

La Comédiathèque

Crisis and Punishment

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Crisis and Punishment

English translation by Anne-Christine Gasc

An actor 'in between jobs' finds work at a bank on the verge of bankruptcy, only to discover he is to be, quite literally, a scapegoat. But the nightmare is only beginning ...

Characters

James: The actor

Dom: The manager (male or female)

Sam: The assistant (male or female)

Magda: The cleaner

Emma: The actor's wife

Margaret: The first customer

Agnes: The second customer

Emma, Magda, Margaret and/or Agnes can be interpreted by the same actor.

The scene is set in an office, minimalistic and intimidating: a large table holding a solitary phone which also doubles as the office intercom, with one green light and one red light; a swivel chair comfortably padded, on wheels; a side table with what looks like an aluminium flask overlooked by the imposing framed portrait of a man. Magda is lightly sweeping the floor. Dom enters wearing either woman's suit or a three-piece suit (depending on the gender chosen for the character).

Dom – Oh, Magda ... Just the person I was looking for ...

Magda stops sweeping.

Magda – Madam?

Dom – How long have you been sweeping for us, Magda?

Magda – I don't know, Madam. I don't keep track. Are you unsatisfied with my work?

Dom – Quite the contrary, I wanted to congratulate you. Are you familiar with our bank's motto?

Magda – We sweep it all under the carpet?

Dom – That's right! Excellent, Magda! And thanks to you, the carpets of the Union Credit are always spotless. And you could say a bank's carpets are a reflection of the bank's reputation. If the carpets aren't spotless, clients might start to think that ...

Magda – The banker might be dirty as well ...

Dom – Exactly! You get it, Magda.

Magda – May I get back to work, Madam?

Dom – Not just quite yet, Magda ...

Magda – Alright ...

Dom clears her throat.

Dom – As you know, Magda ... my dear Magda ... I would even say, my very dear Magda ... we are living in trying times.

Magda – Are we, Madam?

Dom – We are in a financial crisis, Magda! Even if you don't read the financial press every day you must have heard about it? Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot, you're Russian, aren't you, Magda?

Magda – Polish, Madam ...

Dom – That's even better! I mean, worse ... Poland is in an even more catastrophic financial situation. Don't tell me you hadn't heard?

Magda – No, Madam ...

Dom – Anyway, we're in a recession, and the financial sector is the first affected by the global loss of values ...

Magda – Values ...

Dom – I'm talking about stock and bond values, of course, but believe me, Magda, it's a very small step from economic depression to plain old depression. When the stock market is slow, so is morale. And when morale is low, moral crisis comes knocking.

Magda – Yes, Madam ...

Dom – Take yourself for example, Magda, don't tell me you're not a little depressed?

Magda – I'm doing fine, Madam, thank you for asking ...

Dom – Don't take this the wrong way, Magda, but your appearance, the way you're standing there, with your broom ... You don't exactly scream *joie de vivre!*

Magda – I might be a little tired at the moment ... Endlessly sweeping things under the carpet ...

Dom – Never mind, my point is, Magda, that our bank is, of course, also affected by all those financial troubles ... and we need to cut costs. You understand that, don't you?

Magda – Yes, Madam ...

Dom – With nothing but your wellbeing in mind, the Union Credit has had to take a series of drastic, yet painful, measures in order to maintain your position. A position whose continued existence was, I am now free to reveal, gravely threatened.

Magda – Thank you, Madam ...

Dom – I therefore have the pleasure to let you know that you are still employed.

Magda – I'm working off the books, Madam ...

Dom – Regardless, you'll still be able to continue sweeping our floors for the foreseeable future. And who knows? Maybe one day I'll let you sweep under the carpet in the Director's office.

Magda – I live in hope, Madam ...

Dom – Obviously, the Union Credit expects you to meet us halfway in our efforts to maintain the number of jobs in this country. As you know, unemployment leads to the loss of spending power, no spending power leads to a loss of consumer confidence, and without consumer confidence there's no jobs... and the vicious circle of stagflation is closed. Are you following me?

Magda – I'm trying, Madam ...

Dom – I realise this is going way over your head, of course, my poor Magda, but you can trust me ... Here, I'll make it simple for you ... In exchange for you keeping your job, the Union Credit is also giving you a salary reduction of thirty per cent. I think you'll find this offer more than fair.

Magda – Thirty per cent?

Dom – It's a little less than a third.

Magda – A third less?

Dom – Well yes, not a third more, obviously. In these trying times even cleaning jobs are few and far between, Magda. Soon you'll need a Master's Degree just to apply for a job sweeping floors, even off the books! And then you'll be competing against those who benefit from nepotism or a quick chat on the casting couch ... Do you have a Master's Degree, Magda?

Magda – No, Madam ...

Dom – I imagine you don't have anyone you can rely on for some good old nepotism?

Magda – No, Madam ...

Dom – As for the casting couch, my dear Magda, no offense but the odds aren't in your favour ... But what can you do ...? People can't help the way they look ... It's the great lottery of life ... Even the Union Credit can't change that ... Some people are born in Switzerland with double-barrelled names and attractive physiques, while others ... Anyway, you'll agree that our offer is very generous ... What do you think?

Magda – What do I think, Madam?

Dom – Yes Magda ... It isn't necessary that you have an opinion on this matter, but I will still listen to you nonetheless. We are still a democracy, if nothing else ...

Magda actually seems to be thinking about it.

Magda – What do I think ...

Dom – You must be thinking something...

Magda – What I think...? (*Magda raises her boom to strike Dom*). I'll show you what I think, Madam!

Dom – Magda? Have you lost your mind?

Magda chases Dom with her broom backstage into the wings.

Dom – Magda, please, calm down! This is just a first offer! The bank is also a big supporter of labour relations ...

We hear Dom's cries coming from the wings.

Dom – Ow ... Ouch ... Twenty per cent?

Magda – I'll give you twenty per cent more of this!

Dom – Ten per cent?

Magda – Ten per cent raise?

Dom – Well, I mean ...

They both come back on stage. Magda is keeping Dom in check with her broom, ready to strike again.

Dom – Very well Magda ... Knowing how and when to end a negotiation is a skill and I can see your counter offer is not negotiable ... We have a deal ... The Union Credit agrees to your request for a ten per cent raise ...

Magda – Very well, Madam.

Dom – Having said that, I like your tough negotiating style ... At the bank we like to leverage our employees' strengths ... And you, Magda, have quite a strong personality ...

Magda – Thank you, Madam ...

Dom – Would you be interested in a training session, paid for by the bank of course, to allow you to join our repo team? Like I said, we're in a financial crisis and there's more and more clients defaulting on their payments ...

Magda – I think I missed a spot ...

Dom steps back, out of reach of the broom.

Dom – Consider the matter closed, Magda. I'll leave you to your sweeping ...

Magda – Thank you, Madam.

Dom leaves under Magda's attentive gaze who is keeping an eye on her.

Optional musical break, with songs and/or choreographed dancing. As a suggestion, inspiration can be taken from the Punch and Judy universe. Dom changes her mind, turns around and walks back to Magda in a slightly mechanical fashion and Magda hits her with the broom, Punch and Judy style. Dom and Magda leave the stage.

Black.

Sam – It's just right through here ... This is your office, Sir.

James (*astonished*) – My office? Are you sure?

Sam – It's a little impersonal, I know. But you could add a personal touch by hanging a couple of paintings ...

James – Why not ...

Sam – Mind you, I don't recommend flowers, in pots or in vases.

James – Ah, yes ...

Sam – Actually, anything that someone might want to throw at you.

James (*surprised*) – Naturally...

Sam – And of course, never leave a stray letter opener on the desk, or even a stapler.

James – My wife hates it too when I leave my things lying around ...

Sam – Or anything that could be used as a blunt object.

James looks at her, worried

Sam – Mistress Dom will explain.

James – Mistress Dom?

Sam – Mrs. Dom, the manager. She's the one who hired you. She's not here yet, she should arrive shortly.

James – Very well ... But what does your company do, exactly ...?

Sam – Estate management.

James – Right ...

Sam – Let's say that we help rich people become even richer.

James – An honourable mission ... And are you successful ...?

Sam – Not every time, unfortunately... That's sort of why you're here, isn't it?

James – Oh is it? I don't really know actually ... The Job Centre sent me here ... Are you sure this isn't a mistake?

Sam – A mistake? What a strange idea ... What makes you think that?

James – Let's say I don't think I'm the person that you ...

Sam – There's no mistake, rest assured Mr Carpeter.

James – Carpenter ...

Sam – I have your file right here and your profile is a perfect match for what Mrs Dom needs from someone in this position ...

James – My profile ... I didn't even know I had one ... It's unusual for hiring managers to even be interested in me ...

The assistant opens the file and glances at it.

Sam – Let's see ... You're an actor, unemployed for about 2 years ...

James – Almost three, technically ...

Sam – The psychological profile from the Job Centre describes you as actively disengaged, submissive, with low self-esteem and a tendency to feel guilt.

James – And that's the profile you're looking for?

She clearly prefers not to answer.

Sam – I'll bring you the company handbook a little later if that's alright? Would you like a coffee, Mr Carpeter?

James – Thank you, I'm afraid I won't be able to sleep... I mean ... That it'll keep me from a good night's sleep. Later. Tonight.

Sam – Very well. If you need anything, I'm right next door. Just use the intercom.

James – Oh, because there's a ... Just like in those old black and white films ...

She shows him the button on the phone.

Sam – But ours is in full Technicolor as you can see ... It's the green button.

James – Perfect ...

Sam – Only use the red button in case of extreme emergency.

James tries a joke to relax the atmosphere.

James – I see, that's the alarm button.

Sam – Exactly ... But be careful, just like in trains, there is a penalty for improper use.

James doesn't know whether she is joking or not.

Sam – I'll let you settle in.

James – Thank you ...

She leaves the room. He looks at the desk, not really quite sure what to do next. He stands facing the portrait of the man above the side table with a confused look on his face. He then looks at what he thinks must be a flask, picks it up and hesitates.

James – Maybe a coffee wouldn't hurt after all, I could use a little stimulation. *(He looks around the office again)* No cup... *(He unscrews the cap)* Maybe I'm supposed to use the lid ... *(He pours the contents of the supposed flask in the lid, but ashes come out)* Shit, what is that...?!

Sam enters the room. He tries to put the lid back on quickly, but spills the ashes that were in it. The ashes make a puff of dust that he tries to dispel by waving his hand. Sam looks at him reproachfully. He looks like a child being told off.

James – I'm sorry, I ... What is this thing? The genie's bottle? I was half expecting to be asked for my three wishes.

Sam – Trust me, there's no genie in there. But I would still advise you to keep your hands off of it... *(With a worrying look)* Mrs Dom wouldn't like that ... *(Displaying her authoritative smile once again, she hands him a notebook)* Here's the company handbook ...

Jerome – Thank you ...

Sam *(leaving the room)* – By the way, Mrs Dom called, she's running a little late.

James – Very well.

Sam leaves the room. Feeling more and more awkward, James walks around the office and tries to sit on the chair. Surprised by its depth, he repositions himself to sit in a more dignified manner. He places his elbows on the desk and tries to look like a CEO. He picks up the phone to look busy. He tries to move the phone but realises it is screwed to the desk. Out of things to do, he yawns and chooses a more comfortable position with his feet up on the desk. After a while he falls asleep. He is woken suddenly by the phone's aggressive ringing. Surprised, he falls off the chair. He pulls himself up and manages to pick up the phone.

James – Yes? ... No, no ... Yes, yes, put her through, thank you ... Hello, honey? Yes, yes, everything is going well, don't worry ... *(Trying to joke)* Well, I haven't been laid off yet ... Although I haven't seen the manager yet either ... Actually, I haven't actually done any work yet ... My job? Listen, in truth I forgot to ask ... I assume Mrs Dom will tell me ... Yes, that's the name of the boss lady... I don't know if it's a first name or a surname ... Alright, I'll call you as soon as I know more ... Yes, alright, calm down! I'll call you. OK. Bye.

He hesitates for a second then presses on the green intercom button.

James – Sam? It's James ... James from the office next door ... Oh right, next time I'll remember I don't need to introduce myself when I use the intercom ... I just wanted to ask you, er ... I'd love a coffee in the end, if that's not too much trouble ... Milk or sugar? Hmmm ... Let's say three sugars if that's not too greedy. Thank you very much Sam ...

The next second Sam arrives with the coffee.

James – Well ... That is quick service ... You are more efficient than the genie in that flask ...

Sam looks at him sideways before putting the coffee on the desk, then looks at him with a helpful face.

Sam – Can I get you anything else?

James – No, thank you, that is all ... *(She's about to leave)* Well, actually ... *(She turns to face him)* Can I ask you a question?

Sam – Of course ...

James – What's my job, exactly?

Sam – Your job?

James – What I am supposed to do?

Sam – Do?

James – I'm obviously not being paid to stand around? Not that it would be a problem, mind you ...

Sam – You're here to be helpful, Mr Carpeter

James – Helpful in what way?

Sam – Let's say, in a sort of customer support way.

James – I had no idea estate management companies provided ...

Sam – Mrs Dom will explain this much better than I can.

James – Alright.

Sam – Is there anything else you'd like to ask, Mr Carpeter?

James – Er, no ... Actually, yes ... Who is the man above the flask?

Sam – The flask?

James – In the portrait!

Sam – Oh... Him...

James – Is he the employee of the month?

Sam – It's your predecessor.

James – And where is he now?

Sam – In the flask.

James – Pardon?

Sam – It's a funeral urn.

James – Oh, I see ... Oh, right ... It's ... And what did he die of, this wonderful man? That earned him a domestic cult like that ...

Sam – He died in the line of duty.

James – Line of duty?

Sam – Which is now your line of duty.

James – Customer support.

Sam – That's right.

James – Was it a work-related accident?

Sam – Yes, you could say that. Anything else?

James (*stunned*) – No, that's it for now, I think ...

Sam leaves. James stands in front of the portrait which he examines with a newly worried look. Then he picks up the urn tenderly.

James – So it wasn't coffee grounds ...

The large red button starts blinking and an alarm rings. Panicked, James runs to the desk but doesn't have time to pick up the phone. An executive-looking woman bursts into the room as the alarm stops.

Dom – So it's you.

James – Yes, well.... Me?

She slaps him hard across the face, straight up.

Dom – And that's just for starters.

James (*aghast*) – Good morning.

Dom – Are you a liar or an imbecile? Which one is it...?

James – Which one what?

Dom – Are you dishonest or incompetent?

James – I ... I don't know ... Do I really have to choose...?

Dom – That's all you have to say?

James – Well, I...

Dom – Do you want another one...?

James – Er, I'd rather not ... If it can be avoided ...

Dom – Do you know how much this is all going to cost me...?

James – I'm really sorry...

Dom – He's sorry ... Are you fucking with me?!

James – I assure you that ...

Dom – Let me guess, you're going to tell me it has nothing to do with you.

James – I wouldn't go that far, but ...

Dom – That's just the way the cookie crumbles, is that it?

James – It's true that ... But ... What are we talking about, exactly...?

Dom – That's right, pretend like you don't know...

James – I'm sorry.

Dom – So what do we do now...?

James – I don't know ...

Dom – Do you have a solution to suggest...?

James – None whatsoever ...

Dom – You really are a loser.

James – Yes, that's what my wife says ...

Dom – But of course that doesn't keep you awake at night, does it?

James – Can I offer you a coffee...?

Dom – Nice try ... But it'll take a lot more than that.

James – Oh, I wasn't trying to ...

Dom – And you won't get away with it, believe me.

James – I promise...

Dom (*changing her tone*) – It's a strange saying, don't you think?

James – Which saying?

Dom – You won't get away with it ... When you leave, why would you want to take that with you, best to leave all the baggage behind.

James – Yes ... I imagine you'd want to leave everything behind ...

Dom (*pulling herself back together*) - Don't try to change the subject!

James – I'm sorry, I ...

Dom – You're an idiot.

James – Well, actually ... I only just started, and ...

Dom – You only just started being an idiot...?

James – Yes, in a way.

Dom – I predict a long and prosperous career...!

James – Thank you...

Dom – We'll see each other again, Sir ... And sooner than you think ...

James – It will be my pleasure Madam ...

Dom – Are you taking the piss...?

Dom hesitates as if she was looking for something. She moves towards the portrait, takes it down and smashes it over James's head, then leaves the office, fuming. James stays put, aghast, with the portrait's frame on his shoulders. Sam returns, acting as if nothing was out of the ordinary, to pick up the empty cup of coffee.

Sam – Everything okay, James?

James – Er, yes, thank you ...

Sam – Do you want another coffee...?

James – No, thank you ...

Sam looks at him and sees the frame on his shoulders.

Sam – Here, let me... (*She goes to him and removes the frame, which she hangs back in its original position*) Don't worry, we'll replace it. We're used to this.

James – Used to this? But ... who was that crazy bitch...?

Sam – Oh, that ... Well, that was ... that was your first appointment.

James – My first appointment?

Sam – Mrs Dom will explain.

James – Alright, that's enough! Never mind Mrs Dom and her explanations! I'm not here to receive physical and verbal abuse!

Sam – But ... of course you are.

James – Pardon?

Sam – That's exactly why you're here, Mr Carpeter. Like your predecessor.

James – To receive insults and blows?

Sam – It's all part of the job ...

James – What job ...?

Sam – The one you're being paid for...!

James – And if I refuse?

Sam – We can't pay you to just sit around, Mr Carpeter. Be reasonable ... I have to remind you that you have no skills or competencies whatsoever. You're an actor ...

James – Very well ... In that case, I resign... *(He's about to leave)* I won't stay another minute in this insane asylum ...

Sam – Please, can you at least wait until Mrs Dom returns? *(She turns towards the door)* Speaking of which, I think she's on her way ...

Mrs Dom, the customer who just slapped James, comes in. James is startled when he recognises her.

James – You're Mrs Dom...?

Dom *(very friendly)* – Very happy to meet you.

Sam – I'll leave you to it ...

James – I don't understand ... This is a nightmare...

Dom – Forgive me for catching you unawares... this little scene is part of our recruitment process, to test your reactions under real working conditions. Before your first solo flight ...

James – My first solo flight ...

Dom – Consider this your final job interview! Interview that you aced, by the way. Congratulations, Mrs Carpeter!

James – Thank you, but ... Could you please explain what the job is about? Your assistant refused to tell me anything ...

Dom – Oh, it's very simple. You'll understand immediately. Because I know you're intelligent, Mr Carpeter, even if you look like an imbecile and you don't have any degree to prove that you're not.

James – I attended classes at Juilliard's ... online ...

Dom – And believe me it will come in very handy in your new role ... As you know, we manage very large estates ...

James – Yes ...

Dom – That is, we manage rich women's fortunes and we make them richer by selling them all sorts of financial products, some of which are actually good.

James – Only women's fortunes...?

Dom – You'd be surprised to learn the percentage of our national wealth that is in the hands of widows. Have you heard of pension funds?

James – Vaguely ...

Dom – Pension funds is retirement money and would you believe that most retirees are widows.

James – I see...

Dom – So you must also see why we provide such special care to our female customers.

James – Of course ...

Dom – And on top of that, women also have the great advantage of not understanding a thing about the financial products we offer them.

James – Actually, I'm not entirely sure I ...

Dom – Don't worry about it. I'll freely admit that I don't understand all of it either. Actually, no one here has understood any of it for a long time. Not since my husband's death.

James – You're a widow?

She makes a gesture in the direction of the portrait hanging on the wall.

Dom – Alas ... My dear husband left us a while back ...

James – Oh, that was your ...

Dom now looks in the direction of the portrait and notices the damage.

Dom – What happened to him...?

James – I was going to ask you the same question...

Dom – Oh that’s right ... I got a little carried away earlier ... But you’re an actor, you know what it’s like ... When you’re completely in character ... Anyway, our typical client has a portfolio full of widow-and-orphan stocks, as they’re called in our trade.

James – OK ...

Dom – But financial markets are like casinos: in the end the house always wins. That’s what our widows struggle to understand with their aptly named widow-and-orphan stock. Do you follow me...?

James – I’m trying.

Dom – And despite what we imagine, the financial crisis has also affected the rich.

James – Of course ...

Dom – And when the rich are less rich, their bank gets poorer.

James – Naturally ...

Dom – Just between you and I, we’re facing bankruptcy ...

James – You are...?

Dom – Naturally the taxpayer will bail us out again, so it’s not all bad news for us ... And we’ve seen worse, haven’t we...?

James – If you say so ...

Dom – But the widow holding those widow-and-orphan stocks, she’ll never see her money again. So you can understand that she needs a way to express her disappointment.

James – That’s perfectly normal.

Dom – To take it out on someone.

James – Uh huh ...

Dom – And that’s where you come in ...

James – Me?

Dom – Look at it like being a sort of sparring partner for ruined millionaires who feel the temporary urge to hit someone in the face.

James – Sounds more like a punching bag than a sparring partner...

Dom – Come on, James! A big boy like you! They’re just a bunch of weak women after all...!

James – No really, I don’t think I’m the man you’re looking for ...

Dom – May I remind you that you signed an agreement, Mr Carpeter...

James – Why don’t you meet the clients you ruined yourself?

Dom – But because as the director of this branch I represent the continuity of the financial institution. I am responsible for everything, but like bankers or priests, I can't be guilty of anything except of deeply compromising the credibility of those operating above me. The survival of our company depends on it, Mr Carpeter. In fact, the very fabric of our society depends on it! The Good Lord cannot possibly be made responsible for anything. It's up to the ones at the bottom of the ladder to pay for everyone else. And the lowest we could find on the humanoid ladder who could still wear a suit without having to lengthen the arms, is you James! An unemployed actor!

James – And your husband...?

Dom – My husband had a really stupid face, a little like yours.

James – I see ...

Dom – Why don't you stay for your probation period and make a decision at the end ...

James points in the direction of the portrait.

James – If I'm still alive ...

Dom – Think of your pay cheque and the employment situation in our country ... The financial crisis has also affected the poor, James. Think of your wife. Of your children.

James – I don't have any children.

Dom – Think of your wife, then. Think of the face she'll make if you come home tonight and tell her you've been fired from your job, on the first day, yet again ...

James – You don't leave me much of a choice ...

Dom – I just know you're made for this kind of job, Mr Carpeter. Believe me, I've seen many candidates. You've hit rock bottom, James. At this point you can only go up. Did anyone ever tell you you have a face made for slapping?

James – Yes, my wife often says that. But coming from her I don't think it's a compliment ...

Sam comes in.

Sam – Your appointment is here... Shall I ask her to wait...?

Dom – Come on, give it a try. You'll see. I'm sure you'll even grow to enjoy it.

James – This isn't another test, is it ...?

Sam – Oh no, this one is a real client. And she doesn't seem happy at all ...

Dom – Good luck, James. And remember, you're guilty of everything but you are responsible for nothing ...

Dom leaves the room. Sam goes to the side table, turns the 'flask' right side up. She takes the frame down and leaves with it. The red button on the phone starts to blink and the alarm goes off. Margaret, a typical Sloan Ranger barges in the office.

Margaret – You son of a bitch! You ruined me!

James – Please take a seat ...

Margaret looks around, surprised.

Margaret – There's no chair...!

James – That's true ... Thank you for pointing it out.

Margaret – If there was one, I'd use it to bash your head in.

James – That's probably why there isn't one.

Margaret – No worries, I've come prepared ...

She pulls out a gun from her Louis Vuitton handbag and points it at James.

Margaret – If you believe in God now is the time for a last prayer.

James – I think now is a good time as any to press the red button ...

With trembling hands, he presses the red button on the phone.

Margaret – Not so clever now, huh?

James – Please be careful ... These things can go off on their own ...

Margaret – Perfect, that's what I'll tell them! But your Honor, the gun went off accidentally...!

James – But ... what do you want from me...?

Margaret – I want you to give me my money back.

James – That is not in my power, I'm afraid Madam. Believe me ... I am guilty of everything but responsible for nothing.

Margaret – Very well, then you'll have my death on your conscience.

She turns the gun against her temple. He panics.

James – Please don't do that ... It's only money after all.

Margaret – Three million pounds.

James – Oh, right ...

Margaret – I barely have enough left to live on...!

James – How much...?

Margaret relaxes a little.

Margaret – About ten million.

James – Oh, right ...

Margaret – Ten million doesn't take you very far nowadays, you know ...

James – I'm sure ...

Dom enters the room. Surprised, Margaret jumps and places the gun to her temple again.

Margaret – Don't move or I'll blow my brains out...!

Dom – Madam, as department manager I want to reiterate our commitment to support you in any way we can.

Margaret – Financially too?

Dom – More like psychologically. Listen, Genevieve ... Can I call you Genevieve?

Margaret – If you want, but my name is Margaret.

Dom – You just lost three million pounds so naturally you're in shock.

Margaret – That's true.

Dom – In fact, you're probably in the same mentally deranged state as a working-class minimum wage earner who just won the lottery.

Margaret – Are you taking the piss...?!

Dom – Let me finish! In the same state, but the opposite: you must accept the idea that you aren't as rich as you used to be.

James – She still has ten million pounds...

Margaret – Stay out of this! This is all because of your incompetency in matters of financial placements! Go on, tell me I'm wrong...?

James – I... No ...

Margaret – See? He admits it! He's an imbecile...!

Dom – That's my point, Madam. We are very well aware of the limitations of this spineless and slimy individual, who unfortunately abused the trust we placed in him, as he did yours.

Margaret – Pussy.

Dom – And although unfortunate legal reasons no one can understand prevent us from firing him, we can at least ensure that he is appropriately sanctioned.

Margaret – Oh, yes....? And how ...?

Dom – First we'll consider corporal punishment. Don't you think his face is begging to be slapped...?

Margaret – It is ...

Dom, without warning, turns and slaps James who remains stunned for a moment.

Dom (to Margaret) – Go on, don't hold back on my behalf ... It'll help, you'll see ...

Margaret – You think so ...?

Dom – Trust me, Madam ...

Margaret also slaps James across the face.

Dom – So ...?

Margaret – You're right, it does feel good ...

James – It doesn't feel good to me...!

Dom – I wonder if he's not possessed by a financial demon ...

Dom pulls out a crucifix from her pocket and points it at James.

Dom – Bernie Madoff, the power of Christ compels you! *(To Margaret)* It always works but the effects can't always be seen immediately.

Margaret – Don't you think we should burn him, just to be sure? Like witches in the old days...

Dom – Certainly, we could consider cremation in the long term...

Margaret's mobile phone rings and she answers.

Margaret – Yes...? Oh, yes, I'm sorry ... No, no, I'll be there in half an hour at the most ... Thank you, see you soon ... *(Putting her mobile away)* I'm sorry, that was my hairdresser ... I forgot I had an appointment this morning ... I was so upset ...

Dom – That's understandable ...

Margaret – I have to go ... You know how it is ... It's impossible to get an appointment with a good hairdresser ... And my daughter is getting married tomorrow ... To think that my husband won't be there ...

James – Why not ...?

Margaret – Because he's dead! *(To James)* You wait, I'm not done with you ... *(To Dom)* Thank you, you were right, I feel a little better.

Dom – I am at your service, Madam.

The client leaves.

Dom – That went rather well, don't you think? For a first solo flight ... Congratulations, you handled it rather well.

James *(holding his cheek)* – Oh, you think so...?

Dom – Well, you're still alive ... When they are suicidal like this one, you must channel their self-destructive tendencies into positive aggression they can turn against someone else.

James – In this case, someone else is me?

Dom – I am very proud of you, James. If you continue in this manner, in three months we'll give you a permanent position.

James – I'm really not sure ... Did you not see what happened? She almost killed me...!

Dom – But she didn't.

James – But she hit me! And so did you!

Dom – I'll be honest with you, Mr Carpeter.

James – Carpenter.

Dom – Given that loser face of yours and your resume that looks like a menu from a food bank, what do you think you can hope to achieve in life...?

James – Not much, I know ...

Dom – I imagine that in your previous jobs you were often blamed for stuff you didn't do?

James – My previous jobs ...

Dom – With your slap-happy face I imagine that over the course of your studies, your teachers must have given you more than your fair share of clips around the ear?

James – My studies...

Dom – Well, it's no different here but at least you'll get paid for it. And on top of that you'll be aware of the great respect your managers have for you, even if they don't show it.

James – But these are life or death situations...!

Dom – That's why you will be treated as a hero, James! What am I saying...? A semi-god! I bet that with that teacher's pet face of yours you were also a choir boy, am I wrong?

James – No ...

Dom – Do I need to remind you...? I am the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world! As you accept responsibility for the wrongdoings of our society, you will become our Jesus Christ, James. You already have the initials! That's a sign!

James – The initials?

Dom – JC! James Carpeter!

James – Carpenter.

Dom – Whatever, it doesn't change the initials, does it...?

James – No ...

Dom – In truth, Mr Carpeter, you were destined for this scapegoat job. Welcome aboard!

She leaves the room. James falls into his chair, devastated. Margaret returns, followed by Dom. James stands, out of reflex.

Margaret – One last thing ...

James – Of course ...

Margaret – You really are a pussy ...

Margaret slaps him across the face again.

Dom – Well, what are you waiting for...? Give her the other cheek...!

James, in a daze, does so. Margaret slaps the other cheek.

Margaret – It really does make me feel better.

Dom – Right? You can also give him a good kick in the butt if you want.

Margaret – Is that right?

Dom – James ...?

James (*turning to face her*) – Yes...?

Margaret takes the opportunity to kick him.

Margaret – Ah, that feels good ...

Dom – Good bye, Madam, I won't walk you to the door. You know the way out...? Come back whenever you want. Consider this is your home...!

Margaret leaves.

Dom – She loves you already.

James – Do you think she'll come back often?

Dom – You remind me of my husband, James. Who knows...? I might even end up marrying you.

James – I'm already married ...

Dom – In any case, congratulations. I am very happy with your performance. You're already a true doormat.

James – Thank you.

Dom – You'll see, it'll grow on you.

James – I don't know ... Getting slapped is one thing but getting shot ... Being a target for unhappy customers, maybe, but I'd like to avoid walking with a bullseye on my back.

Dom – Sometimes union reps are greeted with buckshot but there's still people who want to do the job ... We're in a financial crisis, James! Look at the bright side: we only have to deal with small calibre weapons, the kind that fit in Louis Vuitton bags.

James – That’s OK for you to say ... you’re not in my shoes.

Dom – You’re funny ... Of course, I’m not in your shoes since I pay you to be in mine ... Listen, I like you, so here’s what I propose: a bonus for each slap and a raise for each gunshot wound. What do you think...?

James – I’d rather have a bullet-proof vest.

Dom – Come on now, Mr Carpeter. The greatest tightrope acrobats are those who work without safety nets. That’s what makes them so great. You are an artist, James...!

Dom leaves the room. The phone rings.

James – Oh, hi darling, it’s you ... What do you mean, I sound strange...? No, no, everything is good ... Listen, it’s a sort of ... It’s a little difficult to explain ... I just had my first client ... Actually, rather well in fact ... At least according to my manager ... Sure, why not ... I just heard I might be getting a bonus, so ... *(He hangs up)* I can’t believe I just told her things were going rather well.

Sam comes in, wearing a white coat like a nurse. She holds a glass in her hand, that she places on the desk.

Sam – So, how did it go, James ...? Still in one piece ...?

James – Yes, I think so ...

Sam – I’m still going to run a check-up... A simple routine examination, don’t worry. Please stand up.

He stands up. She proceeds to examine him summarily, with the few medical instruments that she carries around her neck and in the pockets of her white coat.

Sam – Open your mouth and hold out your tongue, please ... Thank you ... Bend over a little and say ‘thirty-three million’... Perfect ... I think you’re good to continue... Congratulations ... *(she hands him a pill and the glass of water)* Here, take that anyway, it’ll make you feel better...

James – I hope it’s not poison...

Sam – Come on now ... Why would I want to poison you...?

He swallows the pill without another word.

James *(pointing in the direction of the side table)* – What about him ... What did he die of...?

Sam – Who...?

James – The bloke in the flask.

Sam – What makes you think there’s someone in the flask...?

James – You told me earlier...!

Sam – I told you there was someone in the flask...?

James – It's NOT a flask...!

Sam – So why are you asking if there's someone in it...?

She takes the empty glass, moves towards the flask and fills the glass with coffee from the flask, much to James's bewilderment.

Sam – Some coffee to wash down that pill...?

James – No, thank you ...

Sam – I'll have one then (*she empties the glass*) See, that's not poisoned either ... But it's not very warm ...

James is still bewildered, and starting to doubt his sanity. Emma enters the office, very bland and elegant. Emma's character can be played by the same actor playing Margaret.

Sam – Oh, you have another appointment ... (*Aside, to James*) And she doesn't look happy ...

James – That's my wife.

Sam – Very well, I'm leaving you... I mean, I'll leave you to it ...

Emma watches her go with a suspicious look.

Emma – You have your own assistant...?

James – I know, it's crazy, right...?

Emma – And your own office ...?

James – Not bad, huh...?

Emma – See...? I was right to make you drop your acting career to get a real job...!

James – Yes ...

Emma – So how are things going ...?

James – Listen ... I don't really know what to tell you ...

Emma – Don't tell me ... They're not going to keep you, is that it ...?

James – No, it's me ... I'm not sure I want to stay ...

Emma – Are you kidding me...?

James – You're not going to believe me, but they hit me.

Emma – They hit on you? But James, my boss hits on me too.

James – He does...?

Emma – My colleagues hit on me. My clients hit on me. Everyone hits on me. But I need to work...!

James – Oh, but no ... they don't hit on me, what I mean is ... they literally hit me ... do you understand...?

Emma – They beat you...?

James – They sock me in the face...!

Emma – Oh, I see ...

James – They kick me...!

Emma – So that's all you could come up with ...?

James – How do you mean...?

Emma – To try and get out of working here...!

James – No! That's not it at all...!

Emma – I'm warning you James, this is your last chance. If you are not able to keep this job, I'm leaving you for real this time.

James – Don't get upset honey, I was just ... It was just a manner of speaking ... Of course I'll keep this job...

Emma – Very well... Promise...?

James – On ... on my predecessor's grave...

Emma – Alright, I have to go ...

James – We're not having lunch together...? I told you, I'm getting a bonus...!

Emma – Sorry, rain check. I completely forgot I was having lunch with my mother.

James – Really...?

Emma – Today's Monday, James ... Every Monday I meet Mother for lunch ...

James – Of course ... I'm sorry it slipped my mind...

Emma – Good luck ...

James – You too ...

Emma goes to leave but stops.

Emma – By the way ... Can you give me some money since you're getting a bonus...?

James – Of course honey, here you go.

James gives her money from his wallet.

Emma – Thank you. Right, I'm off. See you tonight...?

James – Yes.

Emma – Bon appetit!

Sam comes back with a pile of letters.

Sam – She looks like a tough one, your Mrs.

James – You have to know how to handle her.

Sam – Here’s your mail.

She puts the letters on the desk.

James – Oh, I also get mail...?

Sam – But of course...!

He glances at the envelopes.

James – What are they...?

Sam – Insults, mainly. Some threats, of course ... A few of them are even letter bombs but that’s quite rare. And you don’t have to open them. Do you want me to get rid of them now ...?

James – Yes, please...

Sam – Very well Mr Carpeter ... If you’ll allow me, I will open a couple before sending the lot to our bomb disposal team. Some of them can be quite amusing. I shouldn’t open them but I can’t resist the temptation to read a few ...

Sam picks up the letters and leaves. James collapses in his chair and tries to breathe deeply. We hear the sound of an explosion.

James – Curiosity killed the cat ...

But James doesn’t have time to rest for very long. The red button begins to blink and the alarm starts to ring. Agnes, nouveau riche and quite vulgar, comes in the office. The character can be played by the same actor playing Margaret and/or Emma.

Agnes (*abruptly*) – Good afternoon, Sir.

James – Good afternoon, Madam. Would you like to go straight to the walloping, or would you like to insult me first...?

Agnes (*surprised*) – I have to admit the offer is tempting with that face of yours, but ...

James – Please, it’s not a problem. I deserve it, I assure you.

Agnes – No, really, I...

James – At least give me a good kick in the shins...! I have to justify my salary...!

Agnes – Listen, I don’t understand ... Thanks to your good advice I increased my capital threefold in two years.

She holds out her hand to shake and he recoils out of reflex, thinking she was going hit him across the face.

Agnes – Agnes

He pulls himself together and shakes her hand.

James – Agdes...?

Agnes – Do you have a cold ...?

James – No, why ...?

Agnes – You said Agdes.

James – My cheek is a little swollen ...

Agnes – Anyway, so I wanted to thank you, and ...

James – Thank me...?

Agnes – I even brought you a box of sweets ...

She pulls out a box of sweets from her bag and holds them out to him. He is very surprised, then loses it and sends the box of sweets flying in the office.

James – But I don't want your sweets...!

Agnes – I'm sorry, if I had known I would have brought you chocolates. Do you prefer chocolates?

James – You're wasting my time, do you understand...!

Agnes – Flowers, then...?

James – Do you think I have nothing better to do ...?

Agnes – No, of course not, but ...

James – And do you realise what you're saying...?

Agnes – What...?

James – You're three times richer than you were...! And what did you do to earn this...?

Agnes – Nothing ...

James – Aren't you ashamed...?

Agnes – No ...

James – Come over here ...!

She does. He bends her over his lap and gives her a spanking.

James – Aren't you ashamed ...?

Agnes – Now I am, a little ...

James – Now get out of here...!

Agnes – Very well Mr Carpeter...

Agnes leaves, ashamed. Sam barges in, face blackened by the explosion of the letter bomb.

James – What now ...?

Sam – I'm really sorry for this misunderstanding. It was a mistake, of course. Usually we only get appointment requests from unhappy clients. As you can see, I was still in shock and I didn't ...

Dom arrives. Sam leaves quickly.

James – I'm very sorry. I thought that ... I think I got a little carried away...

Dom – You did ... (*slightly turned on*) I hadn't realised that poodle face of yours hid a pit bull personality ...

James – You're not going to fire me, are you...? My wife really wants me to keep this job ...

Dom – Fire you...? Of course not...! The client was very satisfied with her meeting with you... She is now considering letting us manage all of her savings.

James – Really...?

Dom – I think I might even give you more responsibilities to match your skillset, James.

James – My skillset...

Dom – But first I'm going to need to test you some more, to ensure you have the right amount of force ...

She starts to undress.

Dom (*crazy about James' body*) – I too earn money while I sleep James... I deserve to be punished ...

She presses on the red button which starts to blink and the alarm goes off.

Black.

Lights.

Dom is getting dressed while James is straightening his clothes. Sam comes in with a new portrait that she hangs on the wall where the other one used to be. It represents Christ on the cross. James moves closer to the portrait and looks at it.

James – But that's me...!

Sam – You're the employee of the month, James.

Dom – Was it good for you too?

Sam – Your wife will be proud of you Mr Carpeter.

He's confused for a moment.

Dom – That was the good news, James...

James – Oh, because there's bad news as well....?

Dom – We just learned that our bank filed for bankruptcy.

Sam – The ruined widows are pressing against the gates.

Dom – We're going to have to find something to appease them quickly...

James – I see ... Lots of overtime for me ...

Sam – I'm afraid that won't be enough ...

Dom – We're going to need something more impactful...

Sam – A symbolic gesture...

Dom – We're talking about nothing less than ensuring the survival of our banking system, James...

James – Tell me this is a nightmare...

Dom (*to Sam*) – Go get the hammer and sickle ...

Sam – You mean the hammer and nails ...

Dom – That's what I said ...

Sam leaves.

Dom – You have to be courageous, James.

The red button starts blinking on the phone and the alarm starts to ring.

Black.

Light.

James is asleep in his chair. The phone rings and he wakes up with a start. He picks up.

James – Yes...? Oh, Sam? Yes, yes, okay ... No, no, it's alright ... I fell asleep for a second and had a nightmare...

He gets up, still groggy with sleep, and walks to the side table. He picks up the flask.

James – I need a good coffee.

He unscrews the flask and is about to pour a cup in the lid. Instead of coffee, a puff of white smoke comes out of the flask and engulfs the entire scene, which is now lit with an unreal light, and a voice, which could be Dom's, starts to speak.

Dom – I will grant you one wish, Mr Carpeter ...

James – Actually, it's Carpenter ...

Dom – Whatever ...

James – And usually it’s three wishes, isn’t it ...?

Dom – That was before the financial crisis ...

James – A single wish ... Alright, let’s say ... Can I get a coffee...?

Black

Light

James is asleep in his chair. Emma comes in the office and sees him.

Emma – James...?

James – Emma...? What are you doing here...?

Emma – I asked your assistant to let you know I was coming but since you weren’t picking up the phone...

James – I’m sorry, I must have nodded off for a second ...

Emma – We’re having lunch together, remember...?

James – Yes, yes, of course ... I’m ready ... Let’s go ...

Emma – Are you sure you’re okay...?

James – Yes, yes, I’m fine...

Emma – Okay...

They are about to leave.

James – I just had this crazy nightmare ... You can’t imagine ...

Emma – Oh, yes...?

James – Don’t laugh, but I was dreaming you were my wife.

Emma – But James ... I am your wife ...

James – Oh ... In that case I think the nightmare isn’t over yet ...

They leave.

Black.

End.

The author

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

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

For those who want to read the texts or work from a traditional book format, a paper copy can be purchased from Amazon.

Other plays by the same author in English

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Casket for two

Cheaters

Critical but Stable

Friday the 13th

Him and Her, interactive monologue

Quarantine

Running on empty

Strip Poker

The Worst Village in England

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