

The President

The President liked to eat chocolates very much.

He stored them in a tall, oak display cabinet which took centre stage in the President's Office, lacquered to a sleek sheen and glistening with chocolatey riches within. To open it was to open the doors to a pantry, a museum of chocolate, and much like the curator of precious art only the President had the key. Any new goodies would be left on the small table beside it so that he could carefully place them in the correct order. And new goodies came in frequently and from all over. Switzerland, Germany, Belgium. Household brands to the world's finest chocolatiers. From bars of Hershey's to boxes of Pierre Marcolini. Something for every mood or occasion.

It was Monday 1 June 2009, a date which would later be seen as momentous in the nation's history. The President sat half sunk in his chair and gazed out of the window to his right, where protesters had already started to gather for the day. The morning sun pierced through the glass and he could feel himself growing wet with perspiration, stewing in a wide, beige-grey suit which sweated and mildewed from contact with the leather chair. The air was stale and hot, like in a greenhouse. The President was waiting for 10.00am. And when it came, Ali and Georgi, his chief advisors, arrived for their meeting as punctually as ever.

'If you have one, I'll have one,' said the President, sliding a box of Guylian across the desk.

'Your Excellency, under the current circumstances I do not have an appetite for chocolate.'

'This one has praline in it. You'd like that.'

They each took one, following which the President took two and the meeting could begin. The mood was sombre and he knew why. Last night did not go well. The President had never appeared on live television unscripted before and the Opposition Leader tore him to shreds.

'10 years of neglect. Of bad decisions. Of sheer incompetence. Of overcrowded schools. Of half-built roads. Of underfunded hospitals. And where does all the money go instead? 28 million spent by the Ministry of Nourishment and Wellbeing on cocoa from Ecuador last year alone! A President who has done more for farmers in Latin America than in his own country.'

'Was that true, is it really 28 million?' asked the President, now back in the comforts of his office. 'Can one of you check with the Ministry?'

They took no notice of this request. The Ministry of Nourishment and Wellbeing had been the President's own brainchild – officially tasked with the noble aim of improving the people's diet and thereby their happiness but whose goal had only ever in reality been the proliferation of chocolate consumption on spurious scientific grounds of promoting good mental health. For the President, the logic was simple. You could not be sad when eating a chocolate. It had not traditionally been a chocolate-eating nation and he saw these delights as ones which each of his fellow countrymen and women deserved to enjoy. So, he installed himself as the head of the Ministry. It was the reason for the establishment of a state-owned chocolate manufacturer, Chocomax. It was the reason for National Chocolate Day.

'And National Chocolate Day,' the Opposition Leader had barked, 'is yet another insult to the people. Do you think you can buy us all off with a free piece of candy once a year?!'

The President knew it was a trick question. It was so cleverly worded that to say 'No' would have been to admit that this was all that National Chocolate Day was, a form of cheap bribery and a failed one at that. So he said nothing, instead melting under the bright lights of the cameras and forgetting everything which Ali and Georgi had prepped him to say beforehand. He had failed them and now he was too embarrassed to look them properly in the eye.

His advisors were each considerably older than the President and Ali had even served under the President's father. Lean, neatly dressed, with slicked charcoal hair and a thin, black moustache, Ali did not seem to have aged at all since the day he had been appointed. Back when, in the President's eyes, he was just Uncle Ali. By contrast, Georgi was tall, broad, plump and could easily be mistaken for a hitman. In spite of their long years of service, they were both full of energy and still thoroughly at the heart of government. Sitting in front of them now, the President felt like he was on trial before a jury, awaiting judgment for an abysmal performance in yesterday's televised debate. He was ashamed.

'Let's talk about what we're going to do next, shall we?' said Ali.

The crowd outside was getting louder. The President got up and closed the blinds.

'It was too hot,' he said. 'Please, Ali, do continue.'

'Option one is to go ahead with reforms, as we have discussed previously.'

The President nodded vacantly.

'So,' said Ali, 'the creation of a parliament, elections, some powers for you, some powers for the new parliament.'

'Let's do that. What would we need to do?'

'Invite the Opposition Leader for talks as to how power will be divided.'

The President recoiled at the thought.

'What's the other option?'

'Option two is to do another televised debate. We say the agenda yesterday was biased to the Opposition and we prepare you thoroughly on what you need to say. *Word for word.*'

'Yeah,' chuckled Georgi, arms folded and either unable or unwilling to hide his bitterness. 'That should be easy.'

The President popped another two Guylians into his mouth and darted his eyes back toward Ali.

'If we were to do option one and do the talks,' he said, with chocolate still in his mouth, 'would you need me for that?'

'Georgi and I could probably do it, if it came to it.'

'Let's do that then.'

Then a pause.

'Your Excellency,' Ali hesitated. 'There is something else.'

The President felt like he was frying under their gaze, Georgi's in particular. The sweat secreting from his palm was leaving marks on the armrest of his chair like handprints. He waited to hear what Ali had to say.

'Whilst we will do our best to arrange for talks with the Opposition to take place, it is not that easy. Since the debate, the situation has become... well, it has... *intensified*.'

The President could still hear the chanting outside in all its vitriol and felt the need to fill the silence with more conversation quickly.

'What do you mean?'

'What we mean to say is that the demands of the protesters have changed a bit and reforms may no longer be acceptable to them. They may not want the talks.'

From the way Ali was speaking, the President could sense that something was being left unsaid and it took a kick under the desk from Georgi for him to continue.

'We have been told that the Opposition is speaking to several Army officials about the possibility of defecting. And without the Army, there would be nothing standing between the protesters outside the Palace and... the people inside. Your Excellency, it is our duty to tell you that this could happen at any moment.'

And then, finally:

'In which case, option three would be resignation.'

Resignation. The word lingered in the room, heavy with feeling for the President. For how long the silence that followed lasted, he did not know. What if Ali was still not telling him the full truth? What if the reality was to be one step further than just 'resignation'? Normally, he liked news to be sugar-coated for him – he had even told them as much once – but now he wanted to know the grim details of his predicament.

'Very well, I will go and try to establish contact with the Opposition immediately,' said Ali.

And with that, Ali and Georgi had left.

Despite the gravity of the situation, it had been the shortest Monday morning meeting the President could remember. A hot, overwhelming feeling started to take over, enveloping his body like a smothering rash. It was the feeling that, from this moment on, nothing would ever be the same again. The most consequential changes in one's life always seem to come without prior notice.

Alone in the dark, he stood up at his desk, feeling his moist palms against the lacquered wooden surface. He walked over to the window and flicked one of the blinds up to peer through the rectangular slit of light. The soldiers were still lined up around the Palace's perimeter. For now.

He suckled on a Guylian, savouring the rich, nutty taste in his mouth. The noise outside seemed deafening, bolstered by the arrival of a large drum to lead the chanting. It was a big party now and there were smiles of hope and optimism on people's faces as they voiced their demands in unison.

'The people deserve better than you, Mr President,' the Opposition Leader had said.

Unable to withstand the noise any longer, he decided to go for a walk around the Palace.

He walked for a while. It was good to pass the time. He walked through the Conference Hall, the Ceremony Hall, the Security Council Hall. Floors trimmed with marble, granite and art parquet, walls dressed in paintings set against cream wallpaper, the rooms twinkling with gold features and the glint of chandeliers. All built by his father in the expectation that it would serve as a beacon for independence in the region. He walked from the East Wing to the West Wing, passing through a maze of libraries, meeting rooms and relaxation rooms, before going down a floor to the bureaucrats' offices.

The Palace was a ghost town. The bureaucrats were all gone, presumably having defected or even fled the country. The cleaners must have not been showing up to work either, as the bins beside the desks had paper in them. The President picked up a phone and pressed it against his ear, but the line was cut.

He kept walking.

He walked and walked. Through corridors. Down staircases. The echo of his footsteps filled the air wherever he went. This was his home as well as his place of work, yet all the photographs that hung on the walls were of handshakes with old men he could not remember the name of. It was handshake after handshake. He looked at his right hand with admiration. It had got through some serious work over the years.

It was only all the way down in the kitchen that the President eventually decided to stop walking. There was a serenity about it which cooled his body. The smooth surface of the stainless steel workstations. The knives arranged neatly in a block on the side: red handle for meat, blue for fish and green for vegetables. Not a thing in the sink. The kitchen staff had not shown up to work either and, come to think of it, he and Ali had been eating a lot of boiled rice and beans of late – a dish which Ali probably would have been able to cook himself.

Best of all, though, here in the basement you could not hear anything. Almost at once, like a shelter from the events developing outside the Palace. Total quiet.

So he took a chair from a utility room and picked up a bar of Chocomax from the kitchen pantry and sat.

It was delicious. He sat there for a while appreciating the chocolate's many qualities. It was sugary but it was good, and so silky smooth that it was impossible to resist another bite. He could remember, in the early days of the Ministry, visiting the factory to do a tasting of the various samples presented to him, one of his favourite days as President. As he ate now, he congratulated himself that he definitely made the right choice that day. It was that good.

Revelling in the headspace of his own thoughts, he got up and started making to the pantry for another when something high up caught his eye.

Recipe books.

He took the chair and stood on it to have a closer look.

Tens of recipe books, all of which looked like they belonged to the chefs back in his father's days. As a child, the President would watch them hard at work in the kitchen all day long. The chefs loved having him around and the President adored every single moment he got to spend in their presence. It was not like he did not help out, either. The President did his bit too. They let him squeeze the lemons, mash the potatoes and crush the garlic. In fact, it was his particular fondness for the garlic crusher that once led a Chinese delegation to express their 'surprise' at the unusual taste of a cheesecake

which they had been served during a banquet at the Palace. But the chefs never ratted him out. And as he got older, his visits to the basement only became more frequent. They let him borrow recipe books and cookery magazines which he kept stashed under his bed, hidden away like pornography. All the other teenagers his age dreamt about the naked women in *Baywatch*. Instead, aged 14, the President dreamt about petit fours. He begged his father to let him finish schooling early to become an apprentice in the kitchen. Then his father had a heart attack and the rest is history.

He picked up the recipe book which he had always been drawn to the most:

‘THE BIG BOOK OF DESSERTS’.

And so, just like that, the President spent his last hours in a basement making a glazed chocolate tart.

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He got to work. Suit off, apron on. Like he had been doing this all his life.

The top of the page said:

‘PREPARATION TIME – 3 HOURS 15 MINUTES’.

He checked the time. That would take him to about 3.00pm. It did not even cross his mind that Ali would not know he were down here if something happened.

First, the crust, which should have been easy enough. Two ingredients: biscuits and butter, ground to a crumbly mixture. He eyeballed the food processor for quite some time, fascinated and terrified as if standing before one of nature’s great predators. They definitely did not have this back in his father’s days. So instead, he did like he had seen the chefs do back then and crushed the biscuits by hand. To melt the butter, he opted for the microwave and figured five minutes would do the job, without realising he’d be detonating the contents inside. Disappointed to find that his butter had turned unusually gaseous, he gave it another few goes before he finally had a form he could mix into the biscuits and, remembering what the chefs used to say (‘Always test first’), took a small spoonful to taste. Taste was good.

Into the oven for 10 minutes.

Meanwhile, Army officials and Opposition leaders were congregating in a meeting room somewhere not far from the Palace.

Next, the filling. After some not insubstantial difficulty getting the gas cooker to light, the President brought the cream to a boil whilst simultaneously melting the chocolate – Chocomax, of course – this time over a water bath, and mixed these two together. The recipe called for vanilla extract but, after looking for it in all the wrong places, he decided to freestyle and substituted it with ginger, figuring that it would pair well with chocolate. Having ground it with a pestle, he added the ginger to the chocolate-cream mixture bit by bit, dipping his little finger each time until his taste buds were singing. Perfect.

Into the oven on top of the crust for another 20.

The President was having so much fun. Then he saw the mess.

What a mess it was. He could not believe how many pots he had used already. A graveyard of unnecessary utensils in the sink. Streaks of molten chocolate on the surfaces. Taking a look at himself,

it had spread onto his body, like a nasty case of delicious shingles. He didn't even want to look inside the microwave, whose glass was spattered in buttery-coloured blood.

For a moment, he thought nothing could possibly be worth cleaning this up. That he'd rather the firing squad came in and shot him dead there and then and it'd be their problem. It took a surge of inner strength to finally start scrubbing. Initially with minimal efficacy but spurred on by the smells wafting from the oven, he cleaned the pots, wiped the surfaces and, since the filling was still baking, even swept the floors.

With the kitchen ready for round two – and the powers that be deciding on the future of his country – the President turned his attention to the glaze. Like before, this began with the adding of hot cream to melted chocolate, which the President now did with greater ease. Next, a dollop of honey. The recipe said to use 'light corn syrup', but what on earth was that? Honey would do. Finally, just a bit of warm water until the consistency was just right. A pot of shiny brown, liquid gold.

By this time the tart had both baked and cooled completely, and the President poured the glaze lovingly over the top.

The only thing left now was to wait. 45 minutes to an hour for the glaze to set.

They say that for every passion, there is a price to pay. In the President's case, it was probably bigger than for most. He never did find out if he made a good chocolate tart. He never got the chance.

And that was how they found him.

Sitting in his apron, on a chair, in an empty kitchen. Waiting for the glaze to set on his chocolate tart.