

Patriot Acts

Jonathan pours himself another scotch -- his second of the morning -- as he glances at the clock on the mantel, the incessant ticking grating on his already taut nerves. Sarah has been gone over an hour now. The headquarters are only a ten-minute walk away, in what used to be the Governor's mansion, but it is possible that even Sarah might have to wait to be seen by Colonel Preston.

Thank heaven, Jonathan thinks, that he made the wise decision to befriend the Colonel as soon as the Peace Party took office. There were those who actually criticized Jonathan for his allegiance to the Party, but time has only proved him right. He did the best thing for his own sake and that of his family, and more people should have followed his example. Then there wouldn't have been all of this trouble. People should know when they have it good, Jonathan thinks as he sips his scotch. After all, most of the changes have been for the better. People used to be afraid to walk the streets at night. Only a few months ago Mrs. Gerard from across the street was held up walking home from a bridge game, right in their neighborhood. Two thugs knocked her to the ground, stealing her handbag and, what was much worse, breaking the poor woman's wrist. And a few weeks earlier a co-worker at Sarah's real-estate office was robbed of her car at gunpoint right in the parking lot of the drug store. But with all the Security Officers around these days, no-one needs to worry about that kind of thing. And with the curfew in place, there is no safer place in the world after dark.

Granted, the curfew hasn't been exactly popular. But it wouldn't have been necessary, Jonathan maintains, if it weren't for all those entitled malcontents causing trouble to begin with.

Especially young people. Where did they ever get the idea they could spit in the face of authority? Why can't people raise their children properly, like he and Sarah have done with Emily? At the thought of Emily, Jonathan's hands start shaking and he puts down his glass of scotch.

Jonathan calms himself. He has taken precautions, he reminds himself, by choosing the right side from the start. They have even had Colonel Preston over for dinner. Sarah had hired a cook from the country club who prepared a magnificent meal, and Emily, beautiful Emily, sat with them at the table with her long hair held back in a headband, politely answering questions and helping her mother to serve and clear the table. After dinner, Jonathan and the Colonel retired to the living room for hours, where they had drinks and smoked some of Jonathan's best cigars, the ones imported from South America before the embargo on foreign products. They talked about sports, music, and philosophy – so many ideas they had in common, Jonathan later told Sarah, beaming with pride.

There have been some ugly stories, of course, but rumors always fly at times like these. There was that weird business with the Reilly's, for example. Scott Reilly, a teacher at the High School, was escorted out of his classroom in the middle of the day by Security Officers, and the next morning he, his wife, and their two-year-old daughter had moved away. Taken away, some people said, but that's absurd; Jonathan doesn't believe that. Obviously the Party's new curriculum guidelines didn't mesh with Reilly's teaching philosophy, so he found a different job elsewhere -- probably had it lined up for weeks. Reilly was always a bit of a radical, especially on topics like immigration, which was clearly misguided because look how business and safety have improved now that all the illegals who remained past the deadline have been rounded up.

But that hasn't stopped the rumors from upsetting Sarah. Sarah cried this morning. In fact, she was nearly hysterical. She kept going on about stories she'd heard about people in other towns being taken away, sometimes dragged out of their homes at night, their families given no contact with the prisoners and no explanation until a military car pulled up to the door and an officer stepped out, very proper and efficient, presenting a long white envelope with an official wax seal to the family.

But those are just stories, Jonathan insisted. Malicious, damaging stories instigated by just those kinds of losers who ruin things for everyone else by flouting the rules. People like those vandals who broke into the census office to steal food rations booklets last week. Well, now that is just stealing, and the Peace Party made their "zero tolerance" policy against crime clear from the start, so what did those people expect?

Jonathan was just doing his civic duty when he alerted the police to the light burning in the abandoned warehouse across the river last night. He had been walking the dog when he saw the glow of a dim light, and it was nearly curfew, and hadn't he and Colonel Preston agreed to keep one another abreast of any developments? Jonathan was sure the Colonel would appreciate his vigilance. It was just a phone call, something any responsible person would do, at least anyone who cares about keeping peace and safety in the community.

And how was he to know, Jonathan thinks for the hundredth time? Of course he expected they might find some of those troublemakers there. Why else such sneaky, suspicious behavior? But he couldn't have known they would be so young. And never, not for one second, did he imagine she would be there. Anyone but her.

She had just kissed him and Sarah good night, only an hour before he went out with the dog. She claimed she had a headache and wanted to go to bed early, and that's where he thought she was, safe in her bed, while Sarah and Jonathan watched television by the fire, enjoying the warm sense of security that they felt in the evenings after curfew set in.

It was his family that he thought of as he made the phone call. His family, whose safety he wanted to ensure above anything else. So when he received a call early this morning – not even from the Colonel, but from some idiot bureaucrat who had never heard of Jonathan – that Emily had been arrested with a group of insurrectionists involved in printing an underground newspaper (“resistance propaganda,” the officer called it) in the abandoned warehouse, Jonathan knew there was some mistake. Such moronic incompetence, he thought as he mounted the steps to Emily's room. How could anyone think his Emily had anything to do with those delinquents? But as he opened the door to Emily's bedroom, the cold wind blew from the open window across her empty bed and grasped his heart in an icy grip.

“It's all right, it's going to be all right,” he told Sarah, clutching her arms as she flailed at his chest, sobbing. He shook her impatiently, her lack of control angering him almost as much as her lack of faith in him. “As soon as Colonel Preston hears about this everything will be straightened out.” Jonathan had been on the phone with the headquarters all morning and made certain that everyone from the Chief of Security to the lowest clerk knew who Emily was: the daughter of Colonel Preston's very good friend, Jonathan Petersen, and that there had been a mistake, one which must be put right at once and then forgotten about forever.

Sarah would not wait to hear from Colonel Preston; she was going to the headquarters herself. But Jonathan, afraid that they might miss the Colonel's call, elected to stay at home by

the phone. The Colonel would call him first thing, he was certain, and Jonathan would be much more capable of calmly explaining the situation from his own house than if he appeared, breathless and disheveled, at the Colonel's office. But mothers were good for such displays.

And still the phone has not rung. Jonathan is unable to sit still; he paces the floor like a caged animal, and glances out of the window every few minutes for a sign of Sarah. Finally he picks up the phone and dials the headquarters again.

“Yes, Mr. Petersen, I am certain Colonel Preston has received your message. The Colonel is very busy but I assure you he is aware of your situation. He will call you as soon as he is able.” The Colonel's secretary hangs up and Jonathan is left holding a dial tone to his ear. He hangs up the phone, realizing with a sinking feeling that the Colonel has been in the office for some time without calling him. He tops off his glass of scotch, but Jonathan's stomach is so tight now that he cannot touch a drop of it.

Jonathan stands by the window, his fingers nervously drumming on the sill. He sees a woman approaching along the sidewalk who looks a bit like Sarah. She wears the same camel coat and brown hat and gloves, but she seems much older, her shoulders hunched, her feet shuffling along the ground. And then, when the woman is nearly at the front gate, Jonathan realizes with a sinking feeling of horror that it is Sarah. Sarah is walking in a daze, her eyes unfocused, her head hanging. Jonathan runs to the front door, fumbling with the lock and chain while through the window of the door he sees Sarah clutch the front gate as though her legs are unable to bear her weight. Suddenly, Sarah's knees buckle and she falls in a heap on the front path, and Jonathan screams, pounding the door as he sees the long white envelope with the official wax seal fall from his wife's hands.

THE END