

ENGLISH

The Death of One Man

The wind in the garden carried unseen, the unpalatable taste of tomorrow. A nearby rooster finished his cries as sunlight crept carefully through the smog and the sleepless lights. Epiphanio watched the world wake through the tiny barred window, people parted from their cherished dreams to a cold morning the same as yesterday. The strong aroma of Caturra coffee beans enticed him over to the scarred wooden in his one bedroom apartment. As he gripped the blackened mug and tasted the sweet liquid he read the message from El Spectador, "Congreso Latin Americano: Gaitan, Castro..." the two men stood shaking hands across front page.

He left the sleeping household in a low light, warm under his heavy jacket in the cool air. Downcast smiles and brief, nervous exchanges were the language of the narrow pavement. Each time the occasional car crunched by through the dust he would jump in his faded canvas shoes.

Epiphanio walked through the tunnel of an abandoned scaffold and out quickly across a cracked stone roadway. On the concrete building that rose up in front was a billboard. The poster was of four uniformed figures, each pointing out in a different direction. Their wide black eyes commanded you to consider the blood red photo.

'The long lost sons of Bolivar want you.'

Castro's broad bearded smile faded into the dark green of his star dotted uniform. His visage mirrored that of Gaitan, their mouths contorted in an effort to snuff out the crude image of the United States below their feet.

'Los hombres de los pueblos y de dios' [Men of the people and of God] said a voice to Epiphanio's right, mimicking the text on the display. He pulled his gaze from above, observing the decrepit looking old man who was wrapped up in a sleeping bag against the wall of the building. His white hair was greyed and black in places from smoke and not having washed.

'Do you think so?' replied Epiphanio, unsure of what else to say.

'No' the old man replied, not looking at Epiphanio.

Epiphanio walked on through the empty streets as the sun grew at his back in the clear sky. Slowly the buildings around him grew in height, and people joined him on the streets. The year was 1948...

The unintelligible calls of sellers sounded over the humdrum of the moving herd as Epiphanio walked down the boulevard of Carrera Diez. The air was hot and sticky now, the wind having died down in the early afternoon, Gaitan was due to speak at five o'clock. People joined the crawling streets all the time; mostly young, who from above looked like ants trying to escape the smoky heat.

Moving now into the square the sprawling mass created a bottleneck and it was some minutes before Epiphanio stepped off the gravel onto paved stone. People gradually filled each pocket of the large space, like cars in a car park.

Looking up, his dark sienna eyes came to rest above National Capitol, from which hung the Colombian flag, still in the breathless afternoon. A sea of liberal banners coloured the centre of the square to his left, their dense mass laced with lampposts that looked like pikes sticking out aggressively from the crowd. People had now well and truly spilled into the surrounding streets and people looked on from apartment terraces and store windows. Epiphanio felt watched. He nervously glanced at his skinny leather bound watch.

It was early evening before a small man had appeared on the long stage. The sun had risen so his figure was oddly shadowless in the white heat; he clutched at a paper in his hand.

“Good afternoon citizens of Bogota...I should have the pleasure today, of introducing to you the speakers for our revolutionary conference.”

He gave pause; the eyes of the crowd were wide and gleaming in the bleached heat.

“It is my sad duty however, to inform you of a regrettable action, which will not be forgotten.”

Murmurs infected the masses as his trailing voice revealed the thread of his words. Men and women turned to hard of hearing older relatives, relaying the communication. Parents cupped the faces of their children with sweaty palms, as they turned again to the stage.

What happened next happened quickly. The man was poised to carry on his statement and the square was deadly quiet with anticipation. Gunfire and a hoarse scream then shot from behind the crowd. Everything slowed for Epiphanio. Turning towards the sound he felt each wave of the scream tear through his body, mounting to a sickening crescendo. A pack of frightened animals now surrounded him. The scream and sounds of smashing glass seized the crowds in the thick heat so that slippery bodies now surged in every direction. Families desperately gathered children and grandparents to protect them from the stampede. A current of wretched figures clawed to escape the plaza, whose dark edifices now resembled the walls of a prison. Running, Epiphanio moved with the crowd and its sickening tribal rhythm, which took lead from the uproar of the blistering streets. He neared the road. Moaning and screaming proletariat now littered the ground and he leapt and stumbled over them.

People streamed past him as fires combusted in the street and flames licked the Palace of Justice. Watching down the thoroughfare he saw the shapes of crowds forming against the cityscape, shrouded by smoke and burning debris. The road crumbled in his vision, buildings and trees fading as the people in front moved forward, raising clubs and knives and guns, as if merely extensions of the arm.

To a bystander he was a waxen figure, his feet planted, blood seeping slowly down his left leg. His hair was thick with the filth of smoke and oil and charred rubber. Cries of the accusers and the accused rung out as the mob advanced.

Epiphanio felt as though he couldn't breathe and he looked away and up, searching for clear air. But instead what caught him were the lights of the mob. He rose to the sound of his galloping heartbeat. The irony was not lost on him at that time as he smiled dangerously in the black night. Neither the democrats nor communists nor America could take the glory of this revolution, the death of his martyr. He began moving, as if pulled by an invisible chain that ordered him to run, and to pick up a wooden club from the floor. The burning lights of the mob ignited his eyes; and he walked towards them.