

The Government in Exile
a short story by Paul Collins

It is Revolution Day tomorrow, and the people are already crowding the streets, preparing for the festivities.

I turn from the blackened window and jog down the stairs. I always run up

and down the stairs. I find it amuses the people in the house. I jog mainly because it is the only exercise I get. I think they resent my jogging. They feel keeping fit is a little excessive.

Ob (this stands for Obese, we think, although it might be an abbreviation of Oberon) looks up from the table where he is pondering a crossword.

He nods disdainfully -- I know he thinks I'm a fool for jogging.

I slow to a walk and glance down at his crossword. I have yet to see him

complete one; I wonder why he persists with the charade. He fools no one.

In the kitchen the plates are piled high. Something scurries from beneath

the unwashed cooking utensils. The movement dislodges a knife that is crucial to the pile's balance, and I am barely in time to rescue all but

the large plate, which crashes to the floor. I hear Ob sigh. "How's the crossword?" I call. It is a joke among the household that

has been festering in Ob's mind like some terminal disease. Cancerous growth?

That would be nice. A terminal cancerous growth.

I hear his pencil rattle across the table and can imagine his bloated face

turning a bright red with every swallowed breath. I should remind him to

save his energy for Revolution Day tomorrow.

I kick the shattered plate into the corner where all the other broken items gather like mould. It is my turn to wash the dishes, as it was seven

weeks ago. Perhaps illogically, I concede that I too will forego this chore. Everyone else has.

Ob is not at the table when I leave the kitchen. No doubt he is upstairs

in his one-windowed room, taking rabid, inspired shots at the unemployed

in the streets. If it keeps him happy until tomorrow, why not?

In the downstairs common room Mary Sue and Ike are watching a re-run of some ancient show. Although originally filmed in colour the celluloid

has slid into sepia. The sound track, too, has regressed. This is perhaps

why Mary Sue and Ike are both huddled close to the TV and do not notice my arrival.

I sit down and daydream a little until the show finishes. It is a hardship

I endure gladly. From upstairs the muffled report of a high-velocity carbine echoes down the stairwell.

"You been upsetting Ob again?" Ike says. He giggles hysterically. I have

deduced that Ike is reliving his childhood.

"His crossword wasn't going too well," I admit. I pull a sad face.

Mary Sue says, "Let's hear it for poor Ob!"
And we all say, "Ahh, poor Ob."
We hear another shot. If we had been taking tally of Ob's kills, I believe we might have counted a decrease of at least one hundred unemployed this year. This is a figure of which any government statistician before the Revolution would have been proud.
Dull thuds sound without. It is the unemployed throwing rocks and debris at our battlements in retaliation to Ob's recreation. Shortly they will throw heavier rocks, and, perhaps, as has happened before, a few of them will be brave enough to lay siege with a ram at our front doors. They have never penetrated our defences and I doubt their sanity in attempting to do so now.
"Someone's at the front door!" Mary Sue says brightly. "I wonder who can it be?" This is her Alice in Wonderland guise.
"I'll get it," I say. But Ike is already trundling after her up the wrought iron staircase to the parapets.
Each releases cauldrons of mineral turpentine and I hear howls of pain as it ignites.
Mary Sue has long since ceased taking photos of the victims. Once, this entire room was wallpapered with colour stills of the living dead. Contorted bodies, alive, in poses of abject horror. She no longer takes these pictures, because there is no more film.
Ike has offered to forage for film outside, but Mary Sue declined his offer. There are too few of us left now to lose one for the sake of entertainment, she said. Why not simply go outside and fetch one of the fuckers in instead?
So now that wretch adorns our mantelpiece. Cured over smoking fires for three days he watches us with grotesque eyes, as though he knows something we do not. Perhaps he does, for tomorrow is Revolution Day.
I have ceased hearing Ob's rifle. It has not stopped -- rather, I prefer not to hear it rake the unemployed.
"We got at least ten of them!" Mary Sue says merrily as she skips about the room. She blows a kiss at Dumb Dumb, our mascot on the mantle. "Ten more!" she trills, pulling at the leathery cheeks of Dumb Dumb. She is madder than Rasputin ever was.
Ike and Mary Sue then perform a ritual dance to celebrate. They are always proud of their efforts to keep down the unemployed.
"What's for dinner?" Ike asks as they whirl giddily about the common room.
"We can have unemployed, unemployed or unemployed," I say.
"Er, let me see," Mary Sue says, pondering over the menu. "I think we'll have -- "
"Why don't we have unemployed for a change?" Ike says, as though amazed at his own originality.
"How marvellous, darling," Mary Sue says wondrously. "Now why didn't I think of that?"
Her eyes seem bright.
"If we were all geniuses, gentle child," Ike points out, "there would be

no geniuses."

"So we'll have unemployed," Mary Sue decides. "With a dash of speed."
I bow in parody and repair to the kitchen. The chef's duties were once

on

a rota system, but that, too, collapsed. It seems to me, as I begin to
prepare a frozen chateaubriand, that every system is made to fail.
Should something last more than its scheduled life, it is automatically

a

failure. I suck a syringe full of cheap claret and inject it into the
meat. I wonder idly whether marinating the meat has any beneficial

effect

other than making the vineyards more money, but of course, there are no
more vineyards.

They say I am the best chef, and I imagine my popularity in the

culinary

arts derives from the culmination of small touches: placing slivers of
garlic in the meat, using mixed herbs and spices, reducing the claret

for

the gravy, and other such artistic tips I have learned.

It is more probable that I am the chef because no one else can be

bothered.

Through the plate glass windows I can barely see the westering sun.
Volcanic ash high in the atmosphere has created magnificent sunsets that

I

am unable to appreciate fully owing to the dirt on the windows. Not

even

the rain is clean now.

Dark clouds are scudding across the bright orange horizon, and a

solitary

bird is gliding with the currents in and out of the great carvings in

the

sky. The sun is a molten ball sinking into the water. It is a Dali,

come

to life.

Ob's rifle on automatic shatters the Dali. Curiously I crane my neck
skyward. I expect to see plummeting unemployed.

Instead I see the bird flick and twist like a piece of charred paper.

It

spirals down. Its wings jar its passage, and briefly I urge the bird

back

up among the clouds. For those seconds it appears to gain its balance

on

the sky's high wire, but then Ob's carbine, now firing tracers, brings

it

unequivocally down.

Tiny, fiery spits ignite the sky and fling the bird's corpse so that it
appears space-bound. It punctures like a pillow full of down, and the
feathers are carried away.

From upstairs I hear Ob's whoops of laughter. I cut a deep hole into

the

meat and bury a piece of garlic.

At dinner there are eight of us. Ike and Mary Sue sit at one end of the
table talking sotto voce. It amazes me they have not already exhausted
their tiny repertoire of jokes. I can only conclude that they are

re-runs,

as if on the TV and radio. Perhaps from their inventories they snatch

each

other's jokes and embellish them.

Ob centers himself at the table. There he is closest to the meat.

Presently he is hacking at it with his hunting knife. He attacks the

meat

as he does every obstacle in his life. As a special treat to us he is wearing his Pierre Cardin suit. On him it looks like a Myer special. He has splattered it with globules of gravy.

I sit at the other end of the table. We have candles tonight to celebrate

Ob's killing the bird. It was Mary Sue's idea. As she explained it to me:

"Don't you see, Harry? The bird was free, as are the unemployed -- so it

had to die! Isn't that precious?" Her logic would not stand the scrutiny

of a ten-year-old.

Again, I believe it amuses her to humour Ob. There are so few pleasures in

life. The other four pick at their food with no great fervor. I do not see

them often; they usually eat dinner in their rooms while studying Great Books of Wisdom. They were once technicians of some repute. Eyes

sunken,

owing to massive over-reading, cheeks pallid and gaunt through worry

and

malnutrition, bodies emaciated owing to utter neglect, they live to

learn

and sleep.

The technicians consider themselves our salvation. I refrain from burdening them with the problems of day-to-day living. The freezers are malfunctioning; the generator is burning out; the water supply is being tampered with at its source; so now I drink wine rather than the bitter water (the others have not noticed it yet) -- and the unemployed are becoming increasingly violent.

And Ob is running out of ammunition.

Mary Sue raises her glass of Cuvée Dom Perignon. "Compliments to the chef!"

The technicians leave the table, the worries of the world upon their faces. I imagine they feel we are rather frivolous.

Ike maneuvers his fingers around the gold chalice at his right and glides

it towards me.

"Magnifique," he slurs. The chalice hovers precariously between his lips.

The table swallows more champagne than he. Mary Sue offers assistance and

together they sip from the same chalice.

The centre dish now completely bare, Ob dispenses with the leftovers on the technicians' plates. His eyes, twin coals of fire, are forever watchful, distrustful.

"Hey, did we congratulate Ob on his kill?" Mary Sue wonders. Her face becomes pensive. Thought of this magnitude worries her.

Ob has finished. He reclines into his seat and makes sucking noises as his

tongue digs for errant meat.

"It was damn good shooting," Ike says appreciatively. Ob's cheeks balloon

into a smile. His Neanderthal mind does not readily perceive sarcasm.

"Shame though it's taken you this long to get good," Mary Sue tells him drunkenly. "You're almost out of ammo, aren't you?"

That familiar slow flush pinches Ob's cheeks, deflating them. All at once

he is standing, towering over the two lovers. His chair cartwheels

across

the floor.

I stand to clear the dishes. Melodramatics bore me. Ob is a lousy shot, poor at crosswords, and a glutton. He is a pig of a man. I abhor him.

And

I have no doubt that he finds me equally detestable.

Mary Sue says in a surprised manner, "Look at the candles, Ob!" She

stares

at them wide-eyed, like a five-year-old gazing with wonder at five

candles

on a birthday cake.

"Shall we blow them out?" Mary Sue asks.

Ike, with a prod from Mary Sue, counts: "One, two -- come on Ob, the candles are for you, three -- "

And Mary Sue and Ike blow at the candles and bubble with laughter as

each

candle winks out.

Owing to their negligence they do not see Ob standing in the corner

with

his carbine. It is raised to his shoulder and his cheeks are blood red.

He

looks not at all pleased.

Mary Sue falls across the table, too drunk to reach back to where she

was

extinguishing the last candle.

Ike, wheezing from the effort of huffing and puffing, sees Ob.

In the semi-darkness I see that Ike has an expression of extreme

caution,

difficult to achieve in his state. Eyes fixed on Ob, Ike nudges Mary

Sue.

It topples her from her chair. She clutches at the tablecloth and the candles fall like skittles to join her on the floor.

Stupefied, Mary Sue scrambles to her feet and looks forlornly at the

great

muzzle of Ob's carbine.

I have not moved since Ob retrieved his weapon. He would much sooner be rid of me than the others.

I stand very still.

"Ob," Mary Sue says quietly. She almost touches sincerity. "You think we're having you on, don't you?"

This woman is galling.

"C'mon Ob, a joke's a joke," Ike cajoles.

Not appeased, Ob elevates the carbine several degrees above their heads and pours tracers into the stairwell.

Mary Sue and Ike crumple to the floor, stripped of their chutzpah.

Amid the cacophony of ricocheting bullets I hear Ob's raucous laughter.

Revolution Day. It is perhaps a paradox that this day is considered our day of fun yet also a day during which we could easily die.

Some years ago, Mary Sue proposed a scheme wherein we could taunt the unemployed. It would give us something to look forward to, she claimed.

On the twenty-first of May each year, while the unemployed are

celebrating

the downfall of the government, we should go among them and cause

anarchy

wherever possible -- as they had done when we, members of the

government,

had tried so hard to run the country smoothly.

The technicians had asked to be exonerated and this was permitted. As

for

the rest of us (there were fifteen of us then), we all swore an oath to

leave the fortress and go hunting.
The Official Body of the Unemployed (OBU) has enforced a curfew from 10
pm
to 7 am. So it is at midnight that we hunters evacuate the fortress. We
have a blackout to offer us a modicum of protection against free
rangers
who may be breaking the OBU's curfew.
I wake at 11 pm. I hear Ob preparing his gear in the next room. Every
year
I follow him Out There. It is why I have survived so long. As the
minutes
pass, I become nervous. Occasionally I listen for sounds of Ob's
departure. I must not lose him.
At midnight, I hear him quietly leave his room. I wait thirty seconds,
then tiptoe down the stairs. I am barely in time to see Ob's bulk move
shadow-like through the front doors. For ten years I have watched him
depart. He always returns at midnight twenty-four hours later.
Ob was the government's hatchet man. Australia's Heinrich Himmler. He
is
as efficient at staying alive as any man I have ever known. He is the
most
wanted among us, and was so even when there were many of us crowded
here.
The Prime Minister had not survived the first year's outing. But I have
always thought the PM was no more than a figurehead, reliant on the
team
about him. Ob had refused the PM's order to remain at his side Out
There.
That is why Ob is alive today. He is a loner.
Mary Sue and Ike brush past me in the dark and Mary Sue utters a
clipped
squeal.
"It's only me," I whisper urgently. Ike is heavily armed and no doubt
extremely trigger-happy.
Mary Sue snaps, "Harry! Christ! You're normally gone by now."
I am surprised she knows this. But then, she had been the PM's personal
secretary, had recorded every important movement.
Ike says, "Be seeing you, Harry." Ike was a good Press Secretary.
Forever
optimistic, he speaks in terms of success, or prosperity. He is a
living
contradiction. I wonder how he can look at himself in the mirror.
"Sure," I say simply. After all, we have seen one another after each
Revolution Day for the past ten years, haven't we? When we rendezvous
back
here we will spend days delighting ourselves with tales of our audacity.
Mary Sue and Ike are close behind me when I pick my way through tangles
of
barbed wire. Ob's figure has disappeared into the gloom. I panic a
little,
am tagged by a barb, pull, rip my flak jacket, then hurry off into the
darkness.
Behind, I hear Mary Sue and Ike cursing me.
My mind alert for unemployed, I thread my way across the rubble-strewn
terrain that was once a school playground. Elated, I see Ob shifting
among
the shadows some thirty metres ahead. I lower my night amplifying
glasses.
At any cost, I must keep track of Ob. He is my life assurance.
Each footfall drums in my ears and the wind whistles in accompaniment.

I

wonder why I am out here. Mayhem is not my forte. But I could not renege

on our agreement all those years ago. I did not wish to appear a coward before the others.

I wonder idly, as I have done for many years, whether it would be possible

simply to remain at the fortress, and perhaps venture out for an hour before the others return. I have yet to try it. Perhaps next year.

The moon, obscured, thankfully casts only a meager light. For an hour I track Ob. At times I lose him altogether. He suspects once or twice that

he is being followed, but I manage to elude discovery.

He will be merciless if he discovers my deceit. I lose sight of Ob as he

slides down an embankment. Beyond, I know a canal winds into the Bay. Ob,

I suspect, will cause havoc to their shipping.

I hurry over the embankment's lip and slide down its lichened surface. Suddenly I hit an oil slick. My hands go out to gain purchase but to no avail. I thud into Ob and together we tumble into the water.

Ob is dead. His gaping mouth and blank eyes leave no doubt of that. I stand numbly, wondering how the fall could have killed him.

I am amazed at my own stupidity. I turn rapidly.

There are two of them. One has Ob's rifle. It may as well be in the hands

of an infant. Clearly he does not know how to use it. Held as a club, the

rifle comes crashing down toward me.

I duck to one side, lift my foot into the man's stomach and pull him over

my shoulder. With arms flailing, he splashes into the water.

His companion, a thickset man with spiked hair and gross tattoos covering

his semi-naked body, lunges at me. I barely have time to curl my fingers

around the carbine and release the safety catch.

At such close range the bullets appear to charge straight through his body

and he crashes into me.

I am in shock. The rifle has not fired. This is more appalling than the man's weight landing on me.

He hits me resoundingly on the side of my head. I pull sluggishly at my knife and slice at him. I feel his hot sticky blood crawl over my fingers.

Again and again I stab, until he is dead.

Only when I lose all energy and lie panting do I realise my ear has been

cut off. The blood I feel about my face mingles with my opponent's. I sit

there bewildered. I wonder how such a thing could happen to me.

Finally I push the repulsive body from me and the current carries it away.

His companion must have drowned, for there is no sign of him as I stagger

along the bank in search of a boat.

Ob. The thought makes me sick. How had those two killed him? How? I worry

over this question because I know that without Ob my survival chances are

not good. I flit between shadows and merge into others. I am
over-cautious
in my every movement.
From afar I hear raised voices. A chorus of voices that speak
jubilation.
Success. Ob has been found. Such as he deserves better. Tomorrow they
will
hang his sodden frame outside the fortress. There it will remain until
the
flesh falls from the bones, until the souvenir hunters dismember it.
I splash water over the gory rent where my ear once was. The salt
stings,
but I hold down the urge to scream. Quickly I slap great dollops of mud
over the wound in an attempt to seal it. It is while I am tending my
disfigurement that an idea seizes me.
First, I must live out the day. To do this I must escape into the Bay.
Shortly I come to a craft that appears almost unseaworthy. I hear
voices
and a dog's barking nearby. Hurriedly I free the boat from its mooring.
The canal water laps against my boot. Flotsam bobs against me as I
unleash
the craft and shove it toward open sea. I do not bother to test the
outboard motor that is rusting aft. Luck does not arrive in twos.
The current swiftly carries me out to sea and into the deep waters of
Port
Phillip Bay. The sky is becoming rapidly lighter.
It will be a hot day. I shall soon suffer burns -- second degree at
least.
Without food or water, I shall lose weight, achieve the appearance of
one
half starved.
They will never detect me. Not burnt and disfigured.
A chuckle, with perhaps just a little madness, comes from my chapped
lips.
I shall soon be joining the ranks of the Unemployed.
And so I drift aimlessly.
Without a care in the world.

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