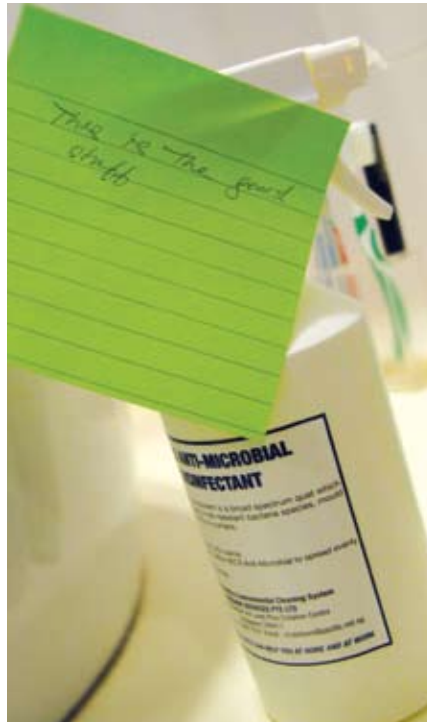


QUARANTINED!

By C. Li

1 May 2009 – I arrive back in Singapore at 1am in the morning exhausted. The past 44 hours have been a mad and tense whirl of last minute flight arrangements, shuttling to and from airports, and trying to squeeze two weeks worth of packing into a space of two hours. The reason? I had the misfortune of arriving in Playa Del Carmen, 2000km away from Mexico City, the very day the news of the H1N1 outbreak came out. While life carried on as per normal in Playa – the tourists were still arriving in droves – the rest of the world seemed to panic and my parents felt the situation was bad enough for border closures and quarantines to occur, and wanted me out of Mexico and back in Singapore as soon as possible, no questions asked.

Walking towards the Immigration Hall, I wonder if I'll have any trouble with the immigration counter with regards to my recent travel to Mexico, but when I arrive what I see is a bit of a let-down in my mind, considering how severe everyone outside Mexico had made the whole situation out to be.



Instead of the hordes of healthcare personnel in full Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) that I had expected, there are only five very bored-looking people manning the thermal scanners. Clearing immigration, surprisingly, is a breeze – there is no one asking me about my recent travel history, no one looking through my passport to see what stamps are inside, and most importantly, no one serving out a quarantine order on me. All there is is a lone man handing out green slips of paper advising people on home quarantines, and try as he might, he can't hand them out fast enough.

The relief in my parents is almost palpable the moment they see me walk out to meet them. Having been away for more than a month, I find it hard not to give them a big hug, but 'minimal physical contact', my dad tells me, is advised, along with room quarantine.

As I hop into the car, the sight of an N95 placed in the backseat especially for me greets me. The thought of spending the car ride home suffocating in it is too much for me, and I wear the mask the Japanese authorities gave us during our stopover in Tokyo instead. The car windows are wound down throughout the drive home, and getting fresh air is definitely not the reason.

At home, I don the dreaded N95 as I unpack all my belongings, sorting out what has been brought with me to Mexico. Being a man with a mission, my dad brings out everything that has come into contact with Mexican air and disinfects the whole lot with a vengeance.

I find another 19 N95s waiting for me in my quarantine quarters, along with a thermometer, three different types of disinfectants with accompanying post-it notes to explain their various uses – these are all from my dad. My mum, on the other hand, provided flowers, magazines, and other forms of entertainment. After I request for another DVD, my dad stands at the doorway, a safe distance away from me, and tosses it onto the bed, the way a zookeeper would toss meat at a tiger.



12pm: My lunch is served to me in the form of a tray placed outside my room, *a la* maximum-security prison, minus the hole in the door. We start joking that *prata* and pizzas might be easier food to serve, since they can be slid under the door.

4pm: I am bored already, only 15 hours into my seven-day home quarantine. When Dr Tambyah assures me that there's no need for room quarantine, I open the door and report everything he has said to my dad. His answer when I ask if I can be released from my prison? "No", with a horrid twinkle in his eye. I can hear the familiar hiss of a spray can as I close the door, and I grab my camera and manage to catch him in action, spraying Lysol in the direction of my doorway.

6pm: Dr Tambyah's words have taken two hours to register with my dad, and I'm allowed out of the room but am under strict instructions to keep away from the bedrooms. Meals are to be eaten upstairs, separate from the rest of the family.

2 May 2009 – The day doesn't start off well when my maid enters the room wearing a mask to get hold of my laundry. While I found all the extreme



precautions amusing yesterday, they are frankly starting to get on my nerves.

The precautions become even more unbelievable when amazingly my dad manages to keep a distance of five feet away from me without fail. It's like a dance routine, I take two steps forward, he takes two steps back; all that's missing is the soundtrack.

The final straw occurs after I finish my dinner upstairs, when my maid sprays disinfectant and starts wiping down the remote control that I have just touched. I feel like, for want of a better description, a giant walking virus, and I'm frankly hurt and insulted by all these measures. I'm pretty sure that a quarantine at the Communicable Disease Centre (CDC) would have less stringent measures than these, and for one thing, the air would definitely not constantly smell of "Country Scent Lysol", which is starting to give me a headache.

My dad has always been somewhat of a hypochondriac, understandably so as he had the unfortunate luck of coming down with dengue fever right smack during the SARS period. His stock of pharmaceutical equipment can put a pharmacy to shame, and I was prepared for some obsessive-compulsive behaviour on his part. This maximum security prison-esque quarantine, however, is not what I expected and rather frightening, and I tell him so.

4 May 2009 – I am finally able to eat a meal with the family at the dining table, albeit seated as far away from the rest of the family as possible, but it's a start at least. The humidity and heat are killing me, and my dad, ashamed at

being likened to a dictator equivalent in his quest to exterminate the virus, relents and allows me to switch on the air conditioning, though I have to leave at least a window or a door open when he's in the same room.

5 May 2009 – Home quarantine for seven days starting from when? When I left Mexico, when I left the States or when I touched down on home soil? While on paper seven days of staying at home didn't sound so daunting, I have never been itching to go out as much as this. I would be the first person to admit that I am a die-hard couch potato, but I think I am going to lay off the TV for a while after this quarantine. Aside from the boredom, what really gets to me is the fact that I can't hug my family, and I feel rather deprived of physical contact.

Read the newspapers and note with interest the quarantine of the NTU students at Aloha Loyang. They only have to take their temperature two times a day, compared to my four. Consider volunteering my father as a quarantine officer, I have no doubts that he'd make Chief in no time.

7 May 2009 – 168 hours, countless DVDs and countless TV shows later, I am free from my quarantine. The first thing I do is make a beeline for my parents and hug hard, especially the dictator, who still asks for my temperature. **SMA**

