ABSTRACT

Sarah has been separated from her husband and daughter during a nationwide quarantine. The quarantine has been designed to divide people by their skill sets, so Sarah finds herself amongst other medical professionals. Sarah is bemused to realise that she is being kept in a state of inertia (along with fellow MDs, Faye and Mike), while a horrific sickness ravages the rest of the global population.

Sarah is confronted with a ridiculous antagonist. Medical doctors are more valuable alive and untouched by the world-ending pandemic in the novus ordo seclorum (new order of the ages); it stands to reason that they would be kept away from the infected denizens during the spread, if at all possible.

This short play focuses on the mathematics of survival. An equation that demonstrates how those most likely to be of help in a state of global contagion are the ones who should be prevented from helping and protected at all costs, once it passes the point-of-no-return. Inspired by an extrapolation of the ethical thought experiment, “the trolley problem”, the play takes a rather cynical view of one possible British response in the midst of a global pandemic.
DRAMATIS PERSONAE

SARAH        Sarah Lima, M.D.
FAYE        Faye Sartre, M.D.
MIKE        Michael Wherry, M.D.
MULCIBER        Field Marshal of Her Majesty’s Armed Forces
GAS-MASKED SOLDIERS        Miscellaneous
SCENE I

GAS-MASKED SOLDIERS greet audience members and guide them to their seats. House lights dimmed. Lighting provided by lamps/torches carried by actors.

SARAH:
(Addressing the audience) Excuse me, has anyone seen my husband? His name is John Lima? We were travelling with our daughter, Laura. She’s seven. They both have light blonde hair… We got separated on the platform at King’s Cross… If anyone does see them, could—could you tell them that I’m— that Sarah— is alright? I don’t want them to worry…

FAYE:
You’re wasting your time. Everyone here has lost someone.

SARAH:
Does anyone know where else they’re sending people?

FAYE:
No one even knows where we are now.

SARAH:
Why are they separating us like this?

FAYE:
What do you do? Sarah, was it?

SARAH:

FAYE:
M.D.?

SARAH:
Yes… I’m – I’m a paediatrician.

FAYE:
I’m internal medicine… Well, I was. I’m retired now. Everyone here has medical training. I expect we’re being put to work.

SARAH:
You really think so?
FAYE:
Standard practice in this kind of situation... At least, I'd imagine it is.

SARAH:
Yes I suppose it is. I mean – most of the hospital doctors would probably have gone down with the initial infection.

FAYE:
I heard that Ground Zero was Central St. Sebastian’s. That was my old hospital.

SARAH:
My god... I'm so sorry.

FAYE:
Don't be. I trained there forty years ago. I don't expect anyone I knew was still there. Besides, that's all academic now anyway. A pandemic goes well beyond nationwide spread. Anyone I know who's not dead already surely will be soon.

SARAH:
That's an awful thing to say!

FAYE:
We're all doctors here Sarah. We all know the probable scenario for a contagion on this scale. Localised containment is a total impossibility. The world should count itself lucky that it broke out on an island like ours. At least there's half a chance for the rest of the world—

SARAH:
We could still get outside help. There's always evacuation?

FAYE:
We just became the largest leper colony in the world. The most we can hope for is an air drop of food, fresh water and meds... but the best we can hope for is a mercy kill.

SARAH:
Well I for one, intend to remain a little more optimistic. I don't understand why no one has told us what's going on. Why aren't they letting us help?

*Another lamp is illuminated to reveal MIKE.*
MIKE:
Stage one of containment – Militia Rule. General populace is placed under house arrest. All civilians already in transit are secured in quarantine camps. Any personnel identified as having medical or scientific expertise are separated from the populace and drafted as ancillary staff for rapid utilisation.

SARAH:
How do you know that?

MIKE:
I had the honour of training in Her Majesty’s Armed Forces. I was recalled to active duty from my home this morning.

SARAH:
Why are you here with us then? Surely you should be on the frontlines, or something?

FAYE:
He probably would be – if he wasn’t blind drunk when they picked him up.

MIKE:
I’ll have you know that my blindness exists independently from my drunkenness!

SARAH:
What happens next? When will they talk to us?

MIKE:
Once the nature of the contagion is confirmed, stage two will be devised subjectively. We’ll probably be informed then.

SARAH:
But we should be helping now!

FAYE:
This is a military operation now. And the forces don’t involve civilians until they ain’t got any other choice.

MIKE:
Way it should be. Civilians make the mess – we clean it up.

FAYE:
You couldn’t clean up your own vomit just now Michael—
MIKE:
—And I already apologised for that, thank you so very much, Faye.

SARAH:
Do you two know each other?

FAYE:
We were in practice together a few years back. The bastard thought it would be funny to give the Military Police my address—

MIKE:
—Wouldn’t be a plague camp, Faye – not without you.

*MULCIBER enters, carrying a lamp and gesturing for the civilian’s attention.*

MULCIBER:
Ladies and gentlemen – I’m sure you’ve all worked out why you’re here. I apologise if you feel left in the dark, but these are dark times and we are working hard to fix the lights. Et lux in tenebris lucet, and all that.

SARAH:
Excuse me, sir? I wonder if you could help me? It’s about my husband—

MULCIBER:
—Rest assured madam, we have some of our top men working hard to fix your husband.

SARAH:
But there was nothing wrong with him! He had no symptoms at all… He couldn’t have been ill—

MULCIBER:
—If your bloke ain’t broke ma’am, then we can’t fix him.

SARAH:
I just want to know where he is?

MULCIBER:
You can remember that he ain’t broke, but you can’t remember where you left him?
SARAH:
    Well no—

MULCIBER:
    —If you didn’t look after your husband ma’am, you’ll forgive me for implying that it’s no wonder he ended up wherever he is.

SARAH:
    Where is that?

MULCIBER:
    Where’s what?

SARAH:
    This is ridiculous.

MIKE:
    Captain Michael Wherry, Doctor, retired sir.

MULCIBER:
    How do you do old boy?

MIKE:
    This lady’s husband was relocated from King’s Cross, she wants to know where to?

MULCIBER:
    Well why the devil didn’t she say so? I’ll need the gent’s name of course—

SARAH:
    —It’s John. John Lima. And our daughter—

MULCIBER:
    —No point in telling me old girl. Brain like a sieve I’m afraid. Write it down though and I’ll make some enquiries.

SARAH:
    Does anyone have a pen? And something to write on?

FAYE:
    Here (produces a pen and paper for SARAH). Any chance of a sit-rep, sir?
MULCIBER:
   Early days yet my dear, early days... But don't worry, we'll let you know just as soon as we let you know. You're all in the hands of Her Majesty now, and the old girl's grip is still quite strong. An aceplay for everyoneway and everyoneway in their aceplay, as they say.

   _MULCIBER strides away for a brisk exit._

SARAH:
   Wait sir – my husband, and my daughter – I've written their names and descriptions!

MIKE:
   Don't worry m'dear... He wouldn't have looked for them anyway.

FAYE:
   What're two lost people in a sea of lost souls?

   _End scene._

**SCENE II**

   _SARAH, MIKE and FAYE sit on boxes. Scene lit with lamps/candles._

SARAH:
   We were going on holiday. That's why we were at King's Cross. Then the soldiers came and took control of the station. They told us the planes had been grounded. They wouldn't let us go home. When they asked to see our tickets I showed them. That's probably why I'm here. Why do I insist on having 'Doctor' written on all of my documents? If I'd just booked my seat under 'Missus' Lima, I'd still be with John and Laura now. But no – I worked hard for my title and I always have to use it!

FAYE:
   Why shouldn't you? We all do. Plus it's sometimes good for a free upgrade or two...

MIKE:
   Never hurts to have a doctor on-board, after all...

SARAH:
   Victims of our own hubris—
MIKE:
— I wouldn’t exactly call us victims Sarah. We have a much higher chance of survival, now we’ve been extracted from the general populace.

SARAH:
Exactly. While everyone I love is condemned to perish in a death camp.

FAYE:
Oh come now – you’re starting to sound like me!

SARAH:
Why shouldn’t I? If they’re being held in camps, my husband and child are already dead! You were right. We all know that infection spreads infinitely quicker when people are kept in large groups! That’s why cities are the first to fall. All it takes is one sick person to slip through the net. It might not even be the pandemic that kills them! They could catch anything, and anything could be fatal… You know it and I know it.

MIKE:
The army will take care of it—

SARAH:
— The army’s answer to everything is to stick people in camps! I’ll never forget Laura’s screams.

FAYE:
Sarah…

SARAH:
The worst of it is – they won’t even let us help. We could have the answer to the problem, and they aren’t even using us!

MIKE:
It’s not that simple—

SARAH:
— Nothing ever is. It’s always shades of grey, and that’s where the army works best – in a fog. A great dense grey one!

FAYE:
I agree, I really do, but there’s no point in getting upset about it.

MIKE:
Nothing like a nice dense fog to hide you from your enemies.
SARAH:
What enemies? This is a virus, not an insurgency!

MIKE:
Still… It helps to have good cover when fighting an unknown force.

Enter MULCIBER.

MULCIBER:
Now ladies and gentlemen, I have news from the frontline. Our boys are tackling the pandemic. We’ve been working out whether the outbreak was accidental or incidental – germ warfare or germ welfare – expectamus, et cetera…

FAYE:
So what news do you have?

MULCIBER:
I just told you.

FAYE:
Your news is that you’ve been “looking into it”?

MULCIBER:
Absolutely! Our top priority is keeping you chaps in the loop.

SARAH:
But we’re not in the loop. We have no idea what you’re actually doing!

MULCIBER:
Of course you don’t – you don’t have clearance. As I said, our top priority is keeping you in the loop, so we’ve been working hard to get you clearance so that we can get you working hard.

FAYE:
You haven’t even told us where we are.

MULCIBER:
That information is on a need to know basis.

FAYE:
Well we need to know.
MULCIBER:
    Whatever for? You can't go anywhere, there's a quarantine on. Anyway; if we told
    you where you were, that would only leave you vulnerable if the worst were to
    happen.

FAYE:
    How so?

MULCIBER:
    Well if it turns out that terrorists are involved, it's best that no one knows where
to find you – including you.

SARAH:
    What a joke.

MULCIBER:
    No. No joke. This is not the time for jokes! I do, however, have some good news
    for the woman who was enquiring about her husband—

SARAH:
    —I'm here!

MULCIBER:
    And he was... Geoff?

SARAH:
    John.

MULCIBER:
    Yes, that's right—

SARAH:
    —And my daughter?

MULCIBER:
    Yes we expect her to pull through any day now.

SARAH:
    She's sick?

MULCIBER:
    Is she?
SARAH:
I was asking you.

MULCIBER:
Well, go ahead then my girl, ask away – I don’t have all day.

SARAH:
No; I was asking you if she’s sick.

MULCIBER:
If who’s sick?

SARAH:
Laura? …Are my husband and child okay?

MULCIBER:
As I said – we found your husband and child. I did not call upon them personally to enquire about their health. They’re in a quarantine camp; I can’t risk going in there – I might catch something!

SARAH:
What?

MULCIBER:
Now, I must be off. We all have work to do!

SARAH:
No – we don’t! We wish we did, but you won’t let us work! All you do is taunt us with nonsensical gibberish and keep us cooped up in this awful camp!

MULCIBER:
Of course we do, my darling – that’s what being under quarantine is all about. And ixnay onway ethay awfulway ampcay – it’s just not cricket!

*MULCIBER exits, SARAH collapses.*

*End scene.*
SCENE III

MIKE and FAYE sit either side of the stage, SARAH paces between them; lit with lamps/torches/candles.

SARAH:
It’s been weeks!

MIKE:
What are you complaining about? They keep us well fed. It’s just like being on a very long on-call shift.

FAYE:
Considering how drunk they’re keeping you, I doubt you’d be able to perform if anyone actually needed you to… Hang on… When you were on-call at the practice, you weren’t drinking all the time were you?

MIKE:
Of course not – not all the time, certainly! …I was a professional then. Now I’m retired, I can do what I like.

FAYE:
You’ve already said yourself that you’re “back on active duty”!

MIKE:
Well – if Her Majesty’s Forces have seen fit to supply me with a brandy ration to stave off the cold and tedium, I will not cause dissention in the ranks by turning it down!

FAYE:
But you’re quite happy to cause dissention by drinking the whole-bloody-lot, all by yourself?

SARAH:
Will you two stop bickering! …You’re making me miss my husband!

FAYE:
That is truly awful Sarah… Do you actually like your husband?

SARAH:
It’s not that! I just… I just miss arguing about the silly, trivial things with him. If I saw John now, I swear I’d never argue with him again. Because, when you think about it, nothing we ever argued about ever actually mattered.
FAYE:
   It must have mattered at the time…

SARAH:
   That’s not the point!

MIKE:
   Just the tip?

SARAH:
   No! None of the things we argued about really mattered. Not really. It’s the arguing itself that I miss… Expressing our perspectives in heated passion—

MIKE:
   —Now you’re talking—

SARAH:
   —Showing each other that we cared enough to disagree. But now I don’t care! Now I just wish John would say something to me that I fervently know is wrong, just so I can embrace his erroneousness with every fibre of my being!

FAYE:
   I hope you see John again soon Sarah – and may you never argue ever again when you do…

   Enter MULCIBER.

MULCIBER:
   I bring very grave tidings indeed – mala ipsa nova – the worst has been discovered.

FAYE:
   Which worst would that be?

MULCIBER:
   We have discovered that this pandemic is the result of a terrorist attack.

MIKE:
   Oh… Jolly bad show!

FAYE:
   How has it taken you so long to discover this ground-breaking revelation?
MULCIBER:
Well, it didn’t take us that long really… You’ve only just been granted clearance, you see. But the truth is – we were fighting an uphill battle from the very start.

SARAH:
In what way?

MULCIBER:
Well most of our germ-warfare lads were wiped out in the opening salvo.

MIKE:
That’s terrible!

FAYE:
How could that happen?

MULCIBER:
Well – the attack was launched at our germ-warfare laboratories, in Central St. Sebastian’s hospital.

MIKE:
How tragic!

FAYE:
How could any terrorists have got the intelligence for that? I worked at St. Seb’s for years, and I had no idea there was a germ, a germ-what-have-you-lab, there!

MULCIBER:
Well… Obviously… We don’t advertise the place to the public, do we? But whichever terrorist organisation was responsible clearly had an intricate intelligence network that burrowed deep into the heart of our country. At this stage we have no evidence to support this theory, but we have people working hard to make it seem like we do.

FAYE:
Isn’t it far more likely that any outbreak was a result of an accident on the part of your germ-what-warfare technicians?

MULCIBER:
That kind of question is counter-productive… And, now I think about it, it’s exactly what a terrorist might say! When exactly did you work at Central St. Sebastian’s?

GAS-MASKED SOLDIERS enter.
FAYE:
    What? … You can’t seriously be suggesting that—

MULCIBER:
    Arrest that woman!

    GAS-MASKED SOLDIERS grab FAYE.

FAYE:
    Mike, for god’s sake! You’ve known me for twenty years… Say something!

MIKE:
    Faye, you are quite right! Field Marshal Mulciber? I’d like to distance myself from the accused. I’d also like my service to this country, and these armed forces, to be considered.

FAYE:
    You treacherous git!

MULCIBER:
    The prisoner will remain silent until I arrange for them to be taken to the brig!

FAYE:
    What bloody difference will that make? I’m already a damn prisoner!

    FAYE is escorted offstage by GAS-MASKED SOLDIERS.

MULCIBER:
    Believe me, madam, when I tell you that it can always get worse! Now… Where is the young lady who lost her husband and child?

SARAH:
    That… That’s me, sir.

MULCIBER:
    Good. We believe that we have located them. They’re in the next room.

SARAH:
    That… That’s fantastic news!

MULCIBER:
    Well that’s hardly the reaction I’d expected from a woman who’s just lost her spouse and offspring!
SARAH:
I… I’m afraid I don’t follow you, sir… You said you’d just found John and Laura?

MULCIBER:
Yes, and you need to identify them for our records.

SARAH:
Can’t they identify themselves?

MULCIBER:
I’m not in the habit of questioning corpses my dear – as you’ll discover if you continue to show such insolence! This is no way for a bereaved wife and mother to behave!

SARAH:
You mean—

GAS-MASKED SOLDIERS enter.

MULCIBER:
—Follow me and find out for yourself, since you appear completely incapable of holding a cogent conversation!

House lights up.

MULCIBER:
Ah, the lights are fixed. I told you we wouldn’t keep you in the dark forever! Now – don’t shilly-shally standing about asking pointless questions about your friends and loved ones – if they aren’t standing next to you right now, then they aren’t part of the solution.

SARAH:
Nobody’s standing next to me now—

MULCIBER:
—My own wife and son didn’t make the cut either, and you don’t see me lolly-gagging when I’m supposed to be somewhere else, do you? There’s much hard work yet to be done, and we’re the only buggers left who can do it. And if any of you don’t think it’s worth your time to play an active role in our novus ordo seclorum, then you’ll find yourselves as eadday as this woman’s amilyfay is now—

SARAH:
Why the hell do you keep talking in bloody Pig Latin? Wait – Eadday? You mean John and Laura are – you mean they’re dead? And…
MULCIBER:
Because you never know who’s listening, of course! Well, come quickly then sweetheart – those odiesbay won’t stay eshfray forever!

*GAS-MASKED SOLDIERS* grab *SARAH* and exit with her.

Now, as for the rest of you – you’re all cleared for active duty on project ‘Pandemonium’. Please proceed to debriefing, and remember: avesay ourselvesyay irstfay, and othersway onlyway if you ancay.

*Exeunt. End.*