

Mr Huxley and the case for sedition

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IT IS A PECULIAR THING that convictions one has held for years can be destroyed by an act committed in the span of ten minutes. I suppose it is a function of our inherent malleability — a very human thing indeed. But I am ashamed to discuss human things in this account, for I feel that I no longer possess the qualities that truly constitute humanity, and lost them long ago with my induction into the Company, and again with my actions committed barely a fortnight ago.

I record those events now so that I may gain respite, but also so that I may be punished and in that way recover some form of my ‘Soul’. Even dictating that age-old term sends shivers down my spine; I have truly crossed into dark, unauthorised territory.

The evening began with a Summons. It was to be an intimate occasion — a gathering with Department heads and the Company Chief — the man I had so longed to converse with, to view even.

‘*For the People.*’ The words were emblazoned above the entry to the Headquarters and reading them made my heart swell with pride. How foolish I was to believe that what we did was for our fellow man and not ourselves alone.

Inside the grand foyer, I was greeted by familiar faces waiting outside the elevator. There was Horatio, Minister of Education, and Murphy, Minister of Allocation of Resources,

and, with a trembling voice I speak his name — my long-time friend Huxley, Minister of Populace Participation. There were other faces, but I cannot recall them now but as a blur of faces and waistcoats. We stepped into the elevator, all of us conversing lightly about our departments, and then as we passed the 50th floor, we began to excitedly discuss the meeting. Together, we concluded that it was to be a roundtable on the future of the Company.

‘What if it’s about the ... Incident?’ interrupted one of the men with a tremor. Benjamin, I think it was. The group fell silent and then after a moment, Horatio shook his head.

‘No, we dealt with that.’

But when the elevator doors parted noiselessly on the 110th floor, an ominous air hung heavy in the opulent hallway that greeted us. I had thought then that perhaps it had not been adequately dealt with.

The hallway was shadowy, illuminated only partially by neon globes hanging low. We passed beneath them; Horatio removed his bowler hat, and the group of men shuffled in a hushed line down the hallway. A large entrance opened at the end of it. My excitement was largely diminished now by a nervousness that increased the more I walked. I instinctively halted in the doorway and noted that a large conference table that must have occupied the centre of the vast room had been pushed against a wall. In its place there were a number of chairs arranged in a circle. There were three men in the room — two Company Guards stood against a wall, and a singular figure, certainly the Chief, stood by the floor-to-ceiling glass windows with his back to us. He was still, as if a statue, and one would have thought so if it were not for the slight twitch of his head and the movement of the fabric of his black coat. I swallowed, stepping silently into the room, followed by the others.

‘Gentlemen.’ The word hung pregnant in the air, perfectly articulated. I glanced at the other men, and anxiety was evident

in their expressions. Finally, the man turned around and I was able to observe him. He was an older man with a stern face and dark, deep-set eyes that stared out at us in one sweeping gaze.

‘I am the Chief Executive.’

He stopped, and after a few seconds one of the men piped up, ‘It is a great honour to meet you sir.’

The Chief nodded slowly and with great emphasis. Then he continued, ‘I have gathered you all here today to aid me in making an important administrative decision.’

He moved closer towards us.

‘In light of recent events, I wish to be apprised of the dedication of my Department heads to the mission of the Company’ — and there was an audible intake of breath — ‘so that I may commit myself to the task of restructuring. As you see before you, a circle of chairs. I am sure you have all heard of the old game of Musical Chairs.’

There were strained smiles and nods from among the men.

‘It is a quaint game, but effective in demonstrating Company loyalty.’

He placed two large hands on the back of a chair.

‘Here are the rules. There are fourteen chairs — and fifteen of you. I will play music’ — and I recall thinking *Music? I suppose rank has its perks* — ‘And when the music stops, each of you will attempt to sit on a chair. He who does not obtain a chair to sit on will be ... relocated.’

My heart pounded. I had heard about relocation.

‘After each round, a chair will be removed. I will do this until I am down to five chairs. Those men who obtain a chair are free to return to their posts. The rest of you will be relocated.’

Each of us was rooted in our spot. The Chief clapped his hands together.

‘Prepare yourselves! The game will begin in a minute.’

He turned and went to the far wall where he had a contraption — a music player — and he began adjusting dials and knobs. The men turned inwards and we each looked at the other — and for the first few seconds camaraderie bound us in our disquiet, but then as the time was whittled down, expressions became stony and we turned away from one another. I remember I had looked at Huxley — and he gazed at me with his round blue eyes that were unmistakably filled with fear — and I looked away. I removed my coat and threw it on the floor. I loosened my tie and rolled up my sleeves, as did the others.

The music had begun. The song was a catchy upbeat jingle, quite unsuited to the wave of anxiety that abided in each of us. The first man to miss a chair did so simply because he did not immediately realise what was happening. Those who had sat down gazed at him with sadness, but also with relief that they were not him. Ashamedly, I did this too.

The next four rounds passed similarly, but there was jostling and cries of anger and distress. Still, I had found a seat, being quick on my feet. The Chief was evidently deriving great pleasure from watching the game — he sat on his own chair and although he sat very still, his lips curled up at the edge and his eyes watched animatedly. Each of the men was coated in a fine sheen of sweat, for one round sometimes lasted five or ten minutes, and great energy was expended maintaining hyper-vigilance during that time.

In the sixth round, Horatio elbowed Murphy so violently in the chest there was an audible crack, and he stumbled back, gripping his ribs and shrieking.

In the second-last round there remained Horatio, Benjamin, Huxley and I, as well as three other men I was not familiar with. I had been lucky to this point, but my heart was beating so uncomfortably fast and I felt that my legs would give way at any moment. I managed to yank a chair out of the hands of one of the men, to his great dismay, and the chair

looked as if it were about to fall apart. Although I was tired, I was driven on by the conviction that I had displayed my loyalty to the Company and *deserved* this. But I know now that I was being compelled by fear. I knew how little I had in my life besides the Company and the horrific things I had authorised — yes I can resign myself to this truth — and selfishly, I could not imagine a life as one of ‘the people.’

The final round began with a jaunty tune, and the piercing sound of violins and saxophones filled the room. The atmosphere had become eerie, the music like a thin veneer of merry-making — and any person looking in might see a group of sweaty, loud men shoving and jumping raucously and judge it just a *game* — but truly, the entire event was one of perversity and malevolence. We had paced for perhaps six minutes. I was looking at the back of Huxley’s head. He was looking down at his feet, perhaps concentrating, or more likely wondering how he even got himself into this situation. I knew Huxley — he was not a man of competition or viciousness, and regrettably I admit that I had begun to analyse him as a predator does their prey. For I knew the time was upon us, and he would be the one I would have to contend with.

Finally the tune stopped and the Chief had shouted out something like ‘That’s it!’ and I immediately reached for the chair between myself and Huxley, and we collided bodies. I grabbed at the chair, as did he, and he looked at me and said, ‘Earnest’, and I did not know if he was pleading with me or warning me, or what ... but I felt furious, and knowing that the others had sat and they and the Chief had fixed their gazes on me, and the entire City was sprawled out before us and perhaps every citizen was looking up at me and wishing I would simply disappear ... well I don’t know what came over me, but I growled and I punched Huxley right in the jaw. He stumbled back but he was a sturdy man, as I knew him to be, and he did not relinquish his grasp of that chair but instead he looked at

me with such *disbelief* — I couldn't stand it, and with one hand left on the chair I threw my shoulder and punched him again, this time landing the blow on the side of his head. His head jerked awkwardly and he crumpled to the floor. I was gaping at him but I still managed to sit down. The Chief was clapping, I think, and I and the others were staring down at Huxley lying on his side, his golden hair brushed over his red face. We were waiting for him to get up, but he didn't. He didn't get up because I had killed him.

The Chief walked over to us and said, 'Brilliant play! I know now the men I can trust, and those I cannot.' And he did not even look down at Huxley. He sent us on our way and none of us spoke in the elevator, for assuredly each of us was ashamed for what we had revealed of ourselves. But I, the most.

I am dictating this now because for the murder of Huxley I was not prosecuted. It was actually seen as a great display of my devotion to the Company. This has tormented me and I am haunted by the image of Huxley's face as he murmurs my name.

Now as I sit, I can hear shouts and banging on my apartment door. That sound brings me some comfort. In my years of service, I knew only one thing for sure — to commit this to record, as I do now, is death.

For the Company I have only seething hatred, and for the things we have 'done for the people' — those things are lies — deceptions of the greatest magnitude. Ironically, my time in service of 'the people' has taught me nothing about people, except about the sort of person I have become.

At last, I can turn off the recorder and be silent. They are here, and the time is upon me.



Maiya Elali wrote this in 2013 as a university undergraduate student in New South Wales.