

The Dictator Considers His Regime

The Dictator

For the third day in succession it was raining. He stood at the tall window and surveyed the empty square far below. Rain streaked the glass. It glistened on the paving stones. The sky was a dull grey and every now and then a distant rumble of thunder disturbed the unnatural quiet of his office. He hated this time of the year, when the rains came and soaked the entire country and brought with them the chill air off the mountains. He'd always hated it, ever since he was a boy and his mother would take him by the hand and lead him squirming to school, water creeping into his boots with every step because they were full of holes and the winding roads that linked the towns in the hills were nothing but muddy trails. His father sent him out to work in the fields, and he could never get dry. He feared he would drown. They were very poor and the bad weather washed away what little they had. Oh yes, he hated the rain and the wind and all that they signified.

Today despite the rain his new driver, Paulo, had been ready at seven. He always tried to get to the office early and over the years this habit had become part of the way people regarded him. This morning the rain woke him at five and he tossed in his bed trying to get back to sleep. Finally he got up and made his way in the dark into the parlour room of his apartment, where he switched on a lamp and lit a cigarette and tried to read the latest report on agricultural subsidies, but the figures on the page seemed like random scratchings and after a moment he had to put it down and rub his eyes. It was depressing for him to think that none of the things in the apartment were his own. They all belonged to the state. When Irene had been alive they shared a few rooms in the presidential palace and filled them with their own antiques and heirlooms. For forty years they had lived together quite happily in the palace, even though he was often at the office for days at a time and sometimes out of the country on diplomatic missions. But no matter where he was, whether sweating under a brutal sun in one of the former colonies, or down at the State House giving a speech, or attending regular sessions of the Advisory Council, it was always at the back of his mind that he could soon return home and Irene would be waiting for him, that he could go into the private grounds and toss a ball with the dog or tend his flower garden. But then last year Irene had had a stroke. It came as a shock because she was younger than he was and her mother had lived a vigorous life into her nineties. He stayed with her until the end, though his presence had done no good and only intimidated the doctors. He'd heard rumours of high officials elsewhere who took movie stars for lovers or kept a cache of gold bullion in the

basement in case they were deposed. But he was a man of simple needs who had never questioned the sanctity of holy matrimony, and on the day of Irene's funeral he found he could hardly hold himself upright at the graveside. For the first time in his forty years as president his people saw him as an old old man, standing with the aid of another's hand on his elbow. He knew it was vanity, but after all this time in power he'd grown unduly sensitive to the manner in which the press portrayed him, and on the day after the funeral the tottering image of himself in an editorial cartoon had left him with a chill in his heart. He did not like to appear weak.

So now, at his suggestion, the palace was empty. The antiques had been distributed among some nieces and nephews and he was living with a couple of servants a few blocks from the State House in a government-owned apartment that was full of functional but anonymous things. Some of these things were quite beautiful, but they had no connection with who he was.

He had not looked at his schedule for today, but soon his personal attaché would arrive with the transcript of yesterday's proceedings and papers for him to sign, and he was content to wait. Down below, in the square, a woman pushed a perambulator through the driving rain, and he wondered where she could be going with a baby at such an hour. And it reminded him that the world had changed in ways he did not understand. Parents left their children with strangers because both mother and father had to work. Young people drove their cars too fast and ravaged their bodies with drugs and alcohol. Nobody went to church any more. It was all very mysterious to him because over the course of many years, through example as well as proclamation, he had done his best to weave a thread of moral responsibility into the fabric of society. Decades ago he had adopted education as a personal cause, and these days the universities had more money than ever and a higher education was available to anyone who wanted it. But according to the latest figures enrolment was falling and illiteracy had spread to every corner of the realm like some pernicious contagion. He shook his head. He did not understand.

Then he remembered something that had been troubling him. That woman was coming today, the mother of that boy who had gone missing. He would have to speak to her and assure her that everything possible was being done to locate her son, who was a journalist and who had written unflattering things about him and his regime. But the truth was that he knew nothing of what was being done and had in fact blinded himself to the entire issue.

The Colonel

The Colonel looked through the window and regarded the young lieutenant narrowly in the weak light outside the barracks. The lieutenant stood apart from the other men beneath the shelter of the overhanging roof, smoking a cigarette. It was still raining, but not so heavily as before. Daylight had come, but you could hardly tell with the

clouds thick and churning like the sea. The ground was muddy and water puddled and glistened on the tarmac. Their orders had come swiftly and without warning in the middle of the night, to get the prisoner out of the city. The generals were nervous, made nervous by events they themselves had set into motion, and now it fell to him to make it right. He focused on the scene outside his window. His young lieutenant was exchanging remarks with the men and a smile flickered across his thin lips. Only he and the lieutenant knew what their orders really entailed, and he could not smile about it. The Colonel had recently come to the conclusion that his lieutenant was a brute. How else could he smile on the day they were about to commit murder?

The Colonel had not seen the prisoner for a few days but had left orders that he be treated with decency and accorded respect. Only a few people knew that Roberto Branco was being held in the barracks prison and the men who had been engaged to transport him this morning had been selected for their stupidity and would likely not even know who he was. For them it was an adventure, something they would use to entice their girlfriends to raise their skirts and lower their britches. Only he and the lieutenant understood the full import of their mission, but even that was enough to make what they were doing dangerous.

The story had been in the papers and defied every effort to suppress it. Posters had appeared mysteriously all over town calling for Branco's release. Still, the government clung to its denials. The president had not addressed the issue, but the Colonel had been told he would do so soon. Branco was attractive and very popular and the Colonel felt that abducting him had been foolhardy, but he was not the one giving orders at that level. Branco's articles calling for elections and openness and mocking the president's recent lapses of memory could have been ignored. Or, if the generals had felt compelled to take action, it would have been simpler and wiser to discredit him, to leak a story about homosexual prostitutes or try him on trumped up corruption charges. The propaganda office had carried out similar campaigns against other targets with great success. But because of his handsome profile and air of virtuous authority Branco made the generals nervous. On the day the last article appeared they ordered some thugs to raid his flat and take him prisoner, but now they didn't know what to do with him. They wanted him out of the way. That's all they knew. And so the Colonel had been told to take care of the problem.

At last Branco was brought out wrapped in a dark poncho and put into the back of the covered transport vehicle. His wrists and legs were bound together with shackles and the leg-irons caused him to stumble like a drunkard. The Colonel left his office and approached the truck, which was dark green but bore no official insignia. He had decided he would ride in back with Branco.

The men stood at attention and the Colonel waved at them to relax.

He addressed the lieutenant. "Let's get this over with."

The young man nodded. "I would be honoured, sir, if you would let me do this

myself.”

The Colonel paused and then said simply, “I’m coming.”

“Yes, Sir.”

He started to get in the back.

“Sir?”

“What? Don’t you know it’s raining?”

The lieutenant looked at him in momentary confusion. He shook his head.

“It’s nothing, sir.” He left the Colonel and could be heard giving instructions to the driver and to the men who were staying behind.

The Colonel got in back. He removed his hat and shook the water from his coat.

“How are you this morning, then?” For the prisoner’s benefit he tried to sound jaunty.

Branco sat stooped over, looking downward. He didn’t move. The Colonel thought the white faces of the two young soldiers on either side of him showed the strain of anxiety.

“Mr. Branco?”

He touched the man on the shoulder. Branco raised his head. The light in the truck was poor but even so the Colonel could easily see the pattern of welts and bruises covering Branco’s face, the fat lip, the scar that split his eyebrow. He staggered. Confusion and anger almost brought him to his knees. He grabbed Branco’s hand and found himself examining knuckles scraped raw, covered with scabs.

“Who did this to you?”

Branco said nothing. His lips appeared parched and his eyes were filmy.

The Colonel addressed the younger of the two soldiers. “Get him some water. Now.” The man jumped from the truck and the Colonel turned to the other. “Take these chains off immediately.” The man stared at him. His mouth dangled open stupidly. “Do it, or you’ll be the one wearing chains.”

The soldier jangled some keys and dropped them, then picked them up and with trembling hands began unlocking the shackles binding Branco’s legs and wrists. The Colonel sat down and rubbed his hand over his face.

Just then the lieutenant pulled back the flap and climbed into the rear of the truck. He didn’t seem surprised to see the soldier removing Branco’s chains.

“Someone’s been taking liberties with our prisoner,” the Colonel remarked, his eyes on the lieutenant.

“He tried to escape. I was going to tell you.”

The other soldier returned with a tall bottle of water. They all watched as he unscrewed the cap and handed the bottle to Branco, who lifted it to his lips and took a long drink.

“He’s not been fed or given water either.”

The lieutenant stared back at the Colonel, his manner full of a strange haughty defiance that hadn’t been there a minute ago. As a smile spread across his lips, the Colonel felt a cold shudder descend his spine.

“Prisoners who attempt to escape are treated differently than those who cooperate. We all know this.”

Branco returned the bottle to the soldier.

“Thank you,” he said in a cracked voice.

The engine turned over and the truck trembled into motion. Rain battered the roof and made further conversation at this point impossible.

The Prisoner

He had more or less resigned himself to his fate, to death. He would become a martyr for freedom and nothing would make him regret that. He would miss Christina’s laughter and the soft light in her eyes, and he was sorry the plans they had made would come to nothing. Already their nights together were more like a dream than a memory. And he would miss the first cool breezes of autumn, and the light slanting off the lake where he often went to swim, but it was all worth it if people were made aware of what was happening, and especially if they decided to do something about it.

But he hadn’t counted on the pain. He had heard the Colonel deliver the order that he be treated like a guest rather than a prisoner and took comfort from this, but as soon as the Colonel was gone, the lieutenant had entered his cell and stood gazing down at him, his youthful eyes full of contempt, and Branco knew immediately that he’d come face to face with his true enemy.

He was ordered to disrobe, and once he was naked he was chained to the wall of his cell. They turned out all the lights and shut the door and left him alone. There were no other prisoners and the only source of daylight was a narrow window high in the wall at the far end of the row of cells, and as he struggled to maintain a lucid stream of thought he watched for the transition of night into day and back into night. But inevitably he lost consciousness and in the end had no idea how many days had passed when someone finally came in and turned on him a painful spray of water, which washed his excretions and the insects who’d kept him company down the drainhole of the cell. They gave him something to eat then, but nothing to wear, nothing with which to dry himself. He sat on the cold stone floor of the cell and waited, trying to calm himself with thoughts of the outside world, but it was as if he’d come into existence in the cell and his other life was nothing but a dream or an idle wish. He could not remember the words he had written that had been the cause of his captivity, could not even remember the night he had been bound and gagged and taken by men wearing black masks and thrown into the back of an unmarked van. It was as if these things had happened to someone else. Then something changed and

he was given food and water. His clothes were returned to him and he could tell they had been washed and pressed. When the Colonel visited again Branco was seated at a folding table that had been put in his cell, and using formal cutlery to eat a dinner of roasted cod and boiled potatoes. They'd even poured him a glass of wine. Then the Colonel left and he was stripped and the young lieutenant beat and kicked him until he was unconscious. He vomited up the dinner. That was the last thing he remembered before being roused and dressed this morning.

So now they were taking him out to shoot him and he was not at all sorry, though he was not glad either.

"You worry too much," the lieutenant was saying.

The Colonel's eyes darkened. "You don't think. You do things and you don't look ahead. They'll find his body and see how he was treated and it will be cause for more unrest."

The lieutenant sniffed and, turning sullen, averted his gaze.

"You don't think it will happen? Just watch. I'm sorry," the Colonel said, addressing Branco now, "that it has come to this."

Branco shook his head to indicate it was of no concern. The truck turned a corner and they all swayed in their seats.

"These are our orders and we have to carry them out." The Colonel seemed wistful about this point. He drew a long breath deeply into his lungs.

"Do you want a cigarette?"

"Yes, please."

The Colonel motioned for the lieutenant to give the prisoner a cigarette and to light it for him. For a moment the match light illuminated his gaunt but still dignified features. Branco drew on the cigarette and eased his torn and fragile body backward, resting himself against the wall of the rattling truck.

"You were educated here?" the Colonel asked.

"Yes," Branco said. "At the university in Coimbra."

The Colonel nodded. "My daughter goes there."

"Really?" Branco tried to appear interested as he wrestled to contain a fugitive hope for salvation.

"She's going to be a doctor."

The lieutenant snorted.

"And what's wrong with you?"

"You coddle him," the lieutenant said scornfully. "We should be interrogating him about his colleagues who want to introduce reforms. We should be making him scream for mercy."

"I leave that sort of thing to animals like you."

Branco lowered his eyes. "I take it the president knows nothing of this."

"I don't know what His Excellency has been told," the Colonel answered.

“What’s going to be the official explanation for my disappearance and death?”

The Colonel shrugged. “Extremists? I don’t know.”

“It’s going to be obvious to a lot of people that the military is behind it,” Branco said.

“That’s true,” the Colonel admitted. “But they’ll have no proof.”

“In their minds they won’t need any.”

“Now he’s threatening you,” the lieutenant scoffed, “and you sit there and take it.”

The Colonel remained calm. “I’ll know a threat when I hear one.”

Branco felt the truck lurch from pavement on to a rough dirt road. He guessed they were taking him to a pine forest up in the hills or to one of the boggy swamps that were an unappealing feature of the local landscape. In summer the flies and mosquitoes could be overbearing even in the city if the winds were blowing the wrong way. He felt something descend heavily into the bottom of his stomach at the thought of summer, and the certainty that he had seen his last one swept over him like a sickness.

“Are you all right?” the Colonel asked.

“I’m not sorry about what I wrote,” he said, regaining himself. “Every word of it was true.”

“You were right about one thing,” the lieutenant said. “The president is like a toothless old lion who doesn’t know that his time is up.”

The back of the truck became very quiet.

“I heard that about him,” the lieutenant went on, “that he doesn’t have a tooth of his own left in his head and someone has to feed him with a spoon.”

One of the soldiers snickered and the Colonel shot him a look, quieting him instantly.

“He’s just old,” Branco said. “It’s not a crime to be old. He used to be brilliant. But he hasn’t even chosen a successor. When he dies there’s going to be anarchy. We need elections to clear the air.”

“You and your elections,” the lieutenant sneered.

“So you think this is better?” Branco raised his voice. “How long can you go on eliminating people whose opinions are different from yours? I’ll be gone but someone else will take my place. Killing me isn’t going to solve your problems. Pretty soon there won’t be any room left in your swamps and your hillsides and your abandoned quarries for more bodies. Someday you might even run out of bullets.”

“I want you to know that if it was up to me, this wouldn’t be happening,” the Colonel said evenly. He met the sulky glance of his lieutenant.

“If it was up to me,” the lieutenant said slowly, “it would have happened a long time ago.”

Branco watched the two men glare without emotion at one another across the

width of the truck. The intensity of their mutual loathing was almost palpable, like an invisible or ghostly presence. The two young soldiers shifted uneasily in their seats. And much to his surprise Branco found that he was searching his mind for the words of a prayer he had known, a prayer he hadn't recited since he was a small boy bathed in lamplight, balanced on tender knees on the floor beside his bed. He watched the two men, and as his lips began reverently to move he held his breath.