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The Rope



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The Rope

Jean-Pierre Martinez
Translation by the author

In a country ruled by a tyrant, as dissent grows and repression intensifies, a doctor and a priest clash over whether the sacred duties of their professions take precedence over their responsibilities as citizens. At stake is the dictator's life — and with it, the survival of the regime or the hastening of its downfall.

Characters

The Doctor

The Priest

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A military doctor's consulting room inside the Presidential Palace. Nothing identifies the country or the period, but above the desk hangs a grand portrait of a general in uniform, covered in medals, making it clear that the country is ruled by a military tyrant. The doctor, wearing a white coat, is seated behind his desk. He may be of any age, though his age will naturally shape the character. He takes a medical scan from a file, rises and holds it up to the light from an imaginary window facing the audience. The telephone rings. He returns to his desk, puts the scan back in the file and picks up the receiver.

Doctor – Yes, Sergeant...? Yes... Very well, let him in...

A priest in a black cassock enters. He may be young or old; his age, and the difference in age between him and the doctor, will affect their characters and their relationship.

Priest – Captain...

The doctor stands up to greet him.

Doctor – Good morning, Father... Or should I say Lieutenant? You're in the military too, after all.

Priest – The days of warrior monks are long gone. I'm the Palace chaplain first and foremost. Just as you're a doctor first, I imagine. Neither of us is meant to serve in a combat unit, are we? Our duty is to support those who serve alongside us and help them when needed.

Doctor – We would both make poor fighters, I'm afraid.

Priest – I can call you Doctor if you prefer.

Doctor – Call me whatever you like, Father... As long as you don't call me 'my son'...

Priest – I'll try to remember that.

Doctor – Thank you for coming so quickly. In fact, you're the first. Please, sit down... Can I offer you a coffee? A pastry...?

Priest – No, thank you. *(He sits.)* So... I'm here for a vaccination, I believe.

Doctor – You're not afraid of needles, I hope...

Priest – No... Though I must confess I've mislaid my vaccination record.

Doctor – Don't worry. Not one of my patients has ever been able to produce a vaccination record. I'm not even sure where my own is...

Priest – In that case, I'm at your disposal, Doctor.

Doctor – Everyone at the Palace will be vaccinated, you know... With all these viruses going around... The General is in excellent health, but he's not getting any younger. Even though he rarely leaves the Palace, we must protect him as far as possible from infections brought in from outside. That means vaccinating everyone close to him. And anyone who might come into contact with him.

Priest – Of course. They used to call that a cordon sanitaire, didn't they...?

Doctor – Let's hope it works better in medicine than in politics...

Priest – I pray for the General every day, but I know that science has its part to play.

Doctor – Yes... We divide the work between us, in a way. As the General's personal physician, I look after the health of his body. As his confessor, you look after the salvation of his soul.

Priest – And I'm not sure which of us has the harder task...

The doctor is surprised by this quietly subversive remark, which encourages him to speak more freely.

Doctor – These are difficult times indeed. As the Palace doctor, I'm not directly exposed to the problems my colleagues face, but I know the hospital has been receiving a constant stream of wounded patients these past few days.

Priest – The recent unrest has claimed many victims. When medicine can do no more for them, I sometimes go and offer them comfort before they give up their souls to God.

Doctor – The unrest... Or rather, the ruthless repression of it.

Priest – We can't simply allow disorder to spread, can we...? Let's hope a peaceful solution is found soon.

Doctor – Hope... That's the Church's business... People in the streets are more inclined to make demands.

Priest – Perhaps there's room for negotiation somewhere between hope and demands. Don't you believe a transition to democracy is possible?

Doctor – A transition to democracy...? When the opposition leader has just been arrested and thrown into prison without even the pretence of a trial?

Priest – I didn't say that I endorsed such methods...

Doctor – The repression grows harsher every day... What I fear most is civil war. Once a war begins, there's no longer any room for compromise. Peace can only be made between a loser forced to surrender and a winner who dictates the terms.

Priest – If war breaks out, everyone will lose... Are you a believer, Doctor?

Doctor – I go to Mass with my family on Sundays... Mostly for the atmosphere... I believe in certain things... Certain values...

Priest – It's a start...

Doctor – I'd like to have more faith in your God, Father. But these days there are plenty of reasons to doubt...

Priest – They say practice makes perfect. And sometimes prayer helps us rediscover our faith... That's why rituals matter in every religion.

Doctor – Until now, I went to church mainly to feel part of a community. But in this country, people who attend Mass have become a faction I'm no longer sure I want to belong to.

Priest – Sadly, those in power have always found ways to use the Church for their own ends.

Doctor – Some would say it's merely an instrument of power.

Priest – Which is why we must believe in God above all, even when we distrust the Church.

Doctor – Before believing in God, surely we have to believe in humanity. Do you believe in humanity, Father?

Priest – I believe that human beings can find redemption before Our Lord. As for the rest, I leave it to human law.

Doctor – I see... Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's... and wash your hands of it. Even when Caesar has become a tyrant?

The priest seems uncomfortable.

Priest – My calling is to listen, Captain. And I'm not one to inform on people. Nevertheless, I advise you to be careful. We're in the Palace, not a confessional, and the walls here sometimes have ears...

Doctor – Come now, Father... You're not a monk living in a monastery, cut off from the world. By doing nothing, we give our tacit approval. You know that... You have responsibilities too...

Priest – Of course... Neither of us can escape our responsibilities. I'm only human, just like you. Priests have sins to confess as well, you know...

Doctor – Hearing a priest's confession can't be too dreadful... Vanity... Gluttony... Temptation... But hearing a bloodthirsty dictator confess every Sunday before Mass... Having to absolve him of his crimes... That can't be easy...

Priest – You'll understand that my duties prevent me from discussing such matters... But I have a feeling there's something more specific troubling you...

Doctor – You're right. I didn't ask you here just for a vaccination.

Priest – I'm listening...

The doctor seems hesitant.

Doctor – I don't know whether you've heard this story. When Hitler was a child, he fell into a river in the middle of winter. Another boy risked his life by jumping in to save him. That heroic boy later became a priest...

Priest – I hadn't heard that story... And what lesson do you draw from it?

Doctor – If that kind-hearted boy had let young Adolf drown, history would have taken a different course, wouldn't it?

Priest – Probably...

Doctor – They say good can sometimes come from evil. So a good deed can also lead to catastrophe.

Priest – Sometimes, no doubt.

Doctor – Which brings me to a philosophical question, almost an examination question: is saving a drowning tyrant's life really a good deed?

Priest – But he was only a child in that story...

Doctor – Yes...

Priest – A child whose fate wasn't necessarily decided.

Doctor – Exactly...

Priest – His life might have turned out very differently. If, for example, he hadn't failed the entrance examination to the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna twice, he might have become a painter...

Doctor – That's a possibility.

Priest – Are you going to hold the examiners responsible for the Holocaust as well?

Doctor – I'm not sure...

Priest – In the end, a person's destiny is the result of countless coincidences.

Doctor – But what if none of them were truly coincidental? What if we were nothing more than the effects of all the causes that shape us? What if everything were already written?

Priest – In that case, it was already written that Hitler would escape drowning. And that he would fail the entrance exam at the art academy. And no one would be responsible for what Hitler did afterwards. Except Hitler himself, of course.

Doctor – So even for you, determinism must leave room for free will?

Priest – What is certain is that no one can predict the future. As a doctor, you save lives. Children's lives too. Without knowing what those children will become...

Doctor – Yes, but what if I did know...? Purely hypothetically. Suppose I'd seen young Adolf drowning and knew what he would become. A monster...

Priest – As I've said, it's an absurd hypothesis... So what? Would you have let that child drown...?

Doctor – That's what I'm asking myself... *(The doctor turns to the audience.)* What I'm asking you...

The priest freezes, as though time has stopped. The lighting changes to mark a direct address to the audience, a break in the fourth wall that temporarily suspends the action.

Doctor – Imagine... You're walking beside a river and you see a child drowning. You know that child is Adolf Hitler. Do you throw him a rope to pull him out, or not? You don't even have to risk your life by jumping in. You could simply pretend you hadn't seen him. It's not a question of choosing between heroism and failing to help someone in danger. You just have to make a decision. He's calling for help. What do you do? Throw him a rope and save him, or let him die? Not an easy question, is it?

A pause.

Doctor – Who would throw him a rope? Raise your hand... *(Allow the audience time to respond.)* Who would look the other way and walk on? Raise your hand... *(Allow the audience time to respond.)* Right... And now... What if it weren't young Hitler, but a politician who might become a tyrant if elected? I don't know... Someone you might have in mind... Would you reach out to save that person? Not easy, is it? Is there a single moral principle that answers this question, or must we judge each case separately? And where do we draw the line? By what criteria do we decide whom to save and whom to let die?

The lighting and the action return to normal, as though the aside had never happened. The scene resumes where it left off.

Priest – I suspect these questions aren't merely theoretical.

Doctor – I do need some advice. But as you said, this isn't a confessional...

Priest – If you wish, I can hear your confession.

Doctor – And you couldn't tell anyone what I'd said to you?

Priest – That's what the seal of confession means. Just as you have medical confidentiality.

Doctor – Forgive me, but... in the present climate, I don't fancy waiting in line to go to confession.

Priest – A priest can hear a confession anywhere.

Doctor – Here? Now?

Priest – As the Palace chaplain, I'm here for you.

Doctor – Very well, Father. I'd like to make my confession...

The priest adopts the posture of a confessor, making the sign of the cross.

Priest – Let us pray together that God will grant us the grace to recognise our sins.

Doctor – Amen...

Priest – I'm listening, my son.

Doctor – I have a matter of conscience to put before you, Father.

Priest – I'll do my best to guide you, according to the teachings of Our Lord.

Doctor – I examined the General a few weeks ago. A routine check-up. I found an abnormality in his heart... It was confirmed by further tests.

Priest – An anomaly...?

Doctor – An abdominal aortic aneurysm, to be precise... Yes, even dictators have a heart, you know...

Priest – That's unfortunate... And serious, I imagine...

Doctor – Yes.

Priest – But can it be treated?

Doctor – With surgery and appropriate treatment, yes. If it's caught in time.

Priest – Then why is it a dilemma for you?

Doctor – If I tell another doctor about this condition, the General will receive treatment and live for years to come...

Priest – And...?

Doctor – If I say nothing, he'll die within weeks. Perhaps tomorrow. And the dictatorship probably won't survive him...

The priest remains momentarily speechless.

Priest – You're not seriously thinking of doing that...?

Doctor – It's a unique chance to change the course of history, isn't it? To bring down this regime and save the lives of opponents who are executed every day in prison courtyards. Or shot by the police while demonstrating in the streets. You mentioned the possibility of a democratic transition earlier...

Priest – By condemning a patient to death when he's placed his life in your hands?

Doctor – To save many other lives, yes. Why couldn't that be an act of resistance?

Priest – Because before you're a politically engaged citizen, you're a doctor! You're bound by the Hippocratic Oath!

Doctor *(quoting the Hippocratic Oath)* – I will never deliberately cause death. Primum non nocere...

Priest – First, do no harm...

Doctor – That's exactly why I called it a matter of conscience... I have to choose between two conflicting duties. The doctor in me says I must see only the patient and treat him. The citizen in me says I must consider this man's crimes and let him die to prevent him committing any more.

Priest – You're forgetting the soldier, who has a duty to obey orders.

Doctor – Obey orders... By that reasoning, everyone at the Nuremberg trials would have been acquitted. They all claimed they had merely followed their leader's orders...

Priest – You asked for my advice, didn't you?

Doctor – I never promised to follow it... But I'm listening...

Priest – Then let the doctor do his duty and honour his oath. The officer can still refuse orders he considers dishonourable. And the citizen is free to rebel and, if necessary, engage in acts of resistance.

Doctor – But right now, the officer and the citizen are powerless against a ruthlessly efficient machinery of repression. Only the doctor can end the dictatorship by bringing about the dictator's death.

Priest – So you claim the power of life and death over your patients? Do you think you're God?

Doctor – Since your God allows a tyrant to remain in power, human beings must take matters into their own hands and bring him down.

Priest – But as a doctor, you have a sacred duty, just as I do. Everyone has the right to medical care, whatever they've done. Just as even someone guilty of a crime is entitled to a defence, however serious that crime may be.

Doctor *(ironically)* – And every sinner has the right to forgiveness, however grave their sins, isn't that so?

Priest – If they truly repent, then yes.

Doctor – Has the General confessed to you that he repents of his crimes?

Priest – That too is covered by the seal of confession.

Doctor – If he repents, it certainly doesn't stop him from having his opponents murdered with impunity. If you'll permit me to say so, you don't seem to have much influence over him as his spiritual adviser.

Priest – Like you, tyrants are convinced they're acting for the good of their people. They claim to act in accordance with their faith, and often present themselves as defenders of religion...

Doctor – You don't seem convinced.

Priest – It's not for me to judge... I believe in repentance and forgiveness. And I chose to serve God.

Doctor – And I chose to serve people.

Priest – Yes. All people. Without exception. Doctors, priests, lawyers... We're the only people whom even the worst human being can trust completely. That's our commitment. It's a difficult and thankless calling, but an essential one. We are the last defence against barbarism. The last refuge of those whom everyone else has condemned, but who still retain a spark of humanity.

Doctor – And yet, while we're talking, people are dying from bullets and torture.

Priest – And you propose to save humanity through a broken oath and a murder? To end tyranny by adopting the tyrant's methods? By betraying the oath you solemnly swore before your colleagues?

Doctor – I told you. It's not an easy decision...

The priest freezes and the lighting changes for another aside to the audience.

Doctor *(to the audience)* – If you were a doctor, what would you do in my place? *(He picks up the medical file and shows it to the audience.)* Who would pass this file to a colleague and save the General's life? Raise your hand! *(Allow time for some of the audience to raise their hands.)* Who would put the file in a drawer and let the tyrant die? Raise your hand! *(Allow time for the audience to respond.)* But you're not doctors, are you...?

The lighting returns to normal and the action resumes.

Priest – Do you support the death penalty, Doctor?

Doctor – No... Not under normal circumstances, no.

Priest – You're either for the death penalty or against it. There can be no exceptions, or soon there will be nothing but exceptions. Life is sacred. Even in secular countries, that's the principle on which capital punishment has been abolished... So that even the worst criminal isn't stripped of every last trace of humanity... And to preserve the possibility of redemption, however remote.

Doctor – I support the right to abortion. And, in certain cases, euthanasia. As a doctor, I may sometimes have to end a life, in apparent conflict with the Hippocratic Oath. But let me put the question to you. Do you believe life must be preserved in every circumstance?

Priest – As a priest, yes.

Doctor – So you oppose abortion even in cases of rape, or when a pregnancy threatens the mother's life? And you oppose bringing an end to the unbearable suffering of someone medicine can no longer help?

Priest – As a human being, I'm not indifferent to suffering...

Doctor – So there are times when you put the human being before the priest, to face the difficult questions life presents. Instead of hiding behind lofty moral principles that can sometimes lead to inhuman decisions.

Priest – As a priest, I cannot take anyone's life... But if a doctor confessed to having done so in exceptional circumstances, and genuinely repented, I would grant absolution.

Doctor – In that case, I need only confess to you after the General has died. It would ease both our consciences.

Priest – So, your mind is made up...

Doctor – Especially as you've promised to absolve me.

Priest – You're considering deliberately letting a man die. I cannot absolve you in advance.

Doctor – After all, the General is old... I'd only bring his death forward by a few months. Perhaps a few days... You can hardly call that murder... Let's say I'd simply be avoiding futile medical intervention.

Priest – You're playing with words. I cannot let you commit such an abomination.

Doctor – Would you really report me?

Priest – It's my duty.

Doctor – May I remind you that you're bound by the seal of confession!

Priest – Yes, but there are exceptions to the obligation of secrecy... Especially when someone's life is at stake.

Doctor – I confided in you... And now you're telling me the seal of confession isn't absolute... Yet in the past the Church has kept silent about far more appalling crimes...

Priest – If someone tells me they intend to kill another person or carry out an attack, it's my duty to inform the authorities. Even under human law, I have an absolute duty. Otherwise I'd be failing to assist someone in danger... A lawyer who learns that a client is planning a murder is required to warn the police. So is a doctor, as you know very well.

Doctor – But I'm not going to kill anyone. I'm simply going to let nature take its course... Let God do his work, in a manner of speaking.

Priest – You invoke God when it suits you. Even though you don't believe in him.

Doctor – So you're prepared to break your oath too?

Priest – As I said, this is about saving a life. No oath obliges me to remain silent in such a case.

Doctor – Even though reporting me to this regime's police would mean sentencing me to certain death?

Priest – All you have to do is fulfil your duty as a doctor, and that won't happen...

Doctor – I'll fulfil my duty as a citizen.

Priest – Then you're leaving me no choice...

Doctor – Are you sure it would be the priest reporting me, and not the military officer?

Priest – I am a priest before I'm an officer. But I'm a human being before I'm a priest. And as a human being, I cannot stand by while you take another person's life.

The telephone rings. The doctor answers.

Doctor – Yes, Sergeant? Go on... I see... Very well... I'll come as soon as I can... *(He hangs up.)* The opposition leader has just been found hanged in his cell...

The priest is shaken by the news.

Priest – How dreadful...

Doctor – I've been asked to confirm the death and officially certify it as a suicide. You see, Father, the General makes no attempt to conceal his murders of political opponents. He kills them openly. And it falls to me, as the doctor certifying the cause of death, to pass off those murders as suicides.

Priest – That's monstrous... Will you take part in this charade?

Doctor – A moment ago you were telling me to obey orders!

Priest – On that point, I agree with you. When orders are illegitimate, disobedience becomes a duty.

Doctor – I've already told you how I could put an end to this escalation of violence without bloodshed...

The action freezes and the lighting changes for another aside.

Priest *(to the audience)* – Since I can't turn to God for an answer, I need your help... Imagine you're a priest. What would you do in my place? Who would report this doctor, after hearing his confession, to save the life of a man who also happens to be a merciless tyrant? Raise your hand. *(Allow time for some spectators to respond.)* Who would say nothing, and let this doctor commit murder by failing to treat his patient? Raise your hand. *(Allow time for some spectators to respond.)* But you're not priests, are you?

The lighting returns to normal and the action resumes.

Priest – I confess I feel helpless in the face of so much violence...

Doctor – If you speak, my death will be on your conscience... You've seen how the General treats his opponents. They'll find me hanging in my cell too... Are you really going to report me?

Priest – Not if you stop me...

Doctor – Stop you? How?

Priest – By killing me as well...

Doctor – Is that what you want?

Priest – The choice is yours.

Doctor – So you won't have to make the choice yourself... Who do you think you are, Father, offering yourself as a sacrifice? Jesus Christ? But your sacrifice would make no sense... and serve no one!

Priest – Jesus sacrificed himself to give humanity the chance of reconciliation. That is the very meaning of the word religion: to bind believers together. And that is also the meaning of the Eucharist. Communion among all people...

An uneasy pause. The doctor seems to have run out of arguments.

Doctor – Well... I suppose the sermon is over, Father... And it's time for your injection...

Priest – I'm ready.

The doctor prepares the injection as the priest watches.

Doctor – Don't worry. It won't hurt. You'll hardly feel a thing...

Priest – I place myself entirely in your hands... Like all your other patients.

The doctor gives him the injection.

Doctor – Still don't want anything to drink?

Priest – A glass of water would be nice.

Doctor – I'll fetch you one...

The doctor leaves. The priest notices the medical file on the desk. He picks it up but does not open it. The doctor returns with a glass of water, and the priest puts the file back on the desk.

Doctor – Ah... Careful, Father. Medical confidentiality...

Priest – I wouldn't be able to interpret those images anyway...

The doctor hands him the glass of water, which the priest takes.

Doctor – Here's your water.

Priest – The condemned man's last drink...?

Doctor – Would you really sacrifice yourself to escape your responsibilities?

Priest – Not to escape my responsibilities. Perhaps to avoid betraying my convictions.

Doctor – Isn't that another way of fleeing reality rather than facing it? Perhaps you'd have been better off as a monk after all.

Priest – It would certainly have been easier.

Doctor – And all this to save a man guilty of crimes against humanity.

Priest – God will judge him. Or the courts will.

Doctor – For now, the General is the law... And he claims to enforce it in God's name.

Priest – Believe me, I don't support this new Inquisition.

Doctor – Yet you've done nothing to oppose it... After the regime falls, you might be called to testify, you know. Despite the seal of confession... They could accuse you of collaboration.

Priest – Yes... And the same goes for you... You're the General's personal physician. So far, you haven't exactly been known as a fierce opponent of the regime... Could it be that you want to secure yourself a peaceful future by abandoning ship just before it sinks... after letting the captain drown?

Doctor – I couldn't even pass myself off as a last-minute resistance fighter, I'm afraid. I'd have hastened the tyrant's end, but since I'd also have broken my oath as a doctor, I could never boast about it.

Priest – You could kill him openly. With a pistol. You're an officer, so you have a weapon. And you see the General regularly for medical examinations.

Doctor – I'm afraid I'll never be a hero. I'll never be Brutus stabbing Caesar before the assembled Senate. I don't have that kind of courage. Unlike you, I have no taste for sacrifice. I'm nothing but a coward, it's true.

Priest – Which is why a secret murder suits you so well, isn't it...?

Doctor – The crime without the punishment... But without any posthumous glory either.

Priest – Whether you escape punishment remains to be seen. The dictatorship won't execute you for killing the General, but the people who liberate the country may condemn you for collaborating with him. Just as they may condemn me...

Doctor – So you see, there's no good solution for me either. And you're right. Deep down, I'll have deserved it. At first I supported the coup. I wanted an end to chaos. I believed that restoring order would be a good thing. But when the powerful impose their order on the weak, order soon becomes another form of disorder.

Priest – Sadly, both order and disorder are governed by the law of the strongest.

Doctor – So what are we to do?

Priest – Humanity's destiny is to walk without a map through a trackless desert, searching for an oasis that doesn't exist. All the more reason to take faith along as a travelling companion...

The doctor takes the medical image out of the file.

Doctor – Or let science light the way... Do you know what semiology is, Father?

Priest – The study of signs. Believing in God doesn't mean we can't be interested in science, Doctor. And some of the greatest scientists have been believers.

Doctor – In medicine, semiology is the study of symptoms that allow us to make a diagnosis and prescribe treatment. In a way, doctors are the heirs of the ancient augurs, who claimed they could read the future in the entrails of animals.

Priest – In ancient Rome, it was the haruspices who read the entrails of sacrificed animals. The augurs interpreted the flight of birds...

Doctor – In any case, those diviners were also your predecessors, weren't they?

Priest – Yes. You and I once did the same job. It's only relatively recently that science and religion have gone their separate ways. For better, and sometimes for worse...

The doctor examines the medical image again.

Doctor – Reading the signs... After all, medicine still isn't an exact science... I might simply have made a mistake... In everyone's eyes, it would be nothing more than a medical error...

Priest – But you would know you'd deliberately let one of your patients die.

Doctor – I'd think of all the others I'd saved.

Priest – Like the augurs you mentioned, you think you can foresee the future and single-handedly change the course of history?

Doctor – I can always try...

Priest – How can you be sure that bringing down the dictator won't lead to a bloodbath? A civil war? Mass purges? This dictatorship may give rise to another, even bloodier one. History has shown us that the Terror can follow a revolution.

Doctor – So what then? Do nothing? Offer no resistance? Even when you're a coward and can act without putting yourself at risk?

Priest – I don't know...

Doctor – Don't you ever feel guilty yourself?

Priest – I do... But I believe in keeping one's word. In the oath we both took. In our different ways, we both made vows. We must keep them, whatever happens. Otherwise, nothing will hold together. Even the law can be unjust in the way it's applied. But without law, there's no civilisation. And without faith in a promise freely given, there's no humanity...

Doctor – Words can be weapons too. A dictator is someone who dictates. Who dictates his own law. The law of the strongest.

Priest – And someone who passes a death sentence on his own authority, in defiance of the law? Doesn't he become a potential dictator himself?

Doctor – Laws are open to interpretation. There are moments in life when one person's death may be the least bad solution.

Priest – Perhaps today. But once you're caught up in that machinery, can you be sure it won't end up crushing you? At some point, shouldn't each of us decide to break the cycle of violence?

Doctor – So you, like that future priest, would have saved Hitler from drowning.

Priest – I would have saved a child. I wouldn't have condemned him in advance. Otherwise we'd have to lock up every extremist in case they became a terrorist. And lock up every believer in case they became an extremist. By that logic, those who govern us would soon imprison anyone who didn't think exactly as they did...

Doctor – But that's already the case under this dictatorship, which is virtually a theocracy!

Priest – Indeed. Which is why anyone who overthrows it must avoid repeating that deadly pattern at all costs.

Doctor – You said it yourself earlier. If we know someone is going to carry out an attack, shouldn't we stop them?

Priest – But we can never know for certain...

Doctor – Never with absolute certainty, I agree... But sometimes you have to defend yourself before you're attacked. You can't be sure you'll ever catch a virus, yet you agree to be vaccinated.

Priest – You can't compare even the worst of us to dangerous viruses that must be eliminated in advance. That would deny them their humanity. Evil exists within all of us. We must struggle against it in ourselves before we fight it in others.

Doctor – I'll deal with my own dark side. But it won't stop a murderer who's about to strike.

Priest – These days there are models designed to predict who will become a criminal. Models we're told are almost one hundred per cent reliable. Should we lock up the people they identify before they've committed a crime?

Doctor – We do lock up people deemed dangerously insane.

Priest – Because they've lost their free will...

Doctor – And a pregnancy can be terminated because a test indicates that the child will have Down syndrome.

Priest – Which raises the whole question of eugenics... Should we eliminate at birth everyone who carries a gene for a disease? So they won't be a burden to themselves or society...?

Doctor – But eugenics isn't about criminals.

Priest – Some have claimed to identify a 'crime chromosome'... Modern science seems strangely close to nineteenth-century phrenology, which claimed to detect congenital defects from the shape of a person's skull... Not far from the pseudoscientific fantasies of Nazi scientists that led to mass extermination in the disastrous pursuit of a so-called superior race. Isn't the true measure of a civilisation how it treats its most vulnerable?

Doctor – At present, we're more concerned with what should happen to the strongman of this regime. Do you really think the General can still change? And how sincere would any repentance be, with crowds already protesting at the gates of the Presidential Palace...?

Priest – That's for human courts to decide, when they consider his responsibility. How free are we in the face of determinism? That's the question... If our destiny is sealed from birth, we're no longer human beings but machines programmed in advance. I can't accept living in such a world... If you believe some are programmed to do evil and others to do good, there's no freedom, no responsibility and no possibility of redemption. All we'd have to do is sort the wheat from the chaff, scientifically, until every last weed had been eradicated. Wouldn't that be a totalitarian society?

Doctor – I believe in freedom. But it isn't absolute... We have some freedom in how we answer a question, but we don't choose the question we're asked. Take a large family. Every child grows up in the same circumstances, yet each responds differently, according to who they are and the choices they make.

Priest – Yes... Someone who has suffered violence may become violent in turn, or may not. We can respond in different ways, that's true. And I choose to believe in what we now call resilience.

Doctor – Exactly. We respond both to the circumstances imposed on us and to who we are. But do we really have any choice about who we are?

Priest – You think the General was destined to become a dictator? That he had no choice? And so you conclude he should have been eliminated at birth? Drowned like young Hitler?

Doctor – I don't know... Above all, I think this philosophical debate is rather futile... While outside our windows people are fighting to change the course of history.

A pause. From the street come the sounds of unrest and bursts of automatic gunfire.

Priest – For now, I'm afraid, as a doctor and a priest, all we can do is wait helplessly to see what comes of this confrontation. By the way... What made you want to become a doctor?

Doctor – My father was a surgeon. One of my brothers is a radiologist, the other a dentist. I have quite a medical pedigree. What about you? I imagine your father wasn't a monk.

Priest – My father was a butcher... He wasn't a believer, and he didn't approve when I decided to become a priest.

Doctor – He must have been disappointed that no one would take over the family butcher's shop...

Priest – A son who becomes a priest... I think he'd rather I'd told him I was gay...

Doctor – Are you an only child?

Priest – I've got four sisters. And I assure you none of them became nuns...

Doctor – Four sisters... and you're the one who chose to wear a dress.

Priest – Do you have children, Captain?

Doctor – I have a son.

Priest – If your son were a criminal and came to you wounded, asking for treatment, would you let him die?

Doctor – Probably not.

Priest – When I became a priest, I decided, like Our Lord, to regard all human beings as my own children. So you'll understand why I can't agree to let even one of them die. Not even the worst.

Doctor – My son is braver than I am. He's out on the barricades right now. He could be killed at any moment. It's partly to save him that I want this regime, and this tyrant, brought down as quickly as possible.

Priest – But nothing is written yet. The worst is never certain.

Doctor – I'm afraid it's more than likely...

A pause. More turmoil outside.

Priest – In a way, I pity you... It must be sad to live in a world where everyone's life has been determined in advance.

Doctor – Though determinism also gives criminals an excellent excuse to escape responsibility. Do you know another story? A man sees a snake trapped under a stone. The snake begs him to set it free, promising not to bite. The man lifts the stone, and the snake bites him. As the man lies dying, the snake apologises, explaining that it's simply in its nature to kill.

Priest – Then it's in my nature not to let you commit this crime.

Doctor – Even if it means reporting me and condemning me to certain death?

Priest – If you leave me no choice.

Doctor – You won't do it.

Priest – Because instead of a vaccine, you've injected me with poison? Like the snake in your story?

Doctor – Is that what you think I've done?

Priest – You could have let the General die without telling me in confession... You'd already made your decision, hadn't you? Why confess a crime you hadn't yet committed?

Doctor – Perhaps I needed encouragement... I'm a coward, as I've told you. I needed your blessing...

Priest – If you really have poisoned me, I want you to know that I forgive you... And you'll have spared me a moral dilemma of my own...

Doctor – That's what you wanted, wasn't it?

Priest – I'll pray for you for as long as I have left...

Doctor – It must be the first time in history a priest has been murdered in the middle of a confession and then absolved his murderer on the spot.

Priest – I still regret that I couldn't persuade you...

A pause.

Doctor – To throw a rope to a drowning tyrant, or not...? Perhaps to hang him with it...

The telephone rings. The doctor answers.

Doctor – Yes, Sergeant... Yes... When? How dreadful... I understand... Very well... *(He hangs up.)* The General has just died of a heart attack...

Priest – Good heavens...

Doctor – God has very little to do with it, as you know...

Priest – But now that your offence has been committed, I can absolve you...

Doctor – Really?

Priest – If you sincerely repent.

Doctor – I certainly take no pride in it.

Priest – I'll have to settle for that... May God, the Father of mercy, who reconciled the world to himself through the death and resurrection of his Son, grant you pardon and peace. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, I absolve you of the sins you have confessed and restore you to communion with the Church. May the Lord be with you.

Doctor – Will you absolve me of murdering you as well?

Priest – I've already forgiven you. But to absolve you, the crime would have to have been committed, and I'd have to be dead. That could prove difficult... You'll have to find another confessor.

Doctor – I see...

Priest – But you haven't actually poisoned me, have you?

Doctor – And you? Would you really have reported me?

Priest – Who knows...?

Doctor – At least you won't die of an infectious disease... You're vaccinated for the next few years...

The priest rises to leave. The telephone rings. The doctor answers.

Doctor – Yes, Sergeant... Thank you for telling me... *(He hangs up.)* The demonstrators are storming the Palace. We'll soon have to answer for what we've done...

Priest – God help us...

The doctor takes a pistol from a drawer and places it on his desk.

Doctor – God helps those who help themselves...

Priest – Who do you intend to use that weapon against, Captain? Your former comrades, or your new friends, who probably don't see you as one of them?

Doctor – We'll find out, Father. For now, we have to save our own skins. Let's not stay here...

The doctor stands. They both make for the exit.

Blackout.

End.

About the author

Born in 1955 in Auvers-sur-Oise (France), Jean-Pierre Martinez first took to the stage as a drummer in several rock bands before becoming a semiologist in advertising. He then worked as a television screenwriter before returning to the stage as a playwright. He has written around a hundred scripts for television and 123 plays, some of which have become classics (*Friday the 13th, Strip Poker*). His plays have been performed in more than 100 countries and translated into around 50 languages.

Amateur and professional theatre groups looking for plays to perform can download Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays for free from his websites :

https://jeanpierremartinez.net/

https://comediatheque.net/

However, performance rights, which constitute fair compensation for the author's work, are a legal obligation. Whether you are an amateur or a professional, you must request authorization to perform the play and pay the corresponding royalties for the production.

Jean-Pierre Martinez is represented by the Society of Dramatic Authors and Composers (SACD).

To get in touch with Jean-Pierre Martinez and request authorization to perform one of his works, please use the contact form on his websites.

Jean-Pierre Martinez recently returned to music, writing original songs inspired by his poems and plays.

With **Jean-Pierre Martinez Music**, he extends that creative universe through original songs: short stories in musical form, humorous or melancholy, in which each song sometimes becomes a miniature theatrical scene.

https://jeanpierremartinezmusic.com/

Other plays by the same author translated in English:

Monologues
Happy Dogs
Like a fish in the air
Short Stories

Comedies for 2
A Thwarted Vocation
EuroStar
Heads and Tails
Him and Her
Is there a pilot in the audience?
Last chance encounter
New Year's Eve at the Morgue
Not even dead
Pentimento
Preliminaries
Running on empty
Russian Roulette at the Kremlin
The Costa Mucho Castaways
The Dressing Gown
The Joker
The Rope
The Window across the courtyard

Comedies for 3
A brief moment of eternity
A simple business dinner
An innocent little murder
Cards on the Table
Cheaters
Crash Zone
Fragile, Handle with care
Friday the 13th
Horizons
Ménage à trois
One small step for a woman, one giant leap backward for Mankind
The Ways of Chance

Comedies for 4
A Cuckoo's nest
A hell of a night
A Skeleton in the Closet
Back to stage
Bed and Breakfast
Casket for two
Crisis and Punishment
Déjà vu
Family Portrait
Family Tree
Four stars
Friday the 13th
Gay friendly
Hangover
Happy Hour
How to get rid of your best friends
Is there a critic in the audience?
Is there an author in the audience?
Just a moment before the end of the world
Lovestruck at Swindlemore Hall
One marriage out of two
Perfect In-laws
Quarantine
Requiem for a Stradivarius
Strip Poker
Surviving Mankind
The Deal
The Fishbowl
The Perfect Son-in-Law
The Pyramids
The Smell of Money
The Tourists
The Worst Best Man Ever

Comedies for 5 to 6
All's well that starts badly
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
Crisis and Punishment
Critical but Stable
Dead End Boulevard
In lieu of flowers...
King of Fools
The Castaways of New Year's Eve
The President's Draw
The Rebels
Traffic Jam on Graveyard Lane

Comedies for 7 or more
At the bar counter
Backstage Comedy
Blue Flamingos
Check to the Kings
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
False exit
In flagrante delirium
Just like a Christmas movie
Miracle at Saint Mary Juana Abbey
Music does not always soothe ...
Neighbours' Day
Nicotine
Of Vegetables and Books
Offside
Open Hearts
Reality Show
Save our Savings
Special Dedication
Stories and Prehistories
Such a lovely village
The House of Our Dreams
The Jackpot
The Performance is not cancelled
The Most Beautiful Village in France
The Worst Village in England
Welcome aboard!
White Coats, Dark Humour

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

All of Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays can be downloaded free of charge from his websites:

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https://comediatheque.net/

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