

The Taste of Freedom

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NEIL BISSOONDATH

A knuckle raps at the closed bedroom door – discreet, deferential, a knock such as he is unlikely ever to hear again. A muffled voice says, “Thirty minutes, sir.”

Through the half-opened jalousies in the windows, hard sunshine throws a latticework of shadow and light into the bedroom. “I asked you to wait for me in the street, Major.” The golden slats warp and crack on the chaotic bed-sheets before splattering shards into the closet open before him. “Surely you can grant me that.”

“We mustn’t be late, sir.” The major’s voice conveys no hint of apology.

“Late, Major ? But it’s already too late. For everything.”

No reply is offered but he senses that the tall, thin major is still there at his door, chewing at his pipe stem, worrying his string of ivory beads with his fingers. He senses that the major is weighing his options. His attention to duty has been impeccable over these two months : protecting him from others, protecting him from himself. He is probably wondering whether prudence now requires a show of force so far unnecessary.

The slats of sunshine suddenly dim. Shadows close in. He doesn’t need to look out to know that storm clouds are veiling the sun. He’s lived in the little house long enough now to read the quality of the light that enters different rooms at different hours in different weather. At a glance, he can recognise the burning gold of morning, the white glaze of midday, the shattered incandescence showering late every afternoon over the dome of the neighbourhood mosque, the radioactive phosphorescence of sunset slowly consuming itself until only darkness remains. Cloistered in the house, unable to expose himself at a window for fear of distant crosshairs, he has learned to interpret the humour of the day outside in this way, to draft its aspects, sense its moods.

The front door of the apartment thuds shut – confirmation that through the weeks of accompaniment and guard duty, the major has come to know him well enough to trust him with these final moments of solitude : there will be no single shot, no rope roughly woven from bed-sheets.

He raises his hand towards the rank of suits compressed in the closet. They are numerous, more than he has ever owned, more than he could ever use. Greys, browns, blues, subtle greens, one with a suggestion of the burning henna he remembers from

the dunes in the western desert just before sundown. After a moment of hesitation, his palm lunges in among them, stirring up their scent of factory newness, shattering the slats of light.

The jalousies darken. He guesses a gathering of storm clouds. In the closet, his fingertips graze the coarse fabric of uniform pressed tight between two suits. They identify an epaulette and the hard insignia of rank. He takes a firm hold of it, eases it out. It has been laundered, his medals and campaign ribbons pinned neatly back into place. He sets the tunic aside, smoothing it out on the bed with his palms. He is undoing the first button of the khaki shirt when, without warning, his fingers freeze and he becomes aware of the second-hand on his watch slapping the seconds away.

His fingers had frozen that night too, a couple of month before, as he laced up his boots in the concrete desert bunker five kilometres from the invisible border. He had remained there for a long time, bent over in the egg-yolk light of the single bulb, incapable of knotting the laces, the watch on his wrist counting off the seconds and the minutes with a mocking insistence, belittling his ability to act in accordance with his will. By the time his will reasserted itself he was thirty-five minutes late. None of the guards thought it strange that the general would wander out alone at night. Complaining of an inability to sleep, he had begun his solitary walks weeks before, getting them accustomed to the idea, each night staying out just a little longer so that his absence would not arouse suspicion.

He worried that the men awaiting him would lose patience, would assume something had gone wrong. But no, they had waited, a clutch of men wrapped in khaki greatcoats shivering in the crackling desert cold beneath starlight that was wan and ghostly and without reach. They had waited as arranged, a clutch of vehicles with lights extinguished, a kilometre beyond the border.

During the drive to the city in the darkened staff-car – the smell of fresh oil and old seat leather, a hint of sweet tobacco from the major's unlit pipe – his fingers had ached. As the convoy retreated at speed from the border, he wondered how long it would be before this freedom he had sought would begin to feel like freedom.

It never has. Two months later and he still wonders what freedom might feel like. And he regrets not having tasted of it, even a little. He lets the shirt fall from his frozen fingers, the ache beginning again as the second-hand slices away time.

He lets himself out of the bedroom. The living room has darkened too, its shadows as if coagulated around the wine-red sofa and the television and VCR across from it. The only decoration on the walls – a faded print of the dusty city in which he grew up, its many minarets like missiles on their launch pads – appears invaded by the dusk.

On his first day in the little house guarded by the major's men, the major showed him with some pride the well-stocked refrigerator, the well-stocked bar, the closet full of brand-new clothes. He had to explain to him how the VCR worked and they shared a laugh, their first, both of them amused that a brigadier general who could detail the intricacies of ground-to-air missile batteries capable of downing multi-million-dollar attack aircraft was puzzled by a hundred-dollar household appliance that would

present no challenge to any unschooled tea vendor. But then the major, lighting his pipe, admitted that while he could manoeuvre any vehicle from the simplest truck to the most advanced tank, he was at a loss as to how to coax his grandfather's oxen into doing his bidding. On learning that the general was partial to American western films, the major provided the videotapes stacked in neat towers on the floor beside the sofa. He has watched them all. *Stagecoach*, *Shane*, *For a Few Dollars More*, *The Good*, *The Bad* and *The Ugly*, and dozens more. He has watched his favourite, *High Noon*, so often he can mime the dialogue.

The television is off but there is a tape in the VCR – not a tape vigorous with cowboys and Indians full of make-believe blood but a tape, vigorous in its own way, that has somehow found him, marking its mysterious trail with crumbs he cannot ignore, crumbs that are as hard and as eloquent as bullets.

He turns on the television. Then, with the decisiveness of a man who knows there is no retreat, he reaches for the remote and aims it at the VCR.

PLAY

His house in the dusty city. Square, two-storeyed, white-washed walls offset by wooden jalousies similar to those in the bedroom. They are all latched shut. Behind tall iron railings, a front door of heavy varnished wood as formidable as it looks. From the street, there is no way to tell that the flat roof is strewn with carpets and cushions so that hot and sultry nights can be spent in comfort.

PAUSE

The camera cannot see all. It cannot see the ground floor hectic with children, three of them : the thirteen-year-old girl proud of her dark eyes and pert nose ministering to her younger brothers. Nor can it see their mother, his sister, to whom he gave haven four years ago when she was widowed by a pointless artillery duel with those who now offer him haven. Beyond its reach too is the second floor with its large bedroom at the back made dense by his parents with mementoes of their long lives, with its view from their window that affords, beyond the crowded city punctured by minarets and domes, the distant mountains among whose tan folds the village of their youth stands unchanged. It cannot probe into the two rooms he has kept for himself across from his parents', one a sparsely-decorated bedroom as utilitarian as this living room, the other a home office elegantly outfitted with testimonials of his career : flags and regimental banners, medals, commendations, framed photographs of units and comrades, the collection of helmets and bayonets that are his battlefield souvenirs, and on the wall behind his walnut desk a large photograph of the Great Leader brandishing a scimitar inscribed to him in recognition of his services to the republic. Most of all, the camera cannot divine that, had his wife not died two years into their marriage taking with her the baby who would have been a young man today, the bedroom would have been elegant and the office sparse.

PLAY

The front door lumbers open – it is specially built from two panels of oak reinforced by a central steel plate – and the girl emerges with her two brothers into the sunshine. Shawled from head to foot, face half-shadowed by the cowl, fist pinning the two edges of moss-green fabric as tight as a sheath, she leans on the wall beside the open door, her large, dark, bored eyes glinting at the ball arcing back and forth between the boys. Desultory play – neither boy has ever displayed much talent for sport. The jalousied window beside the girl swings open and his sister leans out : her wary eyes, her furrowed forehead. Clutching her shawl shut at the neck, she mouths words at her daughter, anxious glances slithering up and down the street – but not across : She remains unaware of the camera absorbing her from the house of the retired accountant, a man unfailingly generous to the children with sweets and small change. In a staccato movement, the lens closes in on the window just as his sister pulls it shut.

PAUSE

There is too much he does not know – as if the narrative of his life has lost its bearings and he needs to sequence things in order to continue. When, for instance, was this tape made ? Days after his departure ? A week ? Two ? What was he doing at the time ? Duelling insecurities with the major ? Calming himself with scotch ? Watching Winchesters fire from a circled wagon-train ? Most likely undergoing debriefing. Yes, most likely. Those endless days of debriefing. That was the point of this after all.

His questioners – three, sometimes four, with observers, he assumed, seated behind the large mirror on the wall to his right – changed every few days, depending on the area under discussion. They sat around an oval table, each with a bottle of water and a glass, pencils and pads of paper, talking into the tape recorder set in the middle. From behind them, a video camera on a tripod trained a red light on him. Occasionally a sergeant would enter the room to change the tape and they would sit back against the backs of their chairs and fall into silence.

He spent almost a month opening windows on all he knew, answering questions, confirming or dispelling suspicions, repeating everything to the point of exasperation before they were satisfied. He pinpointed on maps the location of missile silos, caches of nerve gas, underground ammunition and fuel dumps for forward tank battalions, secret factories that made artillery and mortar shells. He provided a complete list of all army divisions, their readiness status, the objectives assigned to each following the outbreak of fresh hostilities, and he offered insight into their commanders, all of them comrades, many of them friends.

Their courtesy never wavered. During the first session at the round table, he referred to them as interrogators but they rebuffed the word with shy smiles and twists of the head that suggested mild offence. They always saluted, shook hands, addressed him by his rank. And when the day was done, the major would be waiting outside to return him to his whisky and his westerns.

PLAY

The screen blinks black, then blue, then a webby grey. Vague shapes, a skittish light, angled and bending. Then a steady beam flicks on : grey walls, grey floor, and where they meet some kind of bedding, a thin mattress perhaps, or layered blankets. A shadow, two shadows, advancing across the floor and then breaking onto the wall. A grunt, and the sound of shuffling. A woman staggering, hair sprayed loose on her bare shoulders, hugging herself, trying to gather up her nakedness in her arms. At the wall, she hunches down so that her elbows meet her knees, as if she is trying to roll herself into a ball. As if to make herself inconsequential. The lens follows her, draws close. Encroaching on her. Other movement now, on the edges. A sense of crowding in, accompanied by the murmur of low voices, words indistinguishable, the tone technical, men discussing how best to accomplish a task.

PAUSE

During a break in one of the sessions, he wandered over to the mirror on the wall. He saw that, with his thick-rimmed glasses and untrained hair and civilian clothing, he could easily be mistaken for an academic of some kind, a professor of economics or accounting or something equally arid – some discipline that did its best to distance itself through numbers and graphs and formulae from the messy illogic of human affairs. But his appearance was the best kind of camouflage – not rendering invisible but suggesting, convincingly, another nature.

The profession of arms was to him the ultimate blend of the logical and the illogical, the marshalling of destructive force dedicated ultimately, in his mind, to the assurance of peace. The contradiction – accepting it, working with it – was why he had been attracted to a military career, why he had thrived in its complicated atmosphere. Duty – to whom it was owed, the nature of its execution – was not always a simple matter.

He stood there, observing himself in the mirror and sensing the unseen eyes watching him. Then he snapped to attention, jack-knifed his arm into a sharp salute. He counted a slow five seconds before releasing it and turning his back on them. It pleased him to know that they wouldn't know what to make of his gesture.

PLAY

Four men advancing, heads shorn, ears flaring from the sides of their skulls, movements stiff in their desert uniforms : they do not wish to expose their faces. The woman disappears behind them. The sounds of scuffling, the flailing of muscular male arms. A short wail, then a whimper, then a crack as sharp and as dry as the snapping of bone. The lens focuses in on a chaos of arms tugging at the woman, unpeeling her from herself. Exposing her : face curtained by her hair, fists pressed to her forehead, knees tightened at her chin. She shudders with the effort of holding herself together. Useless effort. Too many determined hands, too many powerful arms. Suddenly her body slackens in surrender. Her arms and legs unfold, her head

bobbles backwards as she is tugged away from the wall, laid out, each wrist, each ankle pinned by a hand. She lies there on the grey mattress as still as a battlefield corpse stripped and displayed for souvenir photographs. But her ribcage rises then falls as the hands wrench her legs apart, the lens jumping in to the dark thatch between them, holding there for several breaths, then pulling back to the angry rasp of a zipper being undone.

PAUSE

He remembers one evening in the car on the way back from debriefing, the major said, "Forgive the question, General, but I must ask, it is a mystery to me. Why are you betraying your country?"

The air leaves him now as it did then. His face grows hot. "I thought you understood. This has nothing to do with betrayal." Through the smoked glass of the window, lights were turned into dying flares, pedestrians into ghosts. "Do you have children, Major?"

"I will have a child in two months time, god willing." He filled his pipe with tobacco from a leather pouch, worked it in with his thumb.

"When you hold your child for the first time, Major, remember your question."

The major drew on the unlit pipe, wiggled his thumb once more inside the bowl. "And your oath?"

"Oaths can strangle you, if you let them." Through the window, he saw a group of boys staring in awe at the passing convoy and he wishes he had not restrained his urge to roll down the window and scream at them.

PLAY

An engorged penis, curving upward like a scimitar blade.

He looks away, shuts his eyes. What he has seen once he cannot bring himself to see again. But his ears remain alert to the sounds of hacking and coughing and choking. To laboured grunts, like those of a man toiling strenuously, and to a staccato of screams quickly muffled.

But the scream will not die.

When it becomes continuous, when it acquires the quality of a wail from a cavern, he turns back to the television and opens his eyes.

The lens moving along the quivering body on which a shadow cast from above sways back and forth with metronomic insistence. Moves past the heaving ribcage, past the breasts hidden by a stiffened arm, past the neck with muscles tautened to cables, to the head jerking from side to side in an endless spasm.

PAUSE

The face freezes straight on. He leans forward on the sofa, peers hard at the screen. No doubt. No doubt, at all. Despite the eyes bruised shut, despite the ball of cloth stuffed into her mouth, despite his own reluctance to trust what he sees, he recognises his sister. He stares at her face for many minutes, not ripped by jagged bolts of pain now

as he was the first time, not slashed by guilt, but with a curious sense of communion : as if confronting her agony with his eyes wide open is unshackling him. And soon he recognises it for what it is : he is, at last, tasting freedom.

PLAY

His house again, bathed in late afternoon sunshine, the walls striped by the shadows of the iron railing. The front door eases open and his father slips from the sliver of darkness. He is wearing his new suit, the one he bought two years ago for his son's promotion ceremony. He looks haggard, an old man suddenly older. He hobbles to the gate in the fence and, as he begins unchaining it, the lens eases to the left, to the jalousied window swinging open and a pair of large, dark eyes too terrified to be bored. The lens close in on the eyes with the intensity of an alerted voyeur until they fill the screen, seizes on them as if to swallow them up. The screen goes black, then blue.

STOP

He switches off the television and returns to the bedroom. A sense of controlled urgency has come to him, along with a new sense of lightness. He has, without knowing it, perspired heavily and his undershirt clings to his skin. He peels it off and tosses it to the floor. Then, regretful of the gesture, he picks it up and rolls it into a ball, tosses it into the clothes hamper beside the closet. His fingers, he realises, no longer ache. He makes the bed, carefully, folding the edges of the sheets under the mattress as he did for so many years until rank removed that discipline. Finally, he dresses with quick, precise movements. Time is getting short. The major must be getting impatient.

When he is done – shirt firmly tucked, tunic buttoned, boots tightly laced – he examines himself in the mirror on the wall beside the bed. The uniform no longer fits snugly, no longer exudes fitness and authority. But that no longer matters.

There is a rap at the front door, less discreet than before, and the major lets himself in. “General ?”

“Coming, Major.” He takes a few seconds more before the mirror. He knows that it will not be long before he no longer looks like this, wants to hold on to this pristine image of himself. He folds his beret in two and slides it under his left epaulette before stepping out of the bedroom.

The major looks at him with surprise. “You’ve put on your uniform.”

“Does that surprise you ? I came here as a soldier, I will return as a soldier. There is no dishonour in what I’ve done.”

With a nod, the major leads the way out.

The evening is cool, the sky a rich, darkening blue that tightens his chest : it is the time of day when he aches for his wife. Around the car, the major’s men peer intently at the shadows gathering in the street, the muzzles of their weapons following their gaze. It occurs to him that the next time he sees guns they will be pointed at him. But the thought leaves him unfazed, remains just a thought.

“Major, I have a question for you.”

"Please."

"Did your people view the tape when they received it?"

"Everything must be checked. It's our job."

"Yes, but then you gave it to me knowing what it showed."

The major's ivory beads click in his fingers. "It was not my choice. I wouldn't have. But you are a free man, General."

"I am now. Was I then?"

"You had to decide for yourself, as you have always done. My superiors chose to respect that."

"But they knew what I would do. Your people are clever, Major."

"I suppose they are." There is regret in his voice. "May I ask you a question?"

"I have no secrets."

The beads click again, more rapidly now. "Those men on the tape..."

"They are professionals, it's their job. The Great leader has wondrous ways of ensuring loyalty."

"We've heard rumours, but we haven't dared to believe... We thought it was propaganda."

"That is my country, you see. Where reality is so outrageous it sounds like some kind of fairy tale. You did well not to believe, Major, it is to your credit."

The major gestures him into the car, slides in beside him. As the doors are shut, orders shouted, the major says, "But why do your people want you back? Surely they know it's too late, you've told us everything."

"You know us, Major." He looks away, past the driver, through the windshield of the car to the men now standing in the tray of the truck that will lead the way, their legs splayed, their weapons at the ready – men who, he now knows, cannot protect him from everything. "We are a people who believe in vengeance. It soothes our soul."

"Our soul? You are a believer, sir?"

"I am."

"Then what awaits you does not frighten you?"

His laugh is hollow, even to his own ears. "Have you read Plato, Major? The Republic?"

"I read the word of God and training manuals. There's no time for anything else."

"It was required reading at the academy. Plato wants to design heaven on earth. The perfect world. And all he ends up describing is a nasty little dictatorship. He ends up describing my country, Major. And yours, too."

The major's beads click vigorously, a response he recognises as a kind of Morse Code. Clicking beads will not cause a man to lose his head the way words can.

"What I wonder, Major, is why people keep trying to design a perfect world. The only way to achieve perfection on Earth is by wiping out all life's messiness. And yet..."

"And yet?"

“And yet it is that very messiness that makes human life so wondrous, don’t you think ? It lends great flavour to our lives. It is like salt and pepper – bitter on the tongue but can you imagine your soup without salt and pepper, Major ? That is what life would be like without its messiness, its unpredictability.”

“But we like predictability, General. This messiness, as you call it, just makes us miserable. It is the source of great unhappiness for many people. We are soldiers. What would the army be like without order, predictability ?”

“I have a sweet tooth, as you well know. But that does not mean I want to live forever in a candy store. The truth is, Major, I don’t know if we humans are cut out for Paradise. I can’t say I’m looking forward to checking in. Does that answer your question ?”

After a moment, the major unexpectedly reaches for his hand and pours the string of ivory beads into his palm. His fingers close on them and he nods in gratitude. Out there in the desert, hours away at an invisible border, his family’s future awaits its resolution. On the stroke of midnight, he will walk past them, his mother, his father, his sister, his niece and his nephews, and he will not look back to see them enter the major’s car.