more glasses, which they once again empty quickly.

Mildred – This reminds me of Prohibition.

Harold – Were you around during Prohibition?

Mildred – Of course not! I was joking.

Harold – I thought so. That was even before wartime rationing. I knew you were younger than Victoria.

They both laugh.

Harold – What if you and I got married as well?

Mildred – Are you serious, or is it the liqueur talking?

Harold – You are my intoxicant, Mildred.

He tries to kiss her. She weakly resists.

Mildred – Oh, Harold... You silly man...

Fred and Sam re-enter, surprising them. Mildred straightens her clothes. (The teenagers may be represented by a single character.)

Mildred – Excuse us. We were just... tidying up.

Harold – Hello again! Feeling better?

Fred – Much better. My cold seems to be clearing up.

Sam – A miracle. It must be your elixir.

Fred – Could we have another couple of bottles?

Sam – Since it's alcohol-free.

Fred – For my friends at school.

Mildred – Your friends?

Harold – Are they sick too?

Sam – You know how colds spread. Practically the whole class has caught mine.

Teresa returns.

Teresa – Is everything alright?

Harold – Yes, yes...

Mildred slips a bottle into Fred's hands.

Mildred *(whispering)* – Take it and go. Quickly.

Fred – God will reward you, Sister.

Mildred – I'm not a nun, and I doubt God approves of this.

Harold – That's thirty euros, though.

Sam – Thirty euros?

Mildred – Supply and demand, I'm afraid. Everything's more expensive these days.

Fred hands Harold a banknote.

Harold – Now clear off, you little addicts.

Fred and Sam leave. Harold puts the money in the till.

Mildred – So, how is the Mutual Credit doing?

Teresa – Agnes persuaded the bank to authorise an overdraft after explaining our business plan.

Mildred – I didn't know we had a business plan.

Teresa – Neither did I. And I can't say I understood a word of it.

Mildred – Today's sales alone should cover a good part of what we owe.

Teresa – Thank God.

Harold – And Saint Mary Juana.

Ben and Jo reappear.

Ben – We just met those young school dealers. They won't buy cannabis from us any more.

Harold – Well, if young people are turning away from drugs, surely that's good news.

Jo – What they want now is syrup.

Mildred – Ah... I see...

Ben – If we lose the schools, we might as well close up shop. We have expenses too, you know.

Harold – I understand. I used to be in business.

Jo – And then there are the retirement homes.

Mildred – You sell to retirement homes too?

Jo – The elderly aren't what they used to be. They're the generation of hippies now.

Mildred – And the care workers just let them take drugs?

Ben – Cannabis is like religion. People often come back to it in old age. You know it's probably not good for them, but it gives them comfort.

Jo – But now, nothing!

Ben – Christmas is usually our busiest time of year.

Harold – This period is so depressing...

Jo – It's when older people most need a lift, legal or otherwise. They can't get a prescription for a joint three times a day, so they come to us.

Harold – A joint now and then is probably no worse than some antidepressants. And not much more addictive.

Ben – Except that our elderly customers have started abandoning cannabis in favour of a certain monastic elixir.

Mildred – I'm sorry, but you needn't worry. We're stopping production.

Ben – What if we worked together instead?

Teresa – You want us to become part of a criminal gang?

Jo – Let's not use such dramatic language.

Harold – What kind of partnership?

Ben – We'd work together on growing and processing the crop.

Mildred – Processing?

Jo – Smoking has gone out of fashion. All these health campaigns and bans on smoking in public have hurt our trade.

Ben – Even in retirement homes, the old folk have to sneak off to smoke, like children.

Jo – And what about customers who don't smoke?

Ben – We could create a whole range of products that taste good and are easier on the lungs. We want to do for cannabis what winemakers have done for grapes.

Harold – A fine vintage of cannabis, then. Perhaps with a selection of space cakes as appetisers.

Jo – Under Saint Mary Juana's patronage, naturally.

Ben – And if cannabis is legalised in a year or two, we'll be ready to take the market by storm.

Jo – I bet this abbey would earn more than the Vatican.

Ben – In five years the subsidiary buys the parent company. In ten, you sell up for a fortune and start your own charitable foundation.

Jo – Then you can tackle world hunger. More effectively than multiplying the loaves and fishes.

Ben – Sisters, I think I've found my faith again!

Jo – They might even make you a saint. What is your name, Sister?

Teresa – Teresa.

Ben – Saint Teresa! Has a nice ring to it.

Teresa – I think I'm going to faint.

Inspector Ramirez and Officer Sanchez return. Ben and Jo retreat to the far end of the shop.

Ramirez – Ladies and gentlemen. Is Mother Superior here?

Mildred – What do you want with her?

Sanchez – Our police dogs have led us to the cannabis plantation.

Mildred – Really?

Ramirez – The plants have been cut down, but we found the roots.

Sanchez – Now we just have to find the growers... and the harvest.

Harold – You're surely not accusing the sisters of drug trafficking?

Ramirez – Of course not. However, have a look at these photographs from our hidden cameras. Rather troubling, don't you think?

Sanchez – Apparently the traffickers dressed as nuns to avoid suspicion.

Mildred – Oh my God...

Sanchez – But we've managed to draw up a description.

Sanchez shows her the composite sketch.

Ramirez – Does this look familiar?

Mildred – Not at all...

Ramirez – Tell the sisters my patience has limits. I could bring everyone to the police station for questioning.

Sanchez – Nuns in handcuffs wouldn't look good in the eyes of the Almighty.

Beatrice arrives.

Beatrice – The law doesn't frighten us, Officers. During the German Occupation, this abbey sheltered members of the French Resistance.

Ramirez – We're looking for dealers growing marijuana in the mountains. Hardly the same as the Resistance fighters who hid there during the war, is it?

Beatrice – Leave this instant. This abbey is sacred ground and has always been a place of sanctuary.

Ramirez – We'll be back, Mother. I'm awaiting a search warrant from the judge. It should arrive very soon.

Ramirez and Sanchez leave.

Ben – Thanks for keeping quiet.

Beatrice – Don't imagine that means we approve of what you do.

Jo – Between ourselves, you're doing exactly the same thing.

Beatrice – We do it for a good cause. *(She hands them two nuns' habits.)* For now, put these on. If the police question you, say you've taken a vow of silence.

A moment of hesitation follows her last words.

Jo – How are we supposed to say we've taken a vow of silence?

Ben – If we've taken a vow of silence, we can't say anything at all.

Beatrice is briefly lost for words.

Beatrice – Get out of my sight.

Ben and Jo leave.

Mildred – Is it true the abbey hid Resistance fighters during the Occupation? I had no idea.

Beatrice – Well... I may have embellished the story a little. It was just after the liberation of France. The Mother Superior at the time hid several women to protect them from being publicly shorn as suspected collaborators.

Harold – And perhaps a few other collaborators, to save them from being hanged...

Beatrice – Same principle, isn't it? This abbey has always offered sanctuary!

Mildred looks puzzled. Agnes returns.

Beatrice – There you are! The police have gone. By some miracle, we've escaped the worst.

Agnes – I know. I cut down the whole crop to keep us out of trouble.

Mildred – And where's the harvest?

Agnes – In the barn where I distil our elixir...

Harold – That's madness! The police could return with a search warrant at any moment.

Ben and Jo return dressed in nuns' habits.

Agnes – Good day, Sisters. Welcome to the abbey.

Ben – Hang on, I don't want to spend the rest of my life in a convent!

Teresa – If I were you, I'd lie low until things calm down.

Harold – The habits suit you remarkably well.

Beatrice – And we can always use more volunteers.

Mildred – I'd offer them a place in the shop, but that might attract attention.

Beatrice – They can tend the abbey garden. They seem to have green fingers.

Teresa – Why not...?

Beatrice – In the meantime, Sister Agnes, show them to a cell. They can't stay here.

Jo – A cell?

Agnes – Don't worry. The cell I have in mind locks from the inside.

Ben and Jo leave with Sister Agnes.

Teresa – You don't seriously intend to let them grow cannabis in the cloister garden?

Beatrice *(surprised)* – Is that what I said?

The two police officers return. Ramirez holds a document in front of Beatrice.

Ramirez – Here we are. A search warrant, at last.

Beatrice – We are perfectly willing to cooperate. But first, Sister Agnes, please offer our visitors a drink.

Agnes – Yes, Mother.

Beatrice – I'll leave you. I shall pray for you.

Beatrice exits.

Agnes – You must try our speciality, the famous Elixir of Saint Mary Juana.

Ramirez – Very kind, but we've work to do.

Mildred – It's our custom to welcome visitors this way, Inspector. The sisters would be hurt if you refused.

Ramirez – All right, if you insist. But let's be quick.

Agnes pours them each a generous glass. They taste it cautiously, then with growing appreciation.

Sanchez – Oh, that's good.

Ramirez – Curious... It tastes of...

Agnes – There's some in it...

Teresa – A miraculous elixir, whose formula was revealed to our founder by the Virgin Mary herself.

Harold – It cures everything.

Agnes – Let me top you up.

Ramirez is about to object, but the glasses are already full.

Ramirez – Fine...

Sanchez – Thank you, Sister.

They drink again.

Ramirez – It certainly relaxes you.

Teresa – Which explains the deep peace you can feel within these walls.

Sanchez – I feel thoroughly at peace myself.

Ramirez – Right, if you'll excuse me, I have a search to conduct.

They head for the exit, slightly unsteady on their feet.

Teresa – I'll accompany you.

Agnes – I'll come with you, Sister.

Ramirez and Sanchez leave, followed by Teresa and Agnes.

Mildred – That's it. We're all going to prison.

Harold – All we can do is pray.

Mildred – I suppose prisons aren't mixed.

Harold – Neither are convents.

Mildred – So we won't even be able to share a cell.

Harold – None at all.

Mildred – Then kiss me, Harold!

They kiss, and might go on indefinitely if Ben and Jo did not return, still dressed as nuns.

Ben – We just passed the police. This time we're finished.

Mildred – With luck, they'll find nothing. Sister Agnes has drugged the inspector.

Jo – There's an enormous pile of cannabis right beside the still! They can't miss it, even if they're completely stoned.

Mildred – Then all we can do is pray for a miracle.

Mildred and Harold begin to pray. Ben and Jo hesitantly follow suit. Sacred music and a change of lighting signal the passage of time. The police officers return.

Ramirez *(to Ben and Jo)* – Good day, Sisters. Forgive us for interrupting your prayers.

Ben and Jo hide their faces behind their veils and say nothing.

Mildred – They've taken vows of silence too.

Ramirez – I see. Well, please accept our apologies. We searched the abbey from top to bottom and found nothing.

Sanchez – Your Nativity scene in the chapel is quite magnificent, by the way.

Ramirez – Here's a picture of our suspects. If you happen to see them, please let us know.

Sanchez – Merry Christmas. And our apologies again.

Ramirez and Sanchez leave. Beatrice enters with Teresa and Agnes.

Agnes – It's a miracle! When we reached the distillery...

Mildred – What happened?

Teresa – The cannabis had turned into bay leaves!

Mildred – Praise Saint Mary Juana!

Agnes – This is the sign we've been waiting for. The saint approves of our plan!

Beatrice – Don't get carried away. I performed the miracle.

Harold – Then you deserve to be made a saint, Mother.

Beatrice – The Nativity scene was decorated with laurel branches. The distillery was full of cannabis. I simply swapped the two.

Agnes – Oh... Well, that's good too.

Teresa – A Nativity scene decorated with cannabis...

Beatrice – Only temporarily, Sister. And now I hope we can return to normal.

Agnes – Are you saying that...

Beatrice – You heard me, Sister Agnes. No more cannabis in the liqueur. We go back to the original recipe.

Agnes – Even if it means the abbey going bankrupt?

Beatrice – Don't worry, child. The Catholic Church has survived worse. If necessary, we'll turn our cells into guest rooms and sleep in a hotel ourselves.

Agnes looks disappointed but resigned.

Ben – I'm sorry we got you into all this trouble, Mother.

Jo – I've learned a great deal since I put on this habit.

Beatrice – I forgive you, my child. In fact, it reminds me of my younger days, when I stood up to riot police trying to evict homeless people from a squat.

Ben – Thank you for not handing us over. Without you, we'd be in prison. If there's anything we can do for you...

Beatrice – We'll think about it, my child. For now, go back to your cell.

Blackout.

The shop is peaceful once again. Teresa is counting the takings when the telephone rings.

Teresa – Saint Mary Juana Abbey, good morning... Mutual Credit Bank? Ah, hello, Director. Don't tell me we're overdrawn again... Quite the opposite? Wonderful news! No, we hadn't thought of investing our surplus funds... I see... I'll discuss it with Mother Superior and arrange to meet your financial adviser about your latest investment opportunities... Thank you for calling. God bless Mutual Credit Bank. *(She hangs up as Agnes enters carrying a crate of candles.)* Strange. We've gone back to the original recipe, and yet our elixir is selling better than ever.

Agnes – It's the new label. Customers think they're still getting the new formula.

Teresa – And that seems enough to make them happy.

Agnes – The placebo effect, I believe.

Teresa – Faith can move mountains.

Agnes – I've come to say goodbye, Sister Teresa.

Teresa – Leaving us already?

Agnes – Yes. I've decided not to become a nun after all.

Teresa – Another vision of the Virgin Mary?

Agnes – Quite the opposite. When my old classmates at HEC Paris heard I'd joined a convent, they admitted they'd played a joke on me before that innovation-management class. They'd secretly given me a pizza containing hallucinogenic mushrooms.

Teresa – Hallucinogenic mushrooms?

Agnes – So that probably explains my miraculous vision.

Teresa – Good heavens! Still, we owe you a great deal. Thanks to you, the abbey's finances are flourishing.

Agnes – Thank you, Sister.

Teresa – We'll miss you, Sister Agnes. Though perhaps a convent was never your true calling.

Agnes – I'll miss you too. But I'll come and visit!

Mildred and Harold enter, dressed much more casually than before.

Teresa – Hello, Mildred. Hello, Harold. And when's the wedding?

Harold – We've decided to postpone it. We'll carry on living in sin for the time being, won't we, darling?

Mildred – Marriage can be dangerous. You never know.

Harold – Look at poor Victoria. Hardly married, and already a widow. Marriage certainly didn't agree with Edward.

Mildred – Perhaps he died of happiness.

Harold – Whatever it was, I'd rather not follow his example.

Teresa – But Harold, you're so much younger than Edward!

They all laugh.

Mildred – It looks as though business has picked up, Sister Teresa.

Teresa – It's quite extraordinary. Not only have elixir sales soared, but the candles are flying off the shelves too!

Agnes – Here's more stock for the shelves. I made these candles this morning with our two new volunteers, who'll be taking over from me at the distillery...

Teresa – You've entrusted those two drug dealers with Saint Mary Juana's secret?

Agnes – I think we can trust them, Sister. Let anyone who's never smoked cast the first joint...

Teresa – We hardly see those two outside. They have their reasons for keeping a low profile.

Harold – At least they're better off here than in prison.

Agnes – They make these scented candles with mushrooms they're secretly growing in the abbey's catacombs. Just wait till you try them. They're dynamite!

Mildred – They do have a wonderfully intoxicating scent.

Harold – Let's light one now.

Harold lights a candle. Everyone inhales the scent with delight.

Teresa – What a heavenly fragrance.

Mildred – The very scent of holiness.

Harold – Ever since we started burning them during Mass, the church has been packed.

Mother Superior enters in time to hear this.

Beatrice – Another miracle of Saint Mary Juana...

She crosses herself. Everyone freezes with an ecstatic expression. Sacred music.

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 ...
Neighbours' Day
Nicotine
Of Vegetables and Books
Offside
Open Hearts
Reality Show
Save our Savings
Special Dedication
Stories and Prehistories
Such a lovely village
The House of Our Dreams
The Jackpot
The Performance is not cancelled
The Most Beautiful Village in France
The Worst Village in England
Welcome aboard!
White Coats, Dark Humour

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

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

free of charge from his websites:

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