

The City of Drizzles

Seb, when did your fortune leave you? Sebastian Esteban slumps on the wretched bed, the musty smell of rotten slats crams into his lungs. His back, pressed against the brick wall that had almost paled its reddish color, no longer noticing the sweat soaked for days. Someone is here, who would that be? Probably another unfortunate idiot. Whatever. How long have I spent in this place? Several weeks? I can't remember. Santiago was supposed to write the editorials last week, he said he'd not write those for all the money in the world. God bless him and his notorious grammar.

A pair of knocks echoed on the rusty iron gate, each one a sharp, metallic declaration. The bolt dropped to the ground, producing a heavy thud that hung in the air. The shrill cacophony lasted less than one second before abruptly turning into silence; a thin, familiar figure—worn, like an old memory—shifted from the shadows, entering the more forgiving darkness. “Nice seeing you again, Mr. Sebastian.” His voice had that bizarre mix of familiar and foreign, like those old men you can find in any corner of Lima's streets and bars, out-lived and dried up; Who would approach you and strike up a conversation in a sticky morning or grey afternoon, always whistling with that usual, absentminded tone, asking the same clichéd question: how's your day been? You know they don't really care, and are even surprised that someone takes it seriously, yet you answer, somehow, you always answer. “Not good,” Sebastian mumbles. “Sorry, I didn't catch that.” The man takes off his coat, holds it in his arms, pulls a pen out from his pocket and brings out a notebook from the dark behind his coat. “Nothing, Señor Carlos.” He smiles, strained, barely making it past his lips, before turning his head toward the window in the corner of the room. The window was small, barely enough for him to glimpse a sliver of the murky sky and the fog-swallowed tip of the distant spire of a church tower. Sebastian knew, without a

doubt...outside... up above...falling down...onto the houses... the jail... Barranco...

Lima, the same miserable drizzle as always.

Dim lights from the antique bulb nearly consumed the whole cluttered space, all were immersed in the sunset vibe. Sebastian Esteban sat idly in the bar, immersed in the dull warmth that enveloped the room in a yellowish glow. His puffy eyes scanned the room as he called the waiter over: On the wall hung a fifteen-foot portrait of Audria with the presidential sash; on the counter nearby sat a photo of rockstar Presley; and in the corner, the unmistakable smell of weed lingers. Suddenly he saw a mirror, where there was a face swollen from copious alcohol consumption, a face he didn't recognize, a face of boredom and despair. An exact fit with this place, he thought. "Give me some beer." "Of course, Señor." "Have you heard anything recently? Whispers? Rumors?" Trouble never sleeps in a place like this. "Times are rough these days, Sr. Carlos' boys rounded up a fresh batch of APRA radicals the other day. Bet those anarchists are rotting in a cell right now." "I asked for beer, remember? Not Whisky." "It's the only drink left, Señor. Perhaps you should blame those martyrs for what they've done to this city." Beyond the half-closed wooden door, the drizzle falls softly, a dreary percussion under a sky so heavy and gray, tapping on the souls of everyone below.

He dreamed of that old rental in Barranco, the one he had haunted during his journalist years. *La Verdad*—what a name for a paper that wrung the truth dry. First, they shoved him into the detective section, then the local desk. Three years of rabid dog stories and meaningless fillers, all leading to the editorials. Those soul-draining, mind-numbing editorials. A slow death, he called it, and he was not wrong.

He woke up to the roar of the street, a sound that almost pierced his eardrums. One step outside of the bar, the weekend in Lima stifled him---- bustling bodies, noise, lives grinding forward. Along the way to the Plaza Mayor, there were beggars pleading for change, youths swaggering off to the Theatre Leuro for a night of dance; but the largest crowd, easily distinguished from the rest, were the students from San Marcos marching in protest against the Minister of the Interior. “As if getting the clown out could somehow save this godforsaken circus.” A camera and notebook pressed tight against his chest, he raised his right hand to block the rain, useless, the drops still found him, drenching his stride as he moved briskly toward the city hall. “Where are you off to?” “Chasing stories for *La Verdad*, Señor.” “Be careful you don’t get mistaken for an APRA and be hauled away.” “I know what I’m doing.” “Of course, you probably think you’ve got it all under control, but your job? It’s f...ed up.” “Political prisoner if you’re lucky. A vanishing act if you’re not.” Sebastian tilted his mouth, a look of resignation and desperation slowly taking over his face. “And let’s not forget the backwards schedule, Señor. Keeping hours like this—sooner or later, it’s gonna kill me.” With that, he bid him adios and turned to go, fishing a pack of Inca cigarettes from the left pocket of his coarse tweed coat. Not yet, he thought. As he walked, he tossed the half-smoked butts and remnants of his cigarette to a homeless man slouched against the curb. The man, grabbed them with a frantic, almost desperate hunger, inhaled the smoke into his lungs like it was salvation.

“Compañeros, we’re gathering here, today, not to play games, but to discuss the strike and the protest march!” Carlitos Judas slammed his fist on the table, the impact reverberating. The atmosphere in the warehouse grew thick with tension, the noisy chatter abruptly faded into a suffocating silence. “Carlos, that mountain rat, is holed up in his

office building now, but he'll have to come out sooner or later. The damn police chief already called for the National Guard yesterday, and today, it could very well be the army. Our time's running out, you all hear me?" He scanned the room with a brief glimpse, the old, ticking pendulum clock in the corner chimes. "Muy bien, compañeros. We need to unite. Do you remember what Jorge Gaitán said? 'El pueblo unido jamás será vencido(A united people can never be defeated)!' Let that be our rallying cry. Now, come on, comrades, we stick to the plan. And don't forget—no harm to innocent civilians. Revolution isn't Boléro, and it sure as hell isn't as simple as a Tango. Nathan, you take the East; Jesús, you've got the North. The rest of you, follow me to Southwest Square. Got it? We go there and smash all these bastards, and save our falling country! Let's bring down the military dictator and smash those nationalist dogs! Let's Go!"

Sebastian felt the whisky rising in his throat, a dizzying sensation that left him adrift. The stench of sweat mixed with industrial fumes, the dampness of the rain, and the cheap perfume drifting out from the street corner brothel—all of it hit him like a physical blow. It was too much. "I need air." His elbows rose to shoulder height, trying to carve out a space to breathe in the choking crowd. Hurry up, wrap it up... I can take no more. Why not just be direct on your useless speech? Los estudiantes with their armbands, those little pioneers in Mickey Mouse ties, leading the masses in chants for freedom, calling for the mountain rats to step down—it was too much to believe. Sebastian shut his eyes, lowered his head, and took a deep breath of the foul, polluted air. His hand instinctively went to his chest; his heart was still pounding, but at least he was alive. "Alright, time to get to work." He watched the leader raise both arms high, the crowd saluting him, as he seemed to grow more at ease, barking orders, directing the mob to storm the city hall. This time, it was

going to go wrong, he thought. He was swept forward by the crowd, the iron-thorned barricade at the entrance of the building drawing closer with push and shove. A rumble came from the left, growing louder with every passing second, accompanied by the deafening roar of an engine. “Damn it, they’re sending the military for a bunch of students?” Sebastian muttered under his breath. The students scattered in all directions as if a grenade had gone off among them, ignoring the shouts of the few in armbands at the center. He heard the speaker’s hoarse, enraged yell, and then saw a tear gas canister tumble between bodies, bounce, and explode in a thick cloud of smoke. The air turned white, enveloped the crowd with burning fumes and the stinging flood of tears. Everything blurred in the chaos that erupted. His neck, his palms, his thighs, his armpits—pushed together, suffocating in the surge of bodies. Screams filled the air, swallowed by the collective coughs, choking the life out of the moment. His legs gave out, the camera slipped from his hands, and he collapsed against the wall of bodies. All he could see were the figures with armbands darting in every direction, soldiers in the rear raising their rifles, firing into the chaos. His eyes refused to open. The air felt thick, suffocating, making each breath an impossible effort. His mouth gaped open, desperate for air, but it was useless. He was like a fish stranded on the shore, gasping for breath—but it didn’t matter anymore. He could no longer feel anything.

The lights flickered on in the prison corridor. A guard, holding a portable light, strode to the center of the bridge. “Who is Carlitos Judas?” No response. “I’ll ask again, who—” “I am.” A low, gravelly voice answered from Cell 258. This was absurd—first the police station, then the Ministry of the Interior, and now this? Sending me to military school for re-education? I’ve had enough. “Please follow me.” The guard hurried forward, his bulky

body shaking with each step. When Carlitos stepped out of his cell, he caught the eyes of a stranger in the next cell—bloodshot eyes, disheveled hair, and skin marked by the burns of tear gas. He walked down the flower-tiled hallway, curving and winding, up and down. At the end, there was a door with a metal nameplate hanging from the handle, but he couldn't make out the engraving. He pushed the door. It took some strength to open it. The room was large, with soft llama wool carpeting underfoot. Three antique sofas were arranged in the center, a round table between them, with a desk lamp flickering, its light pulsing erratically. Behind the table sat a male, an obscured figure, but dressed in a gray suit, who waved at him through the light spilling from the lamp. The voice came with an odd blend of urgency and indifference: "Hola, Carlitos Judas. You probably know me pretty well. I'm Salvador Carlos, also known as 'the Mountain Rat'. Your father, Don Fermín, asked me to bring his heir home safely. He doesn't want you causing him any more trouble. So, here I am. A young man's drive and his rebellious spirits are more than commendable, but I'd prefer you to focus it in the right direction." He smiled awkwardly, the kind of smile that didn't quite reach the eyes, that felt more like an apology than a greeting. "Thank you for the reminder, Sr. Salvador," that bastard, I'll see you out of power soon enough. "But, if I'm guilty, how am I supposed to return to the villa in San Miguel?" Damn it, if he makes any outrageous demands, I'd rather go to Bolivia or the Leoncio Prado Military School. "Your neighbor: you must have seen him, the journalist from La Verdad," Carlos paused for a moment. "He'll be off to Bolivia for a few years, maybe forever. Who knows? Or more precisely, who cares? He'll make the headlines too, I suppose. Something like, 'Former Editorialist Incites the Masses, Attempts to Overthrow the Government.' Hmm, not bad. We fabricate a few more lies, slip a few dollars, the communists are more than willing to be 'corrupted by capitalism', and the whole thing is done. What do you think?" "The shackles are uncomfortable," Judas replied. "Well, that's just splendid. Do you need

me to send a car, or do you prefer travelling on your own?" Carlos smiled, but there was no joy in his eyes. "I'll manage on my own." "Bien, then. I'll take my leave. Someone will come by shortly to arrange for your release. But remember, don't go out too soon. It'd make the clean-up a bit more difficult." Carlos gave a slight bow, and in the blink of an eye, he vanished from view.

Seb, you're in some serious trouble. For taking photos for *La Verdad*, now you're going to take the fall for Carlitos Judas—the anarchist lunatic that the greatest bourgeoisie of this country spawned. Yes, your fortune left you from that time, Seb, the time you came to this world. "Carlitos is a good kid," Carlos said, his hands cupping his chin. "Someone doesn't want any 'blemishes' on his record, not even a small protest. So, as for you, Sebastian, I believe it's entirely reasonable and well-supported that you would engage in such an anti-government action." Sebastian feels a twinge of confusion, struggling to force a smile. "Sí, sí, Señor.... So then..."

Carlos raises his left hand, glancing at his watch. It was already 2:58 PM. "Afterward, you'll go to Bolivia: La Paz, in case you are wondering. Stay there for years, perhaps decades. Until you're so familiar with the position of every bench in La Paz, color of every house, and design of every triangular tile in front of the churches that it becomes your second nature. Until you return and wander on the streets of Lima again, and not a single face recognizes you. Until this city is nothing but a blur in your memory, you're here, yet can't recognize a thing."

"By then, you'll be ready to meet God, my dear disciple Esteban."