

La Comédiathèque

QUARANTINE

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English translation Anne-Christine Gasc



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Quarantine

English translation by Anne-Christine Gasc

Four strangers find themselves forcefully quarantined in what turns out to be an abandoned theater. Seated behind an imaginary two-way mirror, they are observed by another group of people (the audience). The allegedly contaminated strangers consider the situation. What virus are they contaminated with? What will happen to them? How and when will all this end? Little by little, we learn that this huis-clos takes place in a near future where Big Brother reigns supreme, and that the reason for this quarantine may not be entirely medically motivated.

Characters

Dom

Pat

Max

Sam/Kim

The characters' genders are not relevant and a gender neutral (or downright uniform) appearance should be a feature of all the characters. The actors could also swap roles over the course of the play, each role being represented by a costume (patients with blue, pink or green hospital gowns; nurses with white lab coats or black Mao shirts). In this version of the play, Dom and Max are men while Pat and Sam/Kim are women.

Act 1

The stage can remain empty except for one or two chairs. Dom enters, unsure. He is wearing the type of gown patients wear in hospitals (blue, pink or green). He looks around, intrigued, and is stunned to discover the audience. He walks towards them, studying them with a worried look. Pat enters behind him, wearing the same gown.

Pat – Hello.

Startled, Dom jumps, spins around and notices Pat.

Dom – You scared me ...

Pat – I'm sorry ... So, you too, you're ...?

Dom – Yes ...

An awkward moment.

Pat – Have we met before?

Dom – I think we were in the same carriage.

Pat – That's right, carriage 13! I don't know if there's a connection ...

Dom – A connection? With the number 13 you mean?

Pat – No, I mean that we're both here now! Because we were in the same carriage ...

Dom – I don't know. Truth be told, I have no idea why we're here.

Pat – Me neither. I have no idea what's happening. When I got off the train two cops asked me to follow them...

Dom – Are you sure they were cops?

Pat – I think so ... They were wearing a mask. Well, not a mask-mask ... like what they wear in hospitals. They put me in an ambulance and then ...

Dom – An ambulance? Are you sure? I mean, because if they were cops ...

Pat – Maybe it was a police van then.

Dom – A police van with medical equipment.

Pat – That's it ... And they drove me here and ... they told me to wait. And you?

Dom – Same ... So they didn't tell you anything either.

Pat – They told me to wait.

Dom – And ... You didn't hear anything else?

Pat – No ... *(A beat)* Yes ... I think the word 'quarantine' might have been said.

Dom – Oh, yes ...?

Pat – Did you hear it too?

Dom – Not really ...

Pat – That’s the most likely, isn’t it?

Dom – A quarantine, yes ... What else could it be?

Pat – It would explain the face masks.

Dom – Yes ... So what do we do now?

Pat – We wait ... That’s what they told us, isn’t it? They told us to wait.

A beat.

Dom – Quarantined ... If they take it literally it means 40 days ... I hope we’ll find out what’s going on before then.

Pat – Well, they call it a quarantine but ... it doesn’t necessarily have to be 40 days. It depends on the disease.

Dom – You think we have a disease?

Pat – What else could it be? If we’re under quarantine ...

Dom – Yes ... It must be a virus.

Pat – Very contagious, then.

Dom – Yes ... must be.

Pat – I’m not feeling any symptoms – you?

Dom – Me neither.

Pat – On the other hand ... It doesn’t mean anything. We might still be in the incubation period.

Dom – Are you a doctor?

Pat – Data collector.

Dom – Data collector?

Pat – What they used to call software engineer, I think.

Dom – Oh right ... That’s why you know so much about viruses ...

Pat – Mainly it’s because I have three children ... How about you?

Dom – No, I don’t have any children.

Pat – No, I meant ... You’re not a doctor either?

Dom – I’m a trainer.

Pat – Trainer ...

Dom – What they used to call professors, I think. Who knows what they'll call us in the future ... handlers maybe.

Pat – I see ...

Dom – Really? What do you see?

Pat – No, I mean ... You know even less about viruses than I do ...

A beat.

Dom – And so, that incubation time, does it depend on the virus?

Pat – Exactly ... Sometimes symptoms appear a week after contamination. Sometimes earlier, sometimes later.

Dom – Sounds like you are quite the expert in epidemic outbreaks ... for someone who isn't a doctor.

Pat – I told you, I have three kids. When one of them gets sick, the other two usually catch whatever it is a few days later.

Dom – But we're not sick!

Pat – We could be contagious well before we become sick.

Dom – Only if we're actually carrying a virus.

Pat – Hence the quarantine ... probably ... But I'm sure they'll explain everything.

Dom – Yes, I'm sure they will ...

Max enters, also wearing the same gown.

Dom – Ah ... The more the merrier ...

Pat – The more the ... ?

Dom – It's an expression we used to say, back then ... The more the merrier ... Never mind ...

Pat – Maybe this gentleman will be able to tell us more.

Max, looking very confused, takes a few steps towards the audience.

Dom – I'm not so sure. He looks rather out of it.

Pat – Hello.

Max – Er, hello ... I ... I only just got here too ...

Dom – How do you know we just got here?

Max – Pardon?

Dom – You said: I only just got here too. How do you know we just got here? For all you know we've been here for weeks.

Max – You’ve been here for weeks?

Pat – We just got here.

Max – Oh ... Just like me then ... That’s what I said.

Pat – Yes ...

Max – And ... Do you know why we’re here?

Dom – We were sort of hoping you’d be able to tell us ...

Max – I have no idea ... They were waiting for me when I got off the train, no explanation. I don’t have time for this.

Pat – Tell me about it ... My three kids are waiting at home. And my husband too. And you?

Max – No, I’m not married. I’ve just spent a few days in the South to visit my mother in the hospital.

Dom – She’s sick too?

Max – She broke her hip.

Pat – At least that’s not contagious ...

Max – Sure, but what about my lost income? I have two client projects that I need to finish before the end of the week ...

Pat – Maybe they’ll pay for our time. Are you an artisan?

Max – I’m a plumber.

Dom – Of course now that we don’t need one ...

Max – Pardon?

Dom – Nothing ...

Pat – Plumber ... I’ve heard about them, but I can’t remember what they are.

Dom – They call them fixers now.

Pat – Oh, right ...

Dom – So this gentleman is a specialised fixer. He fixes pipes, washers, faucets. Plumbers, we used to call them.

Max – That’s it.

Dom – So you have no idea either why we’re locked up?

Pat – You think we’re locked up?

Dom – Locked up or not, if we’re under quarantine we’re not allowed outside, right?

Max – You think we’re under quarantine?

Dom – According to this lady here, an experienced specialist, we've been infected with a virus and we're contagious. That's why we're in isolation.

Max – A virus? What virus?

Pat – Good question ... Probably a new one. Otherwise they would already have a vaccine and we wouldn't be under quarantine.

Max – OK ... But why us? Do you know?

Pat – Maybe we've been in contact with someone who was infected without realising it ... Did you just say you went to see your mother in the hospital?

Max – She has a broken hip!

Pat – Yes, but hospitals are a breeding ground for viruses, aren't they? Everyone knows that ...

Max – Great, so it's my fault now ...

Dom – Calm down, man. No one's saying it's your fault.

Pat – If we're going to be here for weeks we should try and remain supportive of each other.

Max – You think they'll keep us here for weeks?

Pat – We don't know. Right now, we don't know anything.

A beat.

Max – And you, how are you feeling?

Pat – Hanging in there ... I would have preferred to go straight home, be with my husband and my kids, but I'll be fine ...

Max – No, no one cares about that shit. I mean ... Do you feel you're coming down with something?

Pat (*offended*) – Not at the moment.

Max – And you?

Dom – I'm fine. But ... thanks for asking.

Max – Me neither, I ... Never better.

Dom – Great, just great ... We're so happy for you ...

Max looks around again.

Max – Does anyone know where we are, exactly?

Dom – No ... Couldn't see from inside the hearse that brought us here. The blinds were drawn.

Max – It was a hearse? Are you sure?

Dom – Is that what I said ...? Sorry, I meant ambulance, obviously.

Pat – The ride lasted 15 minutes, at the most. We can't be far from the train station ...

Max – Yeah ... but this isn't a hospital.

Pat – Right ... But then we're not sick yet.

Max – This place is weird ... what is it? (*He walks around the edge of the stage, and his face freezes when he notices the audience.*) Who're they?

Pat – Who? What do you mean?

Max (*pointing at the audience*) – Them!

Pat moves closer, squinting.

Pat – I can't see anything ... It's the lights ... They're blinding ...

Max – There! All those people! Looking at us!

Pat (*finally noticing the audience*) – No way ... What is that ...? (*To Dom*) Have you seen this?

Dom – Yes ... It's the first thing I noticed when I came in.

Pat – You could have said something!

Dom – Like what?

Pat – Like we were being watched! That someone was eavesdropping!

Dom – It slipped my mind ... What difference does it make? We haven't done anything, have we? And we haven't said anything incriminating ...

Pat – I hope not ...

Max – I haven't said anything at all.

Pat – It's a nightmare ...

Max – Do you think they can hear us?

Dom – I think that's what they're here for.

Max – To listen to us?

Pat – At the very least to observe us. Since we're under observation. To monitor the evolution of the disease ...

Max – It's weird, we can't hear them.

Dom – Maybe they aren't saying anything.

Pat – Or maybe they're behind some sort of glass.

Max – Glass?

Pat – You know, like the two-way mirrors they have in interrogation rooms ... (*Squinting, looking straight at the projectors that blind her*) Hence the lights aimed directly at our faces ...

Dom – I've never been in an interrogation room. Not before today, I mean.

Pat – But you know what I mean. When you're on the right side you can see the people in the other room, but they can't see you.

Max – What people?

Pat – The suspects!

Max – Yes, but here we can see them.

Dom – One thing I know, if I ever end up in an interrogation room, I doubt it'd be on the right side.

Max – The right side ...? Which one do you think it is?

Dom – The right side of the glass! The one where you can see them but they can't see you.

Max – So following that thought, they're going to be interrogated ... and we're here as witnesses.

Pat – You're right, it doesn't make sense. We're not cops ...

Dom – So you say ...

Pat – Pardon?

Dom – You seem to have extensive first-hand knowledge of interrogation rooms ...

Pat – What are you suggesting?

Dom – I don't know ... You sure seem to know a lot about viruses ... You know what an interrogation room looks like. Is there anything you want to tell us? Don't tell me they sent you here ...

Pat – They? I don't understand ...

Max – You could be undercover. I think that's what this gentleman here is suggesting. A spy, if you prefer ...

Pat – I suggest we're all starting to lose our minds. These people must be doctors. They're here to document the evolution of our infection, without risking infection themselves.

Max – We should just ignore them.

Dom – Exactly. That's what we'll do ... we'll ignore them. As if we weren't guinea pigs in a lab, scrutinised day and night by a hundred specialists positing about the time and manner of our death ...

Sam, wearing the same gown, enters behind them.

Sam – Hello ...

Pat – This lady may be able to tell us more ... Hello Madam, are you a doctor?

Sam – I am an informant.

Pat – Informant?

Dom – What we used to call a journalist, I think.

Max – Oh ... So you're like us then.

Sam – You're all informants?

Max – No ... I mean you're here like us ... You don't know why we've been brought here.

Sam – No, sorry, I have no idea. When I got off the train ...

Dom – Yeah yeah, we know all that ...

Sam – I'm just answering your question ... If you know why do you ask?

Max – But we don't know! We just told you!

Sam – Calm down, there's not need to get upset.

Max – I'm sorry, you're right.

Sam – So, I got off the train and ... some policemen took me here. I don't know anything else. I have no idea why we're under arrest.

Dom – They told you you were under arrest?

Sam – Not in so many words, but ...

Pat – I heard them say quarantine, I think. Well, that's what I understood anyway.

Sam – Maybe they said they had a 'warrant in' for your arrest ...

Dom – The plot thickens ...

Sam – If we are in police custody there must be a good reason.

Dom – Oh, so now we're in police custody?

Sam – Sorry ... I meant under observation ...

Pat lowers her voice and points discretely towards the public.

Pat – So you don't know who those people are either, sat there looking at us, in silence ...

Sam notices the audience but doesn't show any surprise.

Sam – No ...

Max – So you were in the same train as well?

Sam – Carriage 13, seat 40. You?

Pat – 42.

Max – 41.

Dom – 43.

Sam – So we were all seated next to each other.

Pat – Or facing each other.

Sam – That means we could have been contaminated by the same person ... But who?

He looks at the others suspiciously. Everyone is puzzled.

Pat – Look at us in these gowns. I feel like a patient in an insane asylum ...

Max – But insanity isn't contagious ... Is it?

Sam – We should still avoid all physical contact.

Dom – Oh, because you were planning to ...

Pat – We should also avoid coughing. Or cover our mouths when we do.

Dom – Why didn't they give us face masks then? If we're contagious.

Pat – Maybe they think since it's just us, it's pointless. If we're already condemned ...

Sam – Condemned?

Pat – Sorry, I meant contaminated.

Max – Then it's pointless to cover our mouths when we cough.

Dom – So we can touch each other?

Sam – Let's maybe introduce ourselves first. *(Holding out his hand to Dom)* Sam.

After a short hesitation, Dom shakes the hand offered by Sam.

Dom – Dom.

The others do the same.

Pat – Pat.

Max – Max.

They all shake hands, with a little apprehension. Suddenly a speaker crackles and a voice starts to speak.

Voice – Hello everyone. Can you hear me?

A moment of uncertainty.

Sam – Affirmative. We copy you loud and clear.

Dom – Well, more loud than clear.

Voice – First, we'd like to apologise for the inconvenience of the situation, which is unfortunately necessary due to the unfolding health crisis. We had to react quickly. And that means we haven't had the time to clearly explain the reasons for your detention ... I mean your retention in this place of confinement, designed to prevent any contact with the outside ...

Pat – And may we now know the exact nature of this health crisis?

Voice – It's a little difficult to explain through a speaker. But you shouldn't worry. We'll soon send someone to see you. Until we do, we'll make sure you are well taken care of. In the entry hall there's a fridge and a well stocked pantry. Help yourselves to whatever you want. There's also a door leading to a corridor with bedrooms, each with an en-suite and a fully-stocked mini bar. It's rather basic but I think you'll find there's everything you need ...

Dom – Everything we need?

Voice – There's even a foosball.

Max – But can you at least tell us how long we're going to be here for?

Pat – My husband and kids are waiting for me at home, they'll be worried. At least my children will be ...

Voice – Rest assured your families, employers and clients have all been notified. Enjoy your stay with us. We'll talk again soon.

We hear another crackle, then nothing.

Pat – Enjoy your stay?

Dom – Well, there you go ... You heard them ... We can just shut up and wait ...

Sam – That's crazy ...

Everyone is stunned.

Pat – I'm calling my husband. At least to let him know. *(She pulls out her mobile phone.)* And maybe they'll have more information ... *(She presses a key and her face freezes.)* I don't have a signal ... Do you ...?

Dom pulls out his mobile phone.

Dom – Me neither.

Sam – Maybe they're using a scrambler ...

Max – Why would they do that?

They are puzzled.

Pat – So we're really cut off from the rest of the world ...

Dom – What do we do?

Sam – What do you suggest we do?

A beat.

Max – Let's try the grub.

Dom – Pardon?

Max – They told us where the grub was.

Dom – So we're held against our will without knowing why, without any means of communication with the outside world and this one's first thought is ... to eat?

Max – Do you have a better idea?

Dom – No ...

Max – Right, so you do whatever you want, but I could eat a horse ...

He leaves. The others look at each other.

Sam – Actually, I'm a little peckish too ...

He leaves.

Dom – What do you think?

Pat – After all ... No point in starving ourselves to death, is there?

She leaves. After a short hesitation, he follows her.

Black.

Act 2

The lights come back on. Dom and Pat are pacing back and forth, like caged lions. Max looks at them with a detached interest, eating a slice of pizza.

Pat – Weren't there four of us, before?

Dom – Yes, there was ...

Pat – The fourth one's disappeared ...

Dom – What was her name again?

Max – Kim.

Pat – Kim?

Dom – Sam, I think it was.

Max – Sam, that's it ...

Dom – What did they do with her?

Max – Maybe they let her go.

Pat – They let her go? What about us?

Dom – Either that, or she's dead ...

Pat – Dead? You mean ... from this disease?

Dom – I don't know. *(To Max)* What do you think?

Max – Yes, she could be dead.

Pat – Don't let that ruin your appetite ...

A beat.

Dom – How long have we've been here?

Pat – I'd say about a week, no?

Max – Seven days, precisely.

Pat – Yes, that's what I said ... A week. I feel I'm losing my mind.

Dom – Me too.

Pat – Not out of our minds just yet, but steadily walking away.

Max – Good thing they're keeping us under observation.

Dom – They? Who's they?

Max – The Man. You know, the health authorities. That's what they said, in the speaker. You didn't hear them?

Pat – That was just a random voice in a speaker ...

Dom – It's true though, how much do we really know about what's going on? Maybe we've been kidnapped ...

Max – By cops?

Pat – Maybe they weren't really cops. They wore face masks ...

Max – But why kidnap us?

Dom – To ask our families for a ransom? I don't have any family ... I imagine you're not billionaires either.

Pat – I only have my flat, which technically still belongs to the bank until I pay off the mortgage in fifty years. I don't think the bank would pay my ransom just so I can continue to make my mortgage payments.

Dom – On the other hand, no one asked for a ransom.

Max – Not that I know of.

Dom – Our kidnappers must have realised we weren't worth the ROI and bugged off. And they forgot to let us go ...

Pat – Or it's a hostage situation. Those often take a very long time. Years, in some cases.

Max – A hostage situation?

Pat – Why not? They've made demands and they threatened to kill us if the authorities don't deliver what they asked for.

Max – If that's the case, you're fresh out of luck.

Dom – You?

Max – No, I mean ... us, we. We're fresh out of luck. The authorities stopped negotiating with terrorists years ago. Even when the hostages' lives are in danger.

A beat.

Pat – I think we may be starting to lose the plot ... It's just a simple quarantine, that's it.

Dom – You think?

Pat – Well, that's what I choose to believe. That way I won't lose my mind ...

Max – You're right. We shouldn't focus on the worse side of everything.

Pat – Listen, no one is ill, that's the most important ... If it's really a quarantine they'll have to let us go, eventually.

Max – Why do you think we're the only ones deceased?

Dom – Deceased? You mean diseased. Interesting Freudian slip.

Pat – Just a slip of the tongue. What’s your point?

Max – I don’t know ... I didn’t mean anything by it ... What do you think?

Dom – Nothing. I don’t think anything. And if I did, you wouldn’t be the one I told.

Pat faces the audience.

Pat – And how about them ... They’re still here too ...

Max – Maybe they can’t leave either.

Pat – Are they hostages, like us?

Dom – If they’re free to go I really don’t know why they’re still here.

Max – I know, right ... It’s not like there’s anything interesting happening.

Pat – It’s like we’re in a reality-tv show. We’ll soon be bored too ...

Dr. Kim enters the stage behind them. She is played by the same actor who was playing Sam. She’s wearing a black Mao shirt and smiles like a tv presenter.

Kim – Hello! My dear friends!

The other three turn around, surprised.

Pat – She’s not wearing a hospital gown like us, she must be a doctor.

Dom – It’s weird, she looks familiar ...

Pat – Me too, I feel I’ve seen her before.

Max – Maybe she can explain what we’re doing here ...

Dom – Finally!

Pat – Hello Doctor. So, that’s it, we’re free to go?

Kim – Not quite yet ...

Dom – How about you start by telling us who you are and why we’re here.

Kim – I am ... your reformator.

Pat – Reformator?

Kim – I’m here to get you back into shape.

Dom – I think we used to say therapist.

Pat – But you’re a physician?

Kim – I am, technically, a doctor ... I am Doctor Kim. And I’m here to treat you.

Dom – Treat us?

Kim – Let's say ... to put you back on the right path. The path to good health ...

Pat – And how are you going to do that?

Kim – How do you think? By reformatting you. If it's not too late ...

Pat – So you don't have a vaccine.

Max – Perfect, I feel reassured already ...

Pat – Yes but ... why are you keeping us here? You need to tell us now.

Kim – You were in contact with someone dangerous.

Max – Do you mean ... someone contaminated with a dangerous virus?

Kim – Yes, sort of. We're waiting to see if you were contaminated ...

Dom – But we haven't received any treatment!

Kim – There is no known treatment.

Dom – Do you mean no medical treatment?

Dom – Of course, because we don't have any symptoms!

Kim – The disease may have a very long incubation period.

Dom – And if it turns out we did catch this virus, what will you do with us?

Kim – We are waiting for instructions.

Dom – I feel like I'm talking to a robot with a pre-used hard drive. Are you sure you're not the one with a virus?

Pat – All I know that is that we've been here for a week, prevented from having any contact with our families ...

Dom – Not even by phone!

Pat – The network is scrambled. You can't spread viruses by phone, can you?

Kim – It depends on the virus ...

Pat points to the audience.

Pat – And what's with all those people staring at us?

Kim – They're guinea pigs too.

Pat – Too? So you admit it, we are guinea pigs.

Kim – We wanted to study their reaction after prolonged contact with severely contaminated patients like you.

Dom – But we don't have any contact with them!

Kim – No, but they can hear you. And see you.

Max – I feel like a hamster in a lab.

Pat – If only we had a wheel to get a little exercise.

Kim – This isn't a game, believe me.

Pat – Oh, for goodness' sake, what is this virus exactly?

Kim – In truth ... it's not really a virus.

Max – So what is it then?

Kim – It's more like something that is audio-borne. Or visual. Or both. It spreads through mimicry, in a way.

Dom – Ah yes, now it makes a whole lot more sense.

Kim – Someone in carriage 13 engaged in inappropriate, even deviant, behaviour in your presence, putting you at risk.

Pat – What kind of behaviour?

Kim – You really don't remember?

Pat – No.

Kim – Any of you remember?

Dom – No.

Kim – We'll see about that. You've been confined here to check that you weren't contagious.

Pat – Contagious? But you said it wasn't a virus!

Kim – To check that you weren't tempted to reproduce this dangerous behaviour if you prefer. And risk contaminating others.

Pat – And how much longer are you going to keep us here before you're confident we're not ... contagious?

Kim – We're still waiting for instructions. For now, try to remember.

Sam – Try to remember what?

Kim – What you might have seen and heard in carriage 13. I'll give you a bit more time to think about it ...

Pat – But ...

Kim – That's it for today. Dear friends, we'll see each other soon. In the meantime, if you need anything, don't hesitate to let us know.

Pat – Let you know? How? We're locked in here and we don't have any means of communication with the outside world! Or with room service, actually ...

Kim – Don't worry ... Ask and thou shall receive. Seek and thou shall find ...

Dom – Knock and thou shall be let out?

Kim leaves.

Pat – “Try to remember”

Max – Do you remember anything?

Dom – No ... You?

Pat – Me neither ...

Dom – And even if we did, we wouldn't admit it, would we?

Max – Why not?

Pat (*pointing to the public*) – Let me remind you that we are being watched ...

Dom – No risk in forgetting that.

Max – When you know you're being watched, you avoid deviant behaviours, don't you?

Dom – What's a deviant behaviour anyway?

Pat – Deviant compared to what?

Max – We don't know ...

Pat – We don't know anymore.

Dom – We must have known this at one point ... but we forgot.

A beat.

Max – All this thinking is making me hungry. How about you?

Max leaves.

Pat – He's got a one-track mind, that one.

Dom – I'm starting to wonder if this mofo isn't here to watch us.

Pat – But we're already being watched, no?

Dom – I mean, watched from the inside.

Pat – A spy? Anyone of us could be one.

Dom – Indeed ... Maybe I'm a spy?

Pat – No, I don't think you're one of them.

Dom – So you might be the spy. And you're trying to get me to talk.

Pat – Then I wouldn't be very good at my job. You're not saying anything.

Dom – I'm just being careful ...

Pat – OK, so I'll do the talking.

Dom – If you want.

Pat – I said I couldn't remember anything, but ... that's not quite true.

Dom – Really?

Pat – I remember something.

Dom – I'm all ears ... (*Pointing to the audience*) We're all ears, all of us ...

Pat – I remember the couple that was sat next to us, on the train.

Dom – Oh, yes ...?

Pat – The man started telling his wife a story.

Dom – A story?

Pat – A crazy joke.

Dom – I can't wait to hear it.

Pat – A man finds a mirror. He looks into it, sees his reflection and says: I think I've seen that son of a bitch before ... His friend takes the mirror, looks into it and replies: Of course you have, that's me!

Dom – You think that's a crazy joke?

Pat – Well, you'd have to be crazy to tell such a nonsensical joke. That's what we've always been told, no?

Dom – Yes ...

Pat – And this story, you'd heard it before ...

Dom – Maybe.

Pat – You heard it in the same place I did, on the train.

Dom – Possibly. So what if I did?

Pat – The woman's face became ... she winced. She was overtaken by spasms, shaking from head to toe. She opened her mouth and a series of short cries came out.

Dom – Cries? What kind of cries?

Pat – Ha, ha, ha!

Dom – Ha, ha, ha?

Pat – Ha, ha, ha!

She begins to laugh a little hysterically.

Dom – Please, keep your voice down ... And then?

Pat – She didn't look in pain. He looked at her and then displayed the same symptoms.

Dom – So it really is contagious. And then?

Pat – Then the cops arrived and took them both away.

Dom – I see ...

Pat – Of course you see. You were there, with me.

Dom – I don't remember ...

Pat – I'm not a spy. You can tell me.

A beat. He takes her to the back of the stage, away from the public.

Dom – It's called laughing.

Pat – What is?

Dom – This contagious disease, the symptoms you just described. It's called laughing.

Pat – Laughing? What's that?

Dom – A disease that the health authorities managed to eradicate. Well, not entirely apparently.

Pat – But what's this disease?

Dom – It's very old. As old as Humanity. The symptoms are relatively harmless, but those infected tend to display disorderly behaviours. Deviant, as they say ...

Pat – But I just told you the same story and you didn't laugh.

Dom – It's never as funny the second time around. Also, we lost the habit of laughing. We don't know what's funny anymore.

Pat – Funny?

Dom – Yes. Funny. Or comical. It's what triggers the laughter. We don't know how to laugh anymore.

Pat – And you? Do you sometimes ... laugh?

Dom – In secret, you mean? Because otherwise ... You saw what happens to those caught laughing.

Pat – So?

He moves close to her and speaks very quietly.

Dom – I am part of a group.

Pat – A terrorist group?

Dom – Yes, sort of. We hold secret meetings. We tell jokes, and we laugh. Well, we try ...

Pat – Crazy jokes?

Dom – Do you have to be crazy to make fun of the authorities? Or of our Supreme Guide ...

Pat – But criticizing the authorities is strictly forbidden, isn't it? And disrespecting the Supreme Guide is blasphemy.

Dom – Back in the day, blasphemy wasn't illegal.

Pat – How do you know all this?

Dom – We found books.

Pat – Books?

Dom – And newspapers.

Pat – What's that?

Dom – It's like tablets, but the letters are made of black ink printed on paper.

Pat – Like packaging?

Dom – And since it can't be shared on a network they can't control it.

Pat – So of course, it's illegal.

Dom – There was a time when it wasn't ... It was a different time.

Pat – I can't remember.

Dom – No one can remember. The authorities did everything they could to make everyone forget. By burning all the books, among other things.

Pat – This laugh thing ...

Dom – “To laugh is proper to man”, they used to say. It's what separated us from other social animals like bees, ants or termites ...

Pat – We also have intelligence.

Dom – But for how much longer ... Professors have become trainers. Politicians are reformators. Software engineers are data collectors and only a step away from becoming computers themselves ...

Max returns. They stop talking immediately and try to look casual.

Pat – Nice meal?

Dom – How was it?

Max – Excellent.

Pat – What was it today?

Max – Pizza.

Dom – Again?

Pat – How much longer are they going to keep us locked up, stuffing our faces with pizza.

Max – I don't mind pizzas.

Dom – What if we escaped?

Max – Escape? Is that allowed?

Dom – No, of course not ... I was joking.

Max – Of course it's not allowed. And we'd risk contaminating others on the outside.

Dom – Including the audience. They're not laughing a whole lot right now, but ...

Max – And anyway, they'd quickly find you.

Dom – So ... what do we do?

Pat – Is there any pizza left?

Max – There's a freezer full. Just need to zap them in the microwave.

Dom – I'm coming with you.

Dom and Pat leave. Kim returns.

Kim – So? Were you able to pry anything out of them?

Max – Nothing ... I'm starting to wonder if I'm a very good informant ...

Kim – Yeah, me too ... Regardless ... You must have an opinion?

Max – A what?

Kim – What do you think?

Max – Nothing. You always told me I thought too much, Boss. And that it could be dangerous ...

Kim – It doesn't matter, we already have a file on them.

Max – Do you have a file on me as well?

Kim – Of course! You even wrote it yourself, after you turned yourself in to the police to claim the reward. You don't remember?

Max – I do ... It cost me ten years in a re-education camp to put me back on the straight and narrow, like you say.

Kim – If everyone were like you, we'd have a lot less problems, believe me.

Max – Are you sure these people are dangerous, Boss?

Kim – Are you still having doubts?

Max – No, of course not ...

Kim – Since you're not able to get anything out of them, you'll write another report on yourself. I want a list of all your deviant thoughts. And I want it tomorrow morning on my desk.

Max – Yes, Boss.

Max looks around him and towards the audience.

Kim – What are you thinking about now?

Max – Nothing, I promise.

Kim – I can tell you're thinking about something. What is it?

Max – I was wondering ... What is this place?

Kim – An abandoned theater.

Max – A theater?

Kim – A place where people used to gather to laugh together.

Max – Laugh?

Kim – At the time it was legal. You could laugh about anything. Even the authorities.

Max – Even the Supreme Guide?

Kim – Even laugh at yourself.

Max – Thankfully this time is definitely over.

Kim – Indeed ... Don't tell me you're thinking about something else now ...

Max – I'm going to write that report.

Max leaves. Kim walks towards the public.

Kim – And you, how are you feeling? No alarming symptoms? No uncontrollable laughter? Good, so if you continue to behave we'll let you go shortly.

Kim leaves. Dom and Pat return.

Dom – You think it's him?

Pat – Who?

Dom – Sam! Do you think he's a spy?

Pat – So you don't think it's me anymore.

Dom – No.

A beat.

Pat – That couple, you remember them perfectly well, don't you.

Dom – What couple?

Pat – The man who told his wife a joke and they both laughed.

Dom – What makes you think I remember them?

Pat – Because that couple, it's us.

Dom – Yes, maybe. (*A beat*) You'd never laughed before?

Pat – No. I couldn't understand what was happening. It was like ... I couldn't control anything ... I was a little ashamed.

Dom – I understand. That's always how it feels the first time.

Pat – And you? Did you laugh with other women, before me?

Dom – Yes. With other women and men too. Sometimes more than one.

Pat – More than one ...

Dom – Did you like it?

Pat – I ... I don't know ...

Dom – You liked it.

Pat – Yes ...

Dom – You'll see, once you've tried it you can't live without.

Pat – That's what scares me. And that's the reason we're locked in here, isn't it?

Dom – Yes ... The other two, sat across from us, must have been cops.

Pat – They're the ones who brought us here. They wore face masks but I recognised their voices.

Dom – So you knew.

Pat – Yes. But why would two people laughing worry them so much?

Dom – Laughter can be devastating and they know it.

Pat – Devastating? You mean bad for your health?

Dom – For your health, no. In fact, it's actually quite good for your health. It's for them that laughter is dangerous.

Pat – How so?

Dom – When you start laughing about anything you become a lot less naïve and so less compliant. Laughter is subversive ...

Pat – And what are they going to do with us?

Dom – I don't know. We scare them.

Pat – We scare them?

Dom – They're worried because laughter is contagious. They're worried that this epidemic could destroy the system and take them down with it.

Pat – You think they could kill us?

Dom – They would have already considered that option. But they can't kill everyone ...

Pat – So what do we do?

Dom – Do you want me tell you another one?

Pat – Another joke?

Dom – If we're going to die, might as well die of laughter ...

Pat – I have to warn you, I'm married.

Dom – Don't worry, laughing isn't really cheating.

Pat – I'm all ears ...

Dom – So it's the story of a ...

Pat – Wait, let's go somewhere else, I think someone is listening ...

Dom – You're right ... Let's go to my room.

They leave. Kim and Max return.

Sam – Here you go, Boss, my report.

Kim – There's not much there ... Are you sure you haven't left anything out?

Sam – Absolutely sure, Boss.

Kim – Where did they go? I hope they haven't escaped ...

Max – They must be in their rooms.

We hear Dom and Pat laugh loudly.

Kim – Well, now we know.

Max – Yes, they definitely caught the virus.

They listen to them laugh again, a little self-conscious, a little troubled.

Kim – Have you ever laughed?

Max – No, you?

Kim – It looks painful, doesn't it?

Max – I wouldn't know, I just told you I've never laughed. Are you trying to trick me again?

New burst of laughter offstage.

Kim – That's it, they leave us no choice. We must refer them to the Authority.

Black.

Act 3

Kim is standing, still wearing the black Mao shirt. Dom, Pat and Max are sitting down. Dom and Pat are still wearing their gowns, blue, pink or green, but Max is now wearing a nurse's white coat.

Kim – Dear friends, first of all I would like to thank you for coming.

Pat – We didn't really have a choice ...

Dom – We are prisoners!

Kim clears her throat and continues as if nothing had happened.

Kim – So, I brought you here for a group therapy session.

Pat – You mean for questioning ...

Kim – We know that two of you succumbed to a laughing episode after their arrival here. This proves that one of you was contaminated before this quarantine started. And that the other one caught the virus through contact.

Dom – So if you know that, why this pretense of an investigation?

Kim – We need the guilty parties to turn themselves in. It's part of the therapy ...

Max – Laughter? Us? But we don't even know what it means. Don't we, friends?

Pat – Alright, you can drop the act ... We know you're a spy.

Max – But I assure you ...

Dom – A pretty poor one, too.

Max – OK, fine ... undercover maybe but not a spy. A spy is when you're on the wrong side. We're on the right side, aren't we, Boss?

Kim – This gentleman isn't a spy. He's an informant.

Dom – And you, what are you, exactly?

Kim – I am your reformator.

Dom – A reformator?

Kim – I am here to reformat you.

Dom – That's not what reformator means.

Kim – Look it up in the dictionary, you'll see!

Dom – You re-wrote the dictionary in its entirety! But I found a copy of an old encyclopedia and I know the meaning those words used to have.

Kim – The Authority is now in charge of defining each and every word, with the sole objective to improve the Nation's well being.

Dom – You re-wrote everything, even the Bible! You recast God as the Supreme Being! And you burned all the books so there was no trace left of the past!

Kim – Apparently, we missed a few ... it sounds like you managed to read a couple.

Dom – The only reading material available today is displayed on a screen and distributed through a network entirely under your control.

Pat – So you want to reformat us ... Erase our hard drives and reinstall your own operating system, is that it?

Dom – And throw in an anti-virus, probably ...

Kim – Laughter is very addictive. When you've laughed once you'll want to do it again and again.

Pat – Are you saying laughter is a drug?

Dom – Certainly not a hard drug.

Kim – Laughter dependency is like alcohol dependency. You never really get rid of it. You can stop laughing, but the temptation will always be there.

Max – Once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic.

Kim – And you of all people should know. We sent you to rehab for ten years: you were drinking alcohol in secret and you shopped yourself to the cops.

Max – I don't drink anymore.

Dom – But he sure eats ...

Max – So this therapy, is it like an AA meeting?

Kim – That's right ... a meeting of Laughters Anonymous.

Pat – And the goal is to uncover those who laugh in secret.

Kim – Exactly.

Dom – And how are you going to do that?

Kim – I'm going to tell you a story. A funny story, apparently. We'll see who laughs.

Pat – I see. Like a screening test.

Dom – I don't think you'll be able to make anyone laugh regardless of the story.

Kim – Why not?

Dom – Because to get laughs you need to be in the right mood and among good company.

Pat – And you're basically telling us that the first person to laugh will be sent to a re-education camp.

Dom – At best. They might even be executed.

Kim – How did you know?

Pat – I'm already in stitches ...

Kim – Alright, well let me tell you the story anyway.

Max – We're all ears, Boss.

Kim – A man finds a mirror. He looks into it, sees his reflection and says: I think I've seen that son of a bitch before ... His friend takes the mirror, looks into it and replies: Of course you have, that's me!

Max – That doesn't make any sense.

Kim – I think that's why it's funny. Isn't it?

Dom – Also it depends how you tell the joke.

Pat – And who's telling the joke.

Kim – You think?

Pat – When you know you'll be executed if you laugh, it doesn't help.

Kim – It doesn't?

Pat – Well d'uh.

Kim – I see what you mean ... So let's say ... The first person to laugh gets a jollop!

Dom – A jollop?

Dom and Pat laugh.

Max – A jollop ...

Laughter being contagious, Max starts laughing too.

Kim – So everyone is contaminated, I see ...

Dom – For he's a jolly fun fellow, which nobody can deny ...

Kim (to Max) – Right, so now you're really under quarantine.

Max – Yes, Boss.

Dom – The first to laugh gets a jollop ...

Max tries but can't stop laughing.

Kim – You find that funny?

Max – Not at all! I mean yes, but ...

Dom – See, you can be funny too when you try. Actually, more like when you're not trying.

They all continue to laugh, bordering on hysteria. Kim looks very uncomfortable and almost frightened by the laughter.

Kim – Stop laughing immediately! That’s an order!

But the others can’t control their laughter. Kim puts her fingers in her ears and leaves quickly. Dom, Pat and Max slowly stop laughing.

Dom – Well, you’re one of us now. So, how does it feel?

Max – Laughing? I don’t know ... I thought it would be painful. It’s actually quite pleasant.

Pat – Very pleasant ...

Max – And I feel relieved.

Dom – And to think we used to be able to laugh in public ...

Pat – How did it come to this?

Dom – It started a long time ago, but it crept in little by little. They started by making it illegal to laugh about certain things. First it was religion ...

Max – Then the authorities, of course.

Dom – Then they turned the Supreme Guide into a new God and any criticism was labelled blasphemy.

Max – Then they made alcohol illegal, because when you’ve had a drink you laugh more easily.

Dom – The Authority issued a list of subjects that could still be laughed about. But every year the list became shorter.

Max – In the end, they decided it would be easier to just ban laughing entirely.

Dom – And that’s how, little by little, we went from not being allowed to laugh about everything to not being allowed to laugh about anything.

Max – In the end we couldn’t even laugh about ourselves ...

Dom – Even the poor weren’t allowed to laugh about their situation.

Pat – But how were they able to ensure compliance?

Dom – The authorities started treating laughter like a mental illness. Those who were caught laughing were immediately committed.

Max – And of course we forbade anything that could trigger laughter.

Dom – Newspapers were forbidden, theaters were closed, self censorship was everywhere ...

Max – Clowns, comedians and actors were classified as dangerous terrorists.

Dom – They treated laughter like they treated leprosy in the Middle Ages. Some people were walled in alive in their homes because they were heard laughing.

Max – We also forced the entire population to wear face masks.

Dom – Under the pretext of protecting them from a virus. In reality it was to prevent anyone from catching sight of even the faintest smile. The masks became like muzzles.

Max – Like with certain religions, in the past.

Dom – Before the Authority because our one and only religion.

Max – Little by little, the sound of people laughing disappeared.

Dom – And when laughter is made illegal, of course it becomes impossible to criticize or to protest.

Max – No more social conflicts, no more political debates, so no more elections.

Dom – It was already that way in many dictatorships, secular and religious.

Max – The Authority thought this disease completely eradicated. But a few standalone cases reappeared recently. You're one of them.

Pat – What are they going to do with us? Kill us?

Max – Yes, but first, since you are unrepentant gigglers and therefore incurable, they wanted to use you for experiments.

Pat – Experiments?

Max – To study the public's reaction, observe how the disease spreads, and understand the damages laughter can cause on an otherwise healthy population, that kind of thing.

Pat contemplates the public.

Pat – So we were supposed to make them laugh?

Dom – We only know a few bad jokes ...

Pat – We're going to have to relearn how to laugh and make others laugh.

A beat.

Max – But what would happen if the Supreme Guide abandoned us?

Dom – It wouldn't be the end of the world. More like a fresh start. Brain trainers will go back to being professors again. And reformators, politicians ...

Max – What about informants, like me? I don't know how to do anything! What will happen to me?

Dom – If you can't do anything, you have all the qualifications needed to become an actor.

Black.

Act 4

Pat paces the stage, worried. She steps towards the public.

Pat – Don't worry, you'll soon be free to go, too. At least, I hope so ...

Dom arrives.

Dom – So, anything new?

Pat – Still nothing. I think I heard a small commotion outside. But the sound is very muffled.

Dom – Theaters are always well soundproofed.

Pat – Where did the spy go?

Dom – He's finishing the pizzas ...

Pat – We're still locked in here, cut off from the outside world. It's been days since we've had any news from the outside.

Dom – When the freezer is empty we'll starve. And we thought we might die of laughter ...

Pat – Do you think we'll make it out alive?

Dom – In a way, weren't we already dead before this quarantine ...?

Pat – You're right. The only real disease we've been suffering from all these years is terminal doom and gloom.

Dom – And laughter is more of an antidote.

Max returns.

Max – I can hear strange noises coming from outside ... No?

Dom – No ...

The three of them listen carefully.

Pat – Hang on ... Maybe ... From very far away ...

Dom – That sounds like ... bursts, doesn't it?

Max – Bursts? Bursts of laughter, you mean.

Kim returns. Looking haggard and clothes in disarray. He is carrying a 'laughter forbidden' road sign: a laughing emoticon crossed by a red line on a circular piece of paper with a red border.

Max – You look terrible, Boss. What's going on?

Kim – The situation has evolved ...

Max – Not in the right direction, it would seem.

Kim – It depends who you ask.

Max – The epidemic is spreading?

Kim – Unfortunately, it's now a world-wide pandemic. A laughing crisis completely out of control. A case of generalised uncontrollable laughter. They are reporting explosions of laughter all over town.

Max – Is it really that bad?

Kim – There's bursts of laughter on every corner. The police are completely overpowered. Worse. Many policemen have already died of laughter ... they laugh until they can't breathe. They laugh until their sides split! They laugh until they wet themselves! They laugh their heads off! They laugh like hyenas! They're rolling on the floor! They're crying with laughter!

Max – Oh, because you can also cry with laughter?

Kim – Have you heard the expression, the more the merrier?

Max – No.

Kim – Well, let me tell you, there's a lot of them now.

Dom – So the revolution is coming ...

Kim – It's more like the entire establishment is leaving ... The authorities have resigned and the Supreme Guide has left the country.

Max – The Supreme Guide? Where did he go?

Kim – He requested political asylum from the Vatican. No chance of catching anything laughing-related there.

Pat – And what are you going to do with us?

Kim – There's no point in keeping you under quarantine anymore. You're free to go.

Dom – At last ... I can't wait to see all of it. People laughing in the streets, on public transport, and tomorrow, who knows, maybe even in cinemas and theaters.

Kim – I don't find it funny in the slightest.

Pat – Oh, come on! Come and laugh yourself silly with us!

Dom – Stop me if you heard this one before ... A man wanted to stop the whole planet from laughing ...

Max – And in the end, he's the one who chokes with laughter.

They all laugh out loud. Kim starts to laugh nervously too, but it turns into convulsions and she falls to the ground. Pat leans over her.

Pat – She's dead! So you really can die of laughter?

Max – It's something that's been reported recently. Members of the Authority are struck down instantly when they are exposed to thunderous laughter.

Dom – That's why they were so intent on eradicating the epidemic.

Pat (*to Max*) – But you're not dead.

Max – Probably because I stopped believing a while back ...

Dom – In a way you were already vaccinated. Just like us!

Pat – So, we're free now?

Dom – Free to laugh at anything once again!

Pat – Just think, we thought we were here because of the bird flu or the Tsingtao virus.

Max – What are we going to do now?

Dom – We're going to learn to laugh again. To live again.

Pat – I find that a little scary ...

Dom – That's normal. At first, emancipated slaves didn't know what to do with their freedom either.

Max – Maybe I could start drinking again?

Pat – Of course! But you might find you don't need to anymore.

Max – That's wonderful! But it makes me dizzy a little bit.

Dom – Yes ... We are a dead magician's doves.

Max – What does that mean?

Dom – We were born out of a magic trick. But the magician that conjured us from nothing isn't here any longer. We don't understand the trick that brought us here and we can't quite remember how to use our wings ...

Pat – That's beautiful.

Dom – It's poetry.

Pat – Poetry?

Dom – Another thing they had forbidden.

Pat – Are there more of those?

Dom – Many more! Orgasms, for example. You don't know what that is either, do you?

Pat – No, I already told you, I'm married ...

Dom – I'll show you later, in private ... You'll see. The orgasm is to love what laughter is to intelligence, or sneezing to a cold. It doesn't cure anything, but it brings temporary relief.

Kim regains consciousness.

Pat – Oh look, she wasn't completely dead after all.

Max – Maybe she wasn't a true believer either.

Kim – What happened to me?

Pat – You had a fit of laughter. But don't worry, everything's going to be alright now.

Max – What about the public? We forgot about them.

Dom – Now that we can make them laugh without dire consequences ...

Max – We can, boss?

Kim – We're in a theater, after all.

Dom – We're going to have to make up new jokes, aren't we?

Kim – Yes, because I still don't get the one with the men who look at themselves in the mirror ...

Dom – You have to look at it differently, it's symbolic.

Kim – Symbolic? What's that now?

Dom – Humor is like a mirror. Like the mirror that actors hold to the public so they can laugh at themselves.

Pat – And anyone can recognise themselves in that mirror.

Dom – Anyone. Except fools, who prefer to break the mirror so they don't have to look at the gurning face it reflects.

Max – So let's laugh, then!

Dom – This is our freedom, and to quote a comedian from the last century: we only run out of freedom when we don't use it.

Pat – May we always laugh at everything, with everyone ...

Max – Because if we can't laugh about everything today, we won't be able to laugh about anything tomorrow.

Max grabs the 'no laughter' road sign and smashes it over Kim's head. They all burst out laughing, which can be amplified with canned laughter. Black.

End.

About the author

Jean-Pierre Martinez was born in 1955 in Auvers-sur-Oise, France. He first experienced the stage as a drummer in various rock bands, before becoming a semiologist in the field of advertising. He then worked as a television scriptwriter and returned to the stage as a playwright. He has written about a hundred television scenarios and more than ninety comedies for the theater, several of which have achieved cult status (*Friday the 13th*, *Strip Poker*). Today he is one of the most played contemporaries playwrights in France and francophone countries, and several of his plays translated in Spanish and English are regularly produced in North and South America.

Jean-Pierre Martinez is offering free downloads of the texts of all his plays on his website La Comédiathèque (<https://comediatheque.net/>) however, any public production of his plays are subject to authorisation by the SACD. For those who only want to read the play or want work from a traditional book format, printed editions of his plays can be ordered from [Amazon website](#) for a cost similar to that of photocopying this script.

The following plays are available in English:

An innocent little murder

Casket for two

Cheaters

Crisis and Punishment

Critical but Stable

Friday the 13th

Him and Her

Lovestruck at Swindlemore Hall

Running on Empty

Strip Poker

The Worst Village in England

All these translations are available to download for free from the website:

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