

Reality

Morning. General Fernández sprang like a tiger into a sitting position on the canvas army cot, the sweat-soaked blanket from a night of fever slipping to the dirt floor. He got to his feet and immediately felt the pain in his jawbone, the pain that sank its edge of broken glass into the area around his wisdom tooth. He started to bring his hand up to his cheek, but instinctively stopped it in midair and determinedly lowered it to his waist to ascertain that he was still wearing the revolver he had slept with during a night of stifled moans under the watchful eyes of his adjutants, crowded together beyond sleep and the suspicion of death. Inside the tent there floated an odor of bodily fluids blended with the fertile aroma of mint ointment, and a yellowish haze of dust glowed through the still walls, motionless since sunset. General Fernández stumbled lightly over his field boots, balancing himself with difficulty between the fog of pain and the first taste of an early awakening laden with suffocating heat and thirst.

“Damn!” he said, thinking of the bugler as he walked to the entrance, “they forgot to blow reveille, the sons of bitches.”

At the tent entrance he shoved the mosquito netting sharply to one side and lifted the flap. A flood of salt-smelling light invaded the small space, spreading over the empty ammunition cases, the mosquito-covered washbasin, the field maps rolled up in tin cylinders and the saddle with silver riveting and *guayaco*-wood stirrups piled on top of a halter. A dun-colored locust sprang up and briefly fluttered against his face. The General’s boots parted the coarse savanna grass which was covered with a film of volcanic silica. He spat thickly.

The first thing he saw in the distance, in the waxy glare of the April sun that ravaged the plum trees and stifled the beehives, was the reddish rust of his three field guns, set up with their backs to the mountains and with their sights trained on the tent in which he

had spent the night in agony from a wisdom tooth wrapped in a poultice formed of chewing tobacco and lime. His vision was distorted by the shimmering waves of heat hovering over the plain, but when he was finally able to focus, he realized something he had never before imagined even along the tortuous paths of his most secret nightmares: he was alone. He had been left alone at the dawn of his day of glory, on the eve of the final battle, facing the firing squad of his own misfortune, under the already faded trappings of the mirage of power.

"What the hell is this?!" He cursed as he chased the iguanas hiding under the cot, and picked up a bolt-action rifle over which his big clumsy hands fumbled. "You don't pull something like this on the President of the Republic!" He fired three shots point-blank at the pine tent frame. "Filthy pigs," he muttered, choking on the sulfurous fumes of indignation.

Three aides came running in response to the gunfire, still wrapped in the rosy cocoon of morning, holding up their pants, adjusting their suspenders, hurriedly fastening their kidskin leggings in an aqueous cloud of dust which slapped them on the shoulders, whitened their moustaches, made them sneeze. "Commander," they said, "what is it? Just tell us what you want." But the General saw them from the distance of mistrust. "You bastards, weren't you aware of the general desertion? Look at this military disaster we have. Where were your hopes and dreams when you were asleep, you soldiers of the fatherland," he stammered. "You think the enemy is so easy to defeat, you bunch of tin soldiers?"

"Not on your life, General, no, General, not on a stack of Bibles. What happened is that they weren't being careful while the eggs were being stolen from the nest, they had fallen asleep and we were singing on the hill without any regular soldiers or militiamen, the artillery men were off taking a walk, the men on guard duty dozing off . . . Lazy was what they were, don't even think it was anything else, General." Right then they were re-forming the troops, impressing "volunteers," enlisting villagers; they were already out there persuading the deserters to come back.

"What's the trouble, *compadre*?" Colonel Sanabria entered, his spurs jingling, strapping his swagger stick to his belt. General

Fernández turned to look at him with irritation; there was in the cordial distance between the two men, a flow of electric energy originating in the pole of suspicion, and if they had acted as godfathers for each other's children, and if, in earlier campaigns against the guerrillas, they had shared the same trenches, the same women, the same State funds, their individual personal ambitions could not fit in the same room together. They both had the virtue of disturbing the other's sleep and troubling each other's waking hours by inventing ticklish situations, by putting affectionate stumbling blocks in each other's path and by diplomatic rivalry. In their embraces on official occasions, there always was the warm glow of a murderous love, something for which they were both eminently prepared by nature.

Seeing Sanabria and feeling the molar's stab of pain were simultaneous for General Fernández. Turning his back on him, although sensing the icy glare on his back emanating from that colonel with the superbly sturdy frame of a bull, his body pierced by three bayonet wounds received in the cavalry charge of the rebels at Acajutla, the General hurriedly opened the tobacco tin and extracted from it two plugs of the weed which he mixed with a pinch of lime and introduced into the hollow of his mouth. He softly clenched his jaw without betraying a sign of pain, certainly not in front of his *compadre*, and gradually began to feel the moistening of the poultice, the leathery flavor of the tobacco juice bathing his gum, its placid warmth making him spontaneously salivate. He rinsed his mouth with this substance and spat thickly.

Colonel Sanabria was observing the bullet holes, which had ruined the pine tent frame, when General Fernández cursed.

"Cowards," he said, his teeth clenched, his eyes glistening like a pair of hate-filled diamonds, "just like the time we fought at the Zelaya ravine. They all took off on us because they were scared."

"We've had some bad times together," Sanabria added, without seeming to insinuate a double meaning, "but we survived. We won that time, too, so don't let it worry you, Mr. President, *compadre*." He slapped him on the shoulder. "I'll get them back for you right away; that is, if you give me a little time and permission to line a few of them up against a wall as an example, like last time."

General Fernández answered only with a thoughtful grunt. The last time it had been done with a decree from the Ministry, and by his own hand. But now . . . Was Sanabria trying to score points with public opinion? If he gave his permission, it would be he, Sanabria, who would appear as the just executor of the regulations, and after all, that was what counted, the regulations, in the eyes of those lawyers in Congress; if he refused permission, the guerrillas might arrive and find them without weapons, without men, powerless. The Colonel seemed to unravel the complicated reasoning of that secret thought, uncannily reading it in the air.

"*Compadre*," Sanabria smoothly explained, with the conviction of one who has all the cards in his hand, "we believe what we want to believe, but reality takes over sooner or later."

"There you go again with your historical bullshit," the General interrupted. The exclamation knocked the piece of tobacco off position. He pushed the rough plug back into place with his tongue. "This is no time to be going on about the ancient Greeks again," he chewed lightly. "Get a move on," he ordered. "I'm giving you three hours to put me in command of another army."

Colonel Sanabria stamped noisily on the ground, knocking the coat of dust off that had been dulling the shine on his spurs. He walked out, touching his revolver with his fingertips, seeing the sides of the tent out of the corner of his eye. Once outside he was engulfed by a nitrous sunlight.

"And swing the cannons around, *compadre*!" he still heard his *compadre* shouting. The Colonel smiled with rancorous pleasure. "The poor fuckers," he thought, "they even have a sense of humor, these damned deserters."

General Fernández flung himself, exhausted, onto the old cot, an item inherited from the Marines during the last American military intervention. Was it the heat coming in from outside or was it the fever coming out again? He opened his uniform, unbuttoned his shirt; the puff of warm air, reeking of tobacco, made the hair on his chest dance, but he turned his face away with repugnance at his own breath. "A man who chews tobacco," he reflected, "hasn't got far to go to eat shit." In front of him no one smoked, no one drank; a theosophist could not afford to give in to corporeal needs, because they made the mind decay. His regime had reached a conciliation

of spirit and flesh, but how difficult it was to reform the customs of the Indians, to teach them the benefits of obedience, of making peace. If it weren't for the guerrillas, he thought, who have been making raids and setting off bombs for four years, who kept resisting the civilization being offered them, what an ocean of tranquillity he would have. In his eighteen years at the helm, they were the most dangerous of those who had dared to raise their hand against him, to defy his reasons of state with their liberal ideas about elections and human rights: did they even realize they were human?

He stood up and loosened his boots with a couple of tugs at the laces, then went to a corner of the tent and began to delve into files and stacks of papers, notebooks, facsimiles of decrees and copies of agreements, stuffed into leather briefcases and cotton pouches. He put aside the small mahogany box containing his decorations and gold braid. Beneath an exquisite blue scrap book, decorated with the most delicate drawings of doves in flight, he found the cups for mixing medicines. He took the album and blew off the film of dust that had begun to collect, forming a layer of volcanic soil. They were his love poems, secret voices written to be read only by two people, his chosen one and himself. Tenderly caressing that concealed vocation, he felt an ache in his heart and in his molar at the same time. He picked up the porcelain cups and poured into them the colored water from a lightproof opaque jug, and walked around stumbling against ammunition cases, emptying the water from one cup into the other and desperately breathing in the oxygen that sprang from the pink bubbles and the violet effervescence.

It was true, he recognized more calmly, that there had been bad times, but also good ones. He suffered no aftereffects from the two attempts on his life, although he harbored a dull resentment, a minuscule ember of passion, because the poison had been put into the drink with which he gave a toast at the beginning of the banquet: a lack of elemental conspiratorial tact not to allow him to finish the supper of sumptuous partridges and steaming pork tamales. The other incident wasn't worth the scar tissue of memory: hiding a stick of dynamite among the candles on his birthday cake was an act of wretchedly vulgar imagination. If the

chorus had delayed one second more, and if he had not blown out the candles with such robust lungpower, he would have been blown to smithereens, his atoms blending with those of the ice cream and the rice pudding. That was an offense to his dignity and he would rather forget it. Even so, the conspirators had left the country in such numbers after the failed assassination attempt that it had been necessary to classify them as "tourists leaving the country" in order to quiet the speculations of the foreign press, always inclined to see in his every act the odious manias of a dictator:

What did they know about his mission of civilization?

Only his *compadre* was able to comprehend the greatness of the mission in which they had persisted, despite his idiotic fondness for the history of the Greeks, all that pedantic nonsense, famous quotations, adopting gestures, posturings and imitations of a tropical tragedian. "Beware the Ides of March," he would repeat; the fool didn't even realize that it was a Roman saying. But still and all, even if it were only a fluke, his premonitions always came true. After the revolt at San Miguel, his advice was, "We must negotiate."

"Negotiate?! Are you out of your mind? Negotiate with the rebels?! Whose side are you on?" he had said accusingly.

"We must negotiate," he repeated. "That's a lot of people out there; there are thousands of them, *compadre*." And he was on the verge of having him arrested, thrown into a cell in the Central Castle dungeons, when he discreetly added, "It'll give us time, *compadre*, time to send troops and place the cannons on the high ground and make mashed potatoes out of them." He rubbed his hands together with malicious glee.

And after seven days of bombarding the city, when he promptly sent him a rose for each rebel he hanged, with little notes in which he proclaimed the loyalty of a brother with which he was defending the Constitution. "*Compadre*," you're an animal," he had joked with him when he received him in the atrium of the Cathedral for the victory parade, "you've wiped an entire city off the map, you exterminator, you."

"I'm the instrument of God," he had answered, chewing each word behind the parched wrinkles of military exhaustion. "I'm your hand, *compadre*, nothing more than a plaything of the forces

of destiny that you control." The two of them embraced with tears in their eyes under the sympathetic gaze of the Bishop, surrounded by the masses of roses inundating the altar.

General Fernández heard footsteps outside the tent, the bustle of recruits, the whinnying of horses and the placement of baggage. "They're returning," he realized, "little by little, but they are coming back."

After the uprising in San Miguel, nevertheless, he had to be openhanded about compensation. Congress requested permission of him to bestow upon Colonel Sanabria the highest honor, the National Condor Medal, making an exception, in his case, of the clause requiring the recipient to have died in combat, of course. Those slick lawyers were trembling with emotion at the audacity of his initiative and at the joy of being in his presence, which enveloped them in an atmosphere charged with intense animal charisma. That was the first time he seriously considered that now recurrent idea which fertilized his dreams: to award his *compadre* the Grand Cedar Cross, but posthumously. Now along came that pack of fools suggesting he try to rise above his modest ambitions.

"Tradition, colleagues, tradition . . ." he began. The lawyers fluffed the colorful plumage of their flattered dignity, seeing themselves treated as equals. "Tradition imposes on us its sacred principles of organization: the highest honor will be awarded to the highest-ranking citizen." The Congress caved in entirely because of this fear inspired by the concealed message. On award day, each man received his respective decorations.

"I defended you with iron and you repay me with wood," Colonel Sanabria protested when he pinned the Cedar Cross to his uniform.

"The best gift I can offer you is to keep your ambition alive, to give you something to shoot for, *compadre*," the General answered under his breath as Fernández smiled for the cameras.

"Permission to enter, sir," an adjutant said, his voice issuing from the edge of the sunlit nebula extending beyond the mosquito netting of the entrance. "Volunteers are arriving, sir," he explained, coming to attention. He did not look directly at the cot on which the General sat. "We're pulling them in right and left, sir." The adjutant marched out, holding his breath.

Lately they were mellowing with age. Each one's fear of the other was diminishing. The private parties at which they would draw lots for women—and then have them on the couch in the room reserved for consular receptions—were lasting longer. They were substituting sex for their appetites for power. They were getting old, and he suspected that what Sanabria missed about the ancient Greeks were the pleasures of wine rather than their philosophical baloney. He traveled a great deal and each time returned with peculiar ideas, unbelievable fabrications, fantasies from other worlds that could not exist as he described them.

“If everything you tell me is true, the whole world is becoming liberal,” he once said to him.

“I'll bet money on it, *compadre*,” he answered. Years before it would not even have occurred to him to believe what he now saw with his own eyes.

The latest item that Colonel Sanabria had dropped into his little bag of distrust had occurred during the foolhardy attempt at revolt carried out by the proponents of a community land system. In the district of Morazán, news came concerning the mobilization the agitators were carrying out, brainwashing the people, forcing them to conform. “End the problem,” he laconically ordered his regional commanders, but the inflammation continued and spread like wildfire, corroding everything, gnawing away at everything, undermining the long period of hard work in which he had built his government. Handfuls of secret agents became lost in the web of rumors and in the bursts of excitement which already threatened to explode, which were growing large enough to inspire fear. The mayors came and the governors went back. They awoke to find graffiti on the walls, the soldiers' women refused to make love inside the barracks lest the final hour come upon them at an inopportune moment, orders were sent out and then countermanded shortly after; ominous black vultures circled over Morazán.

On the weekend Colonel Sanabria had hurriedly returned from abroad and reported to the President's office as soon as he left the airport. General Fernández stood at the huge window of his office, watching the light fall across the garden of voluminous gardenias and blossoming plantain, and gazing at the walls surrounding the

city—that castaway of the sea—in the distance. December threaded its tiny needles of cold, and the north wind, spewed out of the cavernous mouths of the extinct volcano, beat against the window panes. The General sensed an air of circumspection in the room.

“What do the newspapers say out there?” he asked without turning.

“Bad, it’s all bad,” the Colonel answered, observing the curved spine, the sunken shoulders, the bulges at the waist of the President, as though he were being embraced by a snake, a female acrobat, a rubber tire. “They’re calling it the barefoot rebellion,” he continued explaining, “and they’re sure that time has run out for your government.”

“*Our* government, you mean,” the General corrected, turning to face the Colonel. The glow of the evening sun, reflected against the window panes, outlined for him a crystalline form of gigantic proportions, a monstrous aura of consummate will, and for the first time Colonel Sanabria felt that from the distance conferred by the power to make decisions affecting destiny, a man more powerful than he was speaking to him, a man who had come willingly to search out all the paths leading to death, and that his cruelty knew no bounds.

“They’re ideas,” the Colonel explained, “not men that are rebelling, *compadre*”—he dared to be familiar—“things of the times, changes being born. We have to adapt and come out on top by changing. We have to win by transforming ourselves if we’re going to survive.”

“So they’re ideas, are they, *compadre*?” the General assented with a trace of sarcasm clinging to his lower lip. “And the newspapers call it ‘the barefoot rebellion,’ do they?” he sputtered with a tone of determination. Colonel Sanabria had never before seen him surrounded by that phosphorescent aura of tranquillity and ire. “This man is destiny itself,” he thought.

There was a prolonged silence in which the President scrawled on a sheet of paper with his desk-top pen, not breathing, never raising his eyes for a moment or being aware of the passage of time.

"We're going to immunize the barefoot boys against rebellion," he finally said, calling his secretary and handing the hand-written telegram to him. "You can go now and rest easy, *compadre*, we're going to have a peaceful Christmas," he added, dismissing him.

"What are you going to do, *compadre*?" he dared to ask, his hand on the door knob. He did not fear for himself; he was afraid the General's heart would be flooded in a hatred that would suffocate him. The silence madly bounced around the four walls and broke up into three little pieces of shadow.

The General murmured, "The people love me," as though he were talking to himself. He stood by the window once more. "The barefoot boys love me because I've given them everything," he repeated to himself in a monologue of conviction. "It's the educated and the cultured who oppose me, the ones who have done well, who read and learn to repeat liberal slogans. The real people love me."

Colonel Sanabria left the room unobtrusively, his hat in his hand. The secretary awaited him outside, his eyes bulging out of their sockets; he took the sheet of paper that was trembling in his hands: "Shoot the ones with shoes, every one of them," he read. The General's scrawled signature looked like a hairy spider.

It was true that it had all happened that way, the General reflected as he arose from the cot, but the stabbing pain from the molar made him sit down once more, sick with pain. His eyes half-closed, he prepared a fresh tobacco poultice and doubled the dose of lime, then he leaned back and tried to get a little sleep. Yes, he thought, in the state between sleep and waking, it had been that way, but perhaps he was interpreting the events too drastically. Sanabria, he meditated, staring at the twin porcelain cups, was like a brother, although he was more diffident and more prudent than he. It was better that way. He wouldn't fail him, he knew he wouldn't fail him even though he might contradict him and brag about his own impulsive improvisations. Besides, in how many battles had he, the General, come out in one piece only because of Sanabria's sense of sacrifice. Those three bayonet wounds at Acajutla were meant for him, but Sanabria had allowed the bayonets to pierce the tender tree of his own enormous lungs.

Furthermore, Sanabria had gotten everyone to sing a song that time with the birthday cake bomb. Sanabria took care of the

squealers and gave confession to the informers. Sanabria deposited the money bags in Miami for him in his personal account. Without him, power would be more lonely, although he would not have to share it. His *compadre* had become a part of him, and the only problem was that they both strove for the same material goods; if only he could free himself from the ambition for worldly pleasures, make himself immune, purified forever from human temptation, as in the splendor of the Greek gods, he now imagined, losing himself in a spongy spiral of drowsiness which silenced his pains and memories.

An hour later he was awakened by the distant sound of machine-gun fire. "The game is on," he said and got to his feet, all his worries and aches now soothed. He emerged calmly, his heart like ice, immune either to triumph or to disenchantment, every fiber of his being joined into one skein of willpower. Outside, shouting, orders barked by officers giving hasty battle instructions were heard. He smiled as he heard the neighing of horses. Sanabria must be returning with the powerful army that would crush the guerrillas forever. He strode to the tent entrance and brushed aside the mosquito netting; a flood of sunny-smelling morning clung to his inflamed cheek, to the white fire of his temples, his hands, the circle of his face, and enveloped him in luminous flashes that blinded and prematurely aged him. Above the esplanade of the encampment, on this side of the three reddish field guns which were now aimed at the mountains, the recruits were practicing their early apprenticeship for battle, but the General had the feeling he must be dreaming, that he was the victim of time's sleight of hand, a plaything of the mirrors of the mind. He saw old men dragging themselves along the ground, choking, in greasy rags, fainting in the suffocating heat, women lifting the heavy rifles of iron and lead, exerting their abdominal muscles more than advisable, children, adolescents, invalids, the sick, bearing on their contorted bodies the cases filled with mortars, bullet cartridges. He saw the callused hands accustomed to the hoe practicing with the bayonet, polishing cavalry sabers, and he saw for the first time the tenuous imprint left in the dust by an unshod foot. The adjutants, with their mean and lonely faces, shouted threats, cocking their weapons behind the mob of forced

laborers. Colonel Sanabria rode among them astride his horse like the angel of God.

Then he discreetly summoned to his tent three of the veteran officers and gave them the definitive order, in a manner as irreversible as a bolt of lightning: "Shoot my *compadre*," he told them. The officers were thunderstruck with confusion and a sense of mystery, powerlessly watching the President sail beyond the ocean of compassion. Overwhelmed, they went to carry out the order.

When he heard the thunder of the rifles, General Fernández felt a great weight descend on him as he stared at the translucent walls of his quarters. "*Compadre*," he wearily lamented, as though he were conversing with a dead man, "we believe what we want to believe, but reality takes over sooner or later," and he began to rummage around among the stacks of agreements and loose-leaf notebooks containing decrees, hunting for the regulation concerning posthumous decorations for heroes who fall in battle under the burning sun. □

—Translated by Clark M. Zlotchew

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