

Toccata and Fugue in Fugu

Written by Kishore Tejaswi

Fidel Castro "The commander in chief of the Cuban revolution died at 22:29 hours this evening (03:29 GMT Saturday) 26th November, 2016," President Raul Castro said.

Fidel Castro ruled Cuba as a one-party state for almost 50 years before Raul took over in 2008.

Here is a story written by my friend Kishore Tejaswi a fiction inspired by the friendship of Fidel and [Che. Guevara](#)

On the day the trial ended, Colonel Francesco addressed the nation in a rare radio broadcast. There was a melancholy in his voice that they had never heard before and his speech was punctuated by long, uncomfortable pauses, which the swirling, crackling airwaves of the short band signal rushed to fill in with suitably mournful whistles. They heard him choking at first, followed by an audible sigh. Then the formidable steel in his voice rose once more, mindful of propriety, and he continued.

“...However, my children, duty reigns supreme. As a patriot, I *refuse* to consider *my* emotions. And so must you, good people. My loyalty to him as a friend lies poorly with my duty as a patriot. The heart cannot, *does not*, endure this pain. At the moment of my greatest agony, I shall be at his side as his dearest friend. One cannot be a stone, cannot be dispassionate; and yet, one cannot be a staunch loyalist, a true nationalist, torn apart by dual emotions, either.”

This time the pause was brief, stern.

“Therefore, at his last supper, on the day the sentence is carried out, I shall be his companion, but in the morning, I shall be the relentless, unforgiving hammer that falls on the soul of a wretched traitor”, the Colonel shrieked.

“And, you, my friends, my beloved countrymen, are invited to witness this last supper. A month from now, my people, with a heavy heart I must fulfil my duty as a friend and I yearn for your goodwill, your support and your presence, well into the small hours of the morning when the traitor shall be placed before the firing squad and I shall have to perform my duty as your

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leader in the end. Knowing my burden, this unbearable pain, I ask you this, my brothers and sisters, will you help me steel my nerves? Will you stand by me at the moment of *our* greatest victory and

my

greatest defeat? I ask nothing of you, but this. Good night, my people.

Vive la Revolucion

”

The radio broadcast broke into martial music that echoed across the land. The Dali-esque moustache started quivering as the Colonel looked at his ADC, inquiringly.

“Was it alright?”, the Colonel asked.

The ADC flew to his side.

“The very best speech, ever. The noblest and the best, Colonel. This will be repeated in history as the greatest speech ever made by a friend and a...”

The Colonel harshly cut him off, “But, has *he* agreed?”

The ADC squirmed, withering before the rattlesnake tremor of facial hair.

“*Su excellenzia*, he has. But... but...”, he stuttered.

“Come on, spit it out, you pig”

“But, *su excellenzia*... he has a strange request. He says he shall discuss it and finalize it with you and no one else. He refuses to agree to anything without your presence there”.

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The Colonel roared in frustration.

“Even at this hour, he defies me. I am sure it is another one of his tricks, so that he can force me to deny his request and make me look like a despot. His tricks are well known to me. He will not make me look like a fool. Not this time. Take me there at once”, he shouted.

The trembling officers led him towards his limousine and the cavalcade of armoured cars and infantry trucks hastily drove towards the Army headquarters. They drove past the whispering sugarcane plantations, beyond the defensive perimeters of the naval batteries and the anti-aircraft gun placements, all eerily silhouetted in the moonlit night, past a land which already mourned the passing of a bygone era with dark craters and fresh mounds strewn along the countryside. Devastation marked the miles, as they drove across a country which bore the scars of a thousand bombing campaigns.

The prison finally loomed ahead, ominously, darkly hovering like a malicious presence in the barren landscape of the eastern end of the island. The gates parted with alacrity and when his limousine came to a halt at the entrance, the Colonel stepped out. His staff waited outside as he disappeared into the interiors that stank of fear, blood, sweat and death. The warm, humid air seemed to turn cold when he entered the corridors. The prison guards led him towards the section which housed the condemned. The shrieks from the common cells that had greeted them on arrival faded away as they walked deeper into the maze of darkened corridors and steel bar partitions.

The light bulb in the cell shone harshly on the prisoner whose face held an unexpected smile of anticipation, fearlessness. The handsome features revealed no tension; the familiar olive green uniform and the beret seemed clean, neat and resplendent even in such dismal environs. The steel bars grated and squeaked as they slid open. The Colonel stepped inside, the moustache fluttering in irritation or nervousness.

“So, what’s this I hear, *Doctor*? I thought we had a deal. Do you remember, we still have Maria. Do you wish to see her dead with your unborn child inside her?”, he whispered.

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Ernesto laughed aloud. That laughter held no fear. It was full of life, humour and zest. It echoed around in mockery of the dire threats.

“*Paco*, old friend, stop threatening me. When have I ever gone back on my word? Relax, I just wanted to speak to you like an old friend”

“So what’s this all about? Stop playing games with me, Ernesto”, the Colonel replied softly.

Ernesto paced around the cell, smiling infuriatingly, watching Francesco all the while, knowing his discomfort, his impatience.

“There was a time, *Paco*, when I used to be your minister of education and health. Do you remember that? Maybe not. But if you do, then do you remember the time you sent me to Asia for three months as your representative?”, he smiled at the memory.

The Colonel nodded.

“Well, while I was in Japan there was one little thing that I wished to try and my security staff would never permit me – Fugu. And I wanted it then and I want it now. I do not wish to die without trying it”

“Fugu? What the hell is that?”

“*Paco*, you ignorant *paisano*, learn something. What did I tell the people of this country? That ignorance will destroy us one day. There is so much to see in the world, so much to know. Fugu, dear leader, is the Japanese puffer fish. It is a delicacy there. So permit me to set the menu, at least for my own last supper”, Ernesto laughed.

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The Colonel looked bewildered. This was too simple.

“So what’s the catch?”

“Well, Francesco, there is a catch. The puffer fish is deadly poisonous unless prepared by a trained chef. The tetrodotoxin is tasteless, odourless, lethal”

“Aha, you prefer to cheat the firing squad, is it?”, the Colonel snorted.

“You forget, my *Commandante*, you are going to share that meal with me, to show your wonderful public what a great man and a great friend you are, hahaha”, Ernesto laughed.

The Colonel went pale. The moustache quivered violently.

“Is this a trick, Ernesto? Do you think I am stupid? Is that it?”

“No, *Paco*. Don’t worry. I’ve never been a coward. This isn’t a trick to delay the execution. No tricks, Francesco. I assure you. Do you remember ‘*El Chino*’, the recruit who joined the second Brigade during the revolutionary war? Kitsune?”

Francesco nodded, vaguely recollecting the face and the name. There were so many of them, who would even remember them?

“The Chinese fellow?”

“He is Japanese, but our ignorant people thought he was Chinese, thus his name. Well,

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anyway, he is now a farmer in Higura province and he lives with his native wife and three beautiful daughters. A licensed expert in preparing *Takifugu*. The only one who can cook it for me in this country. The only delay you shall have is in procuring the fish itself. You will have to fly in the fish alive from Shimonoseki in Japan. But then what is a little privilege amongst the heroes of the revolution, eh, *Paco?*"
, Ernesto smiled bitterly.

The Colonel looked at him suspiciously. There was no subterfuge there. But it sounded too easy. Then realization dawned.

"The Second Brigade?? under your direct command? Ah, I see. Your loyalist? So is this an elaborate plan to assassinate me and escape? *Doctor*, you cannot be serious"

Ernesto smiled.

"Ah, my brave *commandante*, you're afraid? I'm a man of my word, but are you? Arrange it. It's my last supper. Of course, I've nothing to lose. I'll be dead the next morning. But, you, my friend, are you willing to gamble everything on *my word?*",
Ernesto mocked him.

The Colonel bit his upper lip thoughtfully. Ernesto *was* a man of his word; also a hero of the revolution and the people adored him. It would be a disgrace to refuse the request or the people would deride him forever. He nodded his head slowly.

"Do you give me your word, that there is no trick here? Alright, my friend. But hear this - I'll hold Kitsune's family hostage, too. They'll die a cruel death if there's any trick. So will Maria and your unborn child. Understand?"

"Yes, I do. *Paco*"

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“And you must understand, we’ll be sitting in a glass cubicle being built at this moment in the *Plaza de la revolucion*

. The outside world can see us but cannot hear us. You cannot give an impromptu speech and inspire the people to save you. I know you’ve always been noble, honourable. So do not make trouble for us. For the sake of the revolution”.

Ernesto laughed bitterly.

“The revolution you betrayed when you took charge, *Paco*? Look at the people, Francesco. Are they happier now than they were under General Valdes? One tyranny for another. You said that I listen to my ideological masters from a land far away, and you live luxuriously while the peasants still toil their sweat and blood away. That revolution? We fought together in the great revolutionary war and today you spurn me for following the true path. So who is the real traitor now? You promised them everything. You said that the land was theirs and then you took it away from them in the name of agrarian reforms. You said you would destroy the capitalists and bring back the money which belonged to this country. Now you sit with them and make deals with the scoundrels. I told you that education must be universal. That we must paint the university black, mulatto, worker or peasant or one day, I warned you, they would break down the doors and paint it any colour they like. Now there is nothing. I told you that this island belonged to a continent of 200 million brothers who suffered the same miseries under imperialism. That the revolution must proceed, persist and permeate through the borders of the countries of the entire continent. But you were satisfied with the power you had already obtained, the riches, the luxuries, the absolute control of the nation. That Revolution?? One day, *Paco*, our people will rise against y

ou

. One day you shall see that they despise you. This country does not deserve you. What Revolution are you speaking of? This pathetic one?”

“Careful, *Doctor*. That is exactly why you have been branded a traitor. Governance is not a game. The people are cattle; they need a strong arm to control them. And you incited them”, the Colonel’s moustache danced violently and his voice sounded gruff, distant. He was furious and he could only shout at Ernesto in frustration.

“There is more to a revolution than your damn fool games. There is global politics, there is world opinion to consider. There is much more to it than woolly-headed altruistic measures. You forget that I faced bullets too. I faced assassination attempts. I fought the imperialist as well as their lackeys in power here. Damn you for inciting the people against me. You wanted to be the eternal hero, the *guerrillero heroico*. Ha! You challenge me at every step, hound me, make my

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life unbearable. Free medicines? Who pays for it? I do. I make the country suffer so that your damn fool expensive ideas are implemented. And this is how you repay me, ingrate! So be it, you want this Fugu-Shugu nonsense, so be it. But, mind you, it is your word, that honour you are so proud of, fond of... Remember it well. Are we agreed, then??"

Glaring at Ernesto for a moment, he clicked his heels without waiting for an answer, wheeled left and walked out of the cell.

In the end it took them more than two weeks to trace '*El Chino*' and bring him to the capital city. His family was held in the Presidential Palace under heavy security. Kitsune protested that it was disgraceful to place women and children hostage. It did not matter.

The glass cubicle in the *Plaza de la revolucion* was ready too. The Colonel's personal plane was sent to Japan to collect the puffer fish. The tools that Kitsune listed were also procured and sent on the flight back to the island. Another week passed by.

The Colonel was a worried man. He did not want a fiasco on his hands. The one last obstacle to his total control over the nation was Ernesto's popularity and it would not do to err now, even though he had no doubt that the people were behind him. He interrogated Kitsune on the details of preparing Fugu. The man sounded competent and confident. It sounded dangerous and deadly, but there was no doubt that Kitsune was indeed a master of the art. But what about deceit, subterfuge, treachery? The Colonel smiled cunningly and said that Kitsune's daughters would also eat the same preparation and Kitsune better be careful with the cuts. But the Colonel could not shake off the ominous thoughts that there was something else in Ernesto's cunning mind.

The day of the last supper arrived much too soon. The island braced to witness the final meeting between the two great heroes of the revolution. In the fields, the labourers, the peasants, the deprived and the mulattos bitterly wept at the fate of the condemned man. In the city, the industrialists, the foreign businessmen and the elite rejoiced at the prospect of being rid of their staunchest enemy. The entire island was festooned with posters – they dangled from telegraph cables and telephone wires, they were pasted on walls, stuck to the carts of the

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peasants, hung from the limbs of dead trees that had died during the bombing campaigns, lay crumpled on the pock-marked roads and crumbling ruins in the countryside - proclaiming the magnanimity of the Colonel and his act of unselfish loyalty to his friend. The colours, the lights, the flags lent the occasion an air of festivity rather than solemnity.

The glass cubicle stood on the square that had once housed the statue of the deposed General Valdes. It was a reminder of the old regime and the Revolution at the same time. It stood supported on scaffolding, temporarily put in place, high above and illuminated by a dozen spotlights. By dusk the square was surrounded by people on all four sides.

The Colonel and Ernesto arrived, to loud cheers from the crowds. The Colonel looked visibly annoyed at the warm reception that his opponent received. Ernesto calmly waved at them, without a trace of guilt, not feeling the gravity of the situation. They entered the cubicle. The glass doors slid into the locked position with a hiss.

“Let’s be civilised, ok? Maria is right behind the square. Any madness here and she will not die quickly. I guarantee that, she shall suffer greatly. And, oh, this is imported bullet-proof glass, so there is an added advantage that they cannot hear whatever we say. So don’t try to make any speeches”, the Colonel smiled thinly as he embraced his friend for the benefit of the masses, who erupted in delight and then shed bitter tears of sorrow at the last meeting of the two great comrades. Ernesto smiled benignly.

They sat down facing their audience, the glare of the spotlights making them look like actors on a stage. The *Sashimi Bocho* and the *Fugu Hiki* knives glimmered under the bright lights. The Colonel nodded sharply at Kitsune to proceed, who dipped his hands into the tank which held the Fugu. He placed the ugly *Torafugu*, Tiger Blowfish, on the cutting table, the most poisonous of all the Fugu. With a swift stab, he pierced its brain and tossed it into a receiving bowl. The bloodied knife dazzled the audience as Kitsune then repeated his action smoothly, gathering other fish from the tank, over and over again. The audience as well as the participants watched in horrified fascination, except for Ernesto who appeared bored and nonchalant.

The bearers, resplendent in their red uniforms, served them expensive, imported wine. Ernesto smiled at the indulgence.

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“The very best for the *commandante*, eh? I am glad I am sitting with you. As a condemned prisoner, this was more than I expected. But, as your companion, no less”, he said, drily.

Then he spoke softly to Francesco, explaining the significance of the process of cutting the fish, of being careful not to damage the ovaries, the liver of the fish. One slip and it would mean inevitable death, he said. The Colonel was sweating profusely, but he kept smiling hideously.

“I assure you, *Paco*, as a doctor I know of no remedy or cure for Fugu poisoning. Are you sure you are ready for this?”, Ernesto teased. The Colonel looked upset.

Kistune skinned the fish expertly and he removed the internal organs with great care. The meat was placed on the flat surface of the table and he began cutting thin slices of the meat and arranging them in an intricate pattern on the serving plate .

“You see the pattern, *Paco*? It is called *Usudzukuri* in Japanese. You will learn quite a lot about culture tonight”, Ernesto laughed as he explained the process. The translucent, almost transparent, slices of fish looked like silk petals. Soon, a chrysanthemum pattern, made up of the thin slices, emerged on the plate, which Ernesto called the ‘*Tessa*’

. The Sashimi was ready, the first course of the evening.

It was placed before them. Ernesto smiled at his friend. Then, with the chopsticks, he picked the dainty petals, dipped them in a sauce and put them in his mouth. The Colonel waited. His hands trembled. Ernesto dared him with mocking eyes to do the same.

After a few minutes, he sighed and did the same and put the pieces in his mouth. He shrugged. The Ponzu sauce and the Momiji Orishi felt strange to his palate. The harsh tang and the sharp flavours assailed his nostrils and the back of his throat. But it was not bad. Strange, unfamiliar, but not bad.

Kitsune stepped before them and apologized that there was no traditional Fugu-tail infused Sake to go with the meal, so they continued to drink the expensive wine that was being served.

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A while later, they were offered the *kara-age*, fried Fugu, which reminded Ernesto of the fried chicken he used to love so much. He felt his eyes go moist and then he sighed and looked at his friend.

He smiled at the discomfort that the Colonel felt.

“Relax, *Paco*. If it had been poisoned, we would both be dead by now. It acts very quickly.”

The Colonel smiled wretchedly as he chewed his food without any appetite. The people were watching. Kitsune then served them *Techchiri*, which he described as a hot stew made of Fugu and vegetables. Ernesto raised a brow as they ate in silence. The Colonel stopped eating. He was disconcerted by the cunning look in Ernesto’s eyes. Ernesto stared at him.

“You know, what we’re eating, *Paco*? *Tessa* and *Techchiri*. Two words that both have *Te* as their root, etymologically. It comes from *Teppou*, which means gun in Japanese. As swift a death as with a bullet, eh *Paco*? The Japanese have a weird sense of humour. They say it kills as effectively and as quickly as a bullet. But, you see, *Paco*, I don’t need bullets, if I can feed you Fugu”, he joked.

The Colonel stared at him. He felt his lips and tongue tingling slightly. He shuddered. Could it be true?

“Haha, look at you, *Paco*. Stop worrying. The poison was not in the Fugu. Are you feeling it now, though? The tingling, the uneasiness, the sickness? Hahaha. Guess how I poisoned you.”, Ernesto mocked.

The Colonel stared at him in fury, his moustache dancing madly.

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“What do you mean, Ernesto? What contained the poison, you bastard? You mad, mad bastard, I knew it, traitor, you wretched traitor. How did you get the poison in?? Tell me, or else I shall kill you, your Maria, your child, Bastard, tell me now”, he spluttered, spitting and wiping his mouth with the napkin.

“Are you sure, my *commandante*, that you trusted your best officers to serve you the purest of wines? All that imported wine, supposedly from your foreign, imperialist friends who mean you no harm. Are you sure it was all that good?”, Ernesto jeered.

The Colonel stared in horror at his ADC and suddenly remembered that he too had been an officer of the Second Brigade under Ernesto. The ADC smiled at him as stupidly as usual, the sycophantic look in place, but that could be a sham. Francesco’s eyes rolled around in panic. Kitsune smiled craftily at him from behind the cooking table.

Ernesto was enjoying this.

“By the way, do you know what Kitsune means in the Japanese culture, *Paco*? You said it is not important to learn about other cultures. So be it. It means a fox

kami

. A

kami

is a mythical spirit in Japanese lore. Did you really think that is his real name? He was born a Samurai. Life means nothing to him. You threatened to kill his family, but it does not matter, it will not scare him. His duty as a samurai comes first and I am his

Daimyo

, his sworn Lord. He shall die for me and sacrifice his family for his duty without a thought. Now, think,

Paco

. Which of these things you ate or drank contained the poison? Now, that is a good riddle.

Hahaha”

Francesco flung himself off his seat and toppled the table with a roar, sending the food tumbling down. He drew his automatic and started firing blindly. The first volley caught Ernesto in the chest. Kitsune suddenly moved and was poised to throw his sharp blade when a bullet

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caught him under his right eye and he collapsed. The ADC screamed in horror as the barrel swung towards him and he got the next bullet in his forehead. The Colonel grabbed the automatic rifle from the bewildered bodyguard and sprayed the cubicle with bullets, his madness and his terror keeping his finger on the trigger. The so-called bulletproof glass shattered as he emptied the magazine into it. The magazine clicked empty.

Then he heard the roar. For a moment he thought it was the blood in his ears. In the sudden silence, he could hear the animalistic growl all around him. In a daze he watched the frenzied crowds venting their fury at the glass walls. The cubicle tottered on the flimsy platform that it stood on. The Colonel looked around, his eyes seemed heavier, his breathing laboured. Was this the end? Did the poison work that quickly? The remaining glass fell apart as they pounded on it. He sobbed. Damn the *traitor terrorist* for ruining his revolution, he thought. The crowds rushed in, pummelling him, crushing him, smashing him. He looked at Ernesto with blood-drenched eyes as he fell to the floor. At least, he would be dead too, he thought.

Ernesto smiled, painfully.

“So, how did you poison me, Ernesto?”, he croaked and though he was unable to hear himself, he knew that Ernesto understood his question.

“*Paco*, do you not see? This is the real revolution. This is the victory of the people. There was no poison in any of the things we ate or drank tonight. *Amigo*, you killed yourself and, thus, you have set the people free, at last.

Adios

, my friend. You never heeded my words. You thought this country would be yours to possess and crush. As for Maria? She will live or die in a free country, my

commandante

. Your soldiers too will join the people. My child shall be born in a country we dreamed of together, once. Only if you had believed in that dream,

Paco

, my friend. It is now that you see the power of the people, the true revolution.

Vive la Revolucion

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Paco

, ”

, ”

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Ernesto laughed painfully. He spat blood and then with a grim smile, he died. The Colonel's moustache quivered one last time, in frustration, in pain, and then it became still.