

THE COUP BEGINS

A STORY BY
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The bad news is the coup begins at the same time every day. At exactly seven thirty the fleet leaves its moorings and all vessels take up their appointed stations; in particular, the cruiser and its squadron of destroyers and minesweepers moves to close off the harbour. At the same time helicopters carry special forces to strategic points around the city. Captain X, a notorious member of the junta, enters the parliament building with 220 armed members of the Civil Guard. They seize the chamber where deputies are merely in the act of taking their places for the morning debates. The leaders of the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, and the New Communist Front are removed from the chamber at gun-point and taken to the room where deputies go for interviews on public television and radio. This room is, in fact, a full-scale television studio, established a long time ago when the government first realised that if they were pleasant to the press they would have an easier time. There, in front of the television cameras, everyone, of course watching, the men are shot dead. There are no anarchists in parliament because they reject all government.

During the transmission, when the eyes of everyone at the station are turned to the monitors, watching, fascinated, the extinction of three human lives, the station itself falls to the rebels. It is the genius of the junta to understand that even the loyal military, who have been notified of the incursion of Captain X, and whose intelligence anyway has predicted these events, will nevertheless be held spell-bound by the transmission. From the moment that the national broadcast system has fallen everything proceeds as normal: All transport into and out of the city is halted. Delivery of foodstuff and other essentials must pass through roadblocks. Usually left-wing sympathisers – anarchists, anarcho-syndicalists, communists, activists of any kind – are shot beside their cars or lorries, or taken off trains and lined up beside the tracks, where the same fate awaits them, although not until the train has moved on. Newspaper editors, except those friendly to the coup are imprisoned. Curiously, trade-union leaders are rarely even reprimanded, despite all this blood. This may have been because the last stable government, which was Liberal, had abolished the right to strike and incorporated the unions as an extension of the industrial complex.



By ten o'clock, visitors to the National Gallery can hear a curious sound, like a stapler, coming from somewhere upstairs. This is the sound of artists being eliminated. Particular attention is paid to surrealists, cubists, photo-realists and print-makers (the latter because of their cooperation with political parties who every night cover the town in posters full of dire and slightly ridiculous warnings about the future) and performance artists. The performance artists take the longest because they are the most numerous. At the university they always start with the post-structuralists because this particular descendant of post-modernism infuriates the colonels with its emphasis on the primacy of language and its belief that reality is a construct of words. The colonels are nothing if not realists, and for this reason they have a subtle affinity with the Marxists whom they always shoot last. The list is comprehensive and surprising people appear on it: at the General Hospital abortionists and nurses who refused to sign the anti-abortion pledge but also those who have performed heart transplants; in the commercial sector, insurance agents; in the farming community, those who agreed to participate in trials of genetically modified seeds; in the religious communities, theologians who preached intelligent design. We are nothing if not forward-looking, Colonel P says. Parking metre attendants are tortured and shot. Those women die who sit at the entrance to public toilet facilities and take tips or sometimes have a hand-written sign displaying charges. Tree surgeons. Teachers of French. Stamp-collectors.

By lunch-time, when the heat is such that office-workers must think twice about leaving their air-conditioned building to go out to eat, the junta is in place. Executions of loyal officers and soldiers are happening at barracks, on airfields and on the ships of the fleet. Already the governments of the United States, Great Britain and China have recognised the junta as the de facto government, pending ratification by parliament which will meet briefly tomorrow before being prorogued until order can be restored. In the square in front of parliament students are gathering and whispering ominously of sinister forces, foreign governments and insurrection. Hotheads move among them calling for solidarity, for unity, for those with foreign connections to get the word out. Others openly talk of Molotov cocktails and the great struggles of the past – the October Revolution, the International Brigades, the great anti-war protests of 2003. A carnival attitude prevails along the fringes with illegal drug-taking and guitar music. Before nightfall the police, who of course, always go over to the junta to a man, will fire-indiscriminately into the crowd, killing most of the guitar players who are slower to hit the ground because of their instruments. Singers and tin-whistle players will have a lower casualty rate.

At exactly four o'clock the colonels make the pilgrimage to their old professor and formally call on him to take up the burden of the dictatorship. When he accepts they breathe a sigh of relief. He lives in retirement in a house with a walled garden. They invite photographers to take pictures of him sitting in the rose arbour. Night editors prepare the headlines: *Philosopher Assumes Power. Or: The Philosopher-King. Or: The Republic of Ideas.* Each newspaper according to its target readership. His first act is to sign the death warrants of those who will succeed him. They will be shot at dawn in the

traditional manner. This will be a liberal republic, he always says, in due course democracy will be restored, but not until the people have received a proper education in what it means to be free.

The colonels issue a press-statement. It is brief, expressed in the plain blunt language of such people. The crisis is over. Order has been restored. The stock exchange will re-open as normal. All roadblocks will be lifted overnight. The blockade of the harbour will be lifted. Air traffic will return to normal. The state of emergency will continue only as long as is necessary. Martial law will continue only as long as necessary. The colonels feel, but do not say, that the honour of the republic has been restored. They feel justified in their previous actions, in their conspiracy, in their cruel authoritarianism, by the nature of the crisis and by the success of their project. They have the best interest of the country at heart. They are decent people who take no pleasure in the extremes that have been forced upon them. They all have families and some have sons at university who have been infected by the very ideas they hate. In a fair world, they tell themselves, soldiers like them would live to an honoured retirement without ever having to meddle in the sordid world of politics.

During the night the country settles into an uneasy peace. Children whimper in their sleep. Old people recount tales of other days and other coups, or remember the time before coups when bloodshed seemed an impossible price to pay for anything. Young mothers wonder what will become of their children. Fathers feel both protective and frightened, as though they will be called upon to defend their homes. The explosion, when it comes, shatters every illusion. It happens after cock-crow. The wall is breached, the rose-arbour destroyed. The guards die in the blast. No one knows who is responsible for the death of the philosopher, but everyone knows the act will destabilise the state. Whatever hope of normality existed before the explosion, nobody now believes the future holds anything but danger. It is time to act. People whisper about the need for a firm hand, about sinister forces, about terrorism. They feel one more push against the enemy is required. And so at exactly seven thirty the fleet leaves its moorings. The coup begins.

BOOKS BY WILLIAM WALL

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