

Empire of Dirt

A short play

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CHARACTERS

Gregan: A cowardly servant to the high general and spy for the resistance. Nothing he does is ever with absolute certainty.

The Brother: A manipulative leader and recruiter in the resistance.

High General: A ruthless demagogue that will stop at nothing to make true his vision of a utopia under his absolute control.

Servant 1: A loyal subservient to the High General. Higher in rank than Gregan.

SCENE 1

Open to a dimly-lit one-room apartment. A small table carrying a half-empty bottle of scotch is flanked by two glasses. The time of day is 4am. Gregan is a man in his early 30s dressed in modern servant's attire. He anxiously paces around the room, eagerly eyeing the scotch bottle, until a sudden knocking at the door stops him in his tracks. Gregan panics. He reaches one hand deep into his coat pocket and nervously retrieves a small pistol. He inhales deeply and, pistol pointed towards the door, glances through the peephole. Upon looking, he exhales not with relief, but with a kind of powerless sufferance - as if death itself is at his door. Gregan opens the door. Enter The Brother.

GREGAN

(pocketing pistol)

I'm - I'm sorry I should have tidied up a bit but...

(chuckling nervously)

I'd like to think that the state of my apartment shall always reflect my current state of mind and thus all the... chaos.

(pacing)

You know the, uh, saying 'cleanliness is next to godliness'? Well I was thinking about just that this morning while I was pacing around the apartment and I came to the conclusion that right now I am the very furthest thing from godly. Can I offer you a drink? Milk? Water? Scotch?

THE BROTHER

I'm fine, thank you.

GREGAN

Right, okay.

Gregan serves himself a small cup of scotch
aside. The Brother waits patiently.

GREGAN

I'm out of milk anyway - don't know why I asked. And this is good scotch, I'm told.
Normally, I would never - but given the circumstance...

(aggressively, to The Brother)

What, are you going to tell me that I can't? (beat) See, I'm having to ask you - the one
expecting me to kill a man - quite literally the most powerful man in the state...

(scoffs)

To think that you have the audacity to expect me to pass those gates sober!

Gregan takes a sip from the glass before spitting
the scotch back in disgust. He slams the glass
back on the table.

GREGAN

I'm on edge. I - I can't relax, I can't go to sleep.

THE BROTHER

Gregan.

GREGAN

This is hell, sir. Hell. You don't understand - I am treading fire and brimstone!

THE BROTHER

We all are.

GREGAN

I'm always half-expecting some government agent to just break down my door and shoot
me on the spot. What's stopping them? A nickel lock? A half-inch slab of plywood? I leave
my .38 on the bedside table and most of the time I couldn't tell you if the barrel points
towards the door

(points finger-gun towards door)

-Or my fucking temple!

(points finger-gun towards temple)

THE BROTHER

(sternly)

Gregan.

GREGAN

All this planning and coordination and thinking. You know, I've been doing a bit of thinking of my own and I've decided that I really don't think I can go through with this. I don't think I can. I'm very, very sorry, Brother, but I'm no god-damned executioner!

THE BROTHER

What are you?

GREGAN

A servant!

THE BROTHER

You are simply a servant.

GREGAN

And nothing more!

THE BROTHER

You weren't built to be any kind of agent of war. You're no harbinger of destruction.

GREGAN

Naturally.

THE BROTHER

(nodding)

Naturally.

The brother puts his hand condescendingly on Gregan's shoulder.

THE BROTHER

I recall a story-

GREGAN

(frustrated)

Oh, please spare me!

THE BROTHER

Be silent for a second. Be silent and listen. (beat) I recall a story of a servant. This servant was the son of a soldier - a poor infantryman that loved his family only second to his country. (beat) One day he's sent to battle. Do you remember what for? Do you? (beat) Gregan, why was he sent to war?

GREGAN
(halfheartedly)

He was rescuing an ally.

THE BROTHER
(mockingly)

You should write their propaganda. He was sent to retrieve the corpse of an ambassador that had been executed by the enemy three days prior. (beat) Your father's life was less valuable to the general's than that of a cadaver. Do you understand? All your father's loyalty and compassion, and even he was not granted the general's mercy!

GREGAN
(shoving away)

God forgive me.

THE BROTHER

Gregan! Evil has a face and you serve it. You mix cocktails for the bastard that sent this country spiraling into dystopia! You carve chicken for the villain that brought us to the brink of nuclear war! You wait on the man that sent your father - the man who raised you and taught you right from wrong - to his death! (beat) My brother, have you ever thought to look out the window and gaze upon the faces of your countrymen?

GREGAN
(defensively)

I am a survivor.

THE BROTHER
(ignoring)

Their faces cry for a revolution. They cry for an uprising. They cry for a champion. (beat) Gregan, my brother-in-arms, you must be their champion.

GREGAN
(scoffing)

A champion?

THE BROTHER

Oh yes. A glorious crusader in shining silver armor that will call forth the army of the masses.

(grabbing gun from Gregan's belt)

Let this be your banner. Your sword. Your holy relic. With this, you will change the course of history. You will lead your country - your people - to a new era that promises prosperity and happiness. They will remember you not as Gregan - the boy who since conception has played the lowly subservient to the general and his authority - but as Gregan - the man that toppled a brutal dictatorship and in doing so instilled a government that promised peace and justice for all.

GREGAN

I can't... I... There's so much stress and acting on impulse. (beat) What if there was some better way? Have we thought maybe to perhaps try and negotiate terms?

THE BROTHER

(chuckling)

Negotiate with the general? Gregan, the man is a dictator, and acts as dictators do. He'll do whatever it takes to consolidate power, and nothing but a bullet can stand in his way. Do you understand?

The Brother hands Gregan back his gun. Gregan gingerly takes it.

GREGAN

(defeated)

What happens next?

THE BROTHER

(caressing cheek)

You, Gregan. You happen. You avenge your father and score us the final victim of this most bloody revolution.

SCENE 2

The private quarters of the high general. He sits at a small, circular table, dining alone. To his right stands a servant, awaiting his command.

HIGH GENERAL

Peterson?

SERVANT 1

Yes, lord High General?

HIGH GENERAL

(to servant)

How's the weather today?

SERVANT 1

Cloudy, High General.

HIGH GENERAL

(chewing food)

Of course God would rather blind himself than see what has become of his empire of dirt.

SERVANT 1

(playfully)

All this negativity, High General! So much negativity! Some might say a turbid sky accentuates our most vibrant colors, bringing out the brightest nature in us all.

HIGH GENERAL

Oh, Peterson. Your positivity is always welcome in these trying times.

Enter Gregan in servant's garb. He is obviously very anxious. One hand is kept rigidly by his side while the other carries a bottle of wine over a thick cloth.

HIGH GENERAL

(softly)

Red, please.

Servant 1 nods towards Gregan who approaches the high general, filling his near-empty glass to the brim with an opaque red. The general downs the glass. While Gregan takes a few steps back.

GREGAN

High General? There - there's a visitor here to see you...

The High General places down his wine to look up at Gregan, pushing him for more information.

GREGAN

...In the rotunda.

HIGH GENERAL

(to Servant 1, later transitions to Gregan)

The lieutenant Gallo back from his confrontation with those damned rebels. Why would you wait so long to tell us, boy?

SERVANT 1

Forgive him, general - he emulates the shyness of the sun. If you'll excuse me, I shall go receive the lieutenant.

HIGH GENERAL

Perhaps he can absorb some of your much-needed positivity, Peterson.

Servant 1 bows and excuses himself from the room, leaving only the High General and Gregan alone. The High General raises his empty glass in the air, beckoning a frightfully nervous Gregan over. Gregan's hand shakes violently with anticipation as he serves the general more of the his drink. Again, the general downs it as Gregan takes a few steps back.

As the general returns to face his lunch, Gregan whips off the thick cloth napkin to reveal a gun pointed straight at the general. The general tilts his head and freezes in place at the sight of the weapon. Then, facing the gun, he delivers a new fork full of food into his mouth.

HIGH GENERAL

Safety's on.

Gregan fumbles with the gun.

HIGH GENERAL

Nope, not there.

Gregan looks down briefly towards the gun, flicking a small button on the side of the barrel before returning to his threatening stance.

HIGH GENERAL

There you go.

The High General is seemingly indifferent. A few seconds pass of silent chewing before the general's gaze returns to his plate.

HIGH GENERAL

Now you're hesitating.

Gregan is silent.

HIGH GENERAL

(calmly chewing)

You must... You must learn to act with intention. That's what I tell my idiot son. If you set your sights on the peak, you don't stop 'till you're banner can be seen waving from a thousand leagues away. Do you understand?

Gregan's pistol remains pointed at the general's head.

HIGH GENERAL

It's Gregan, isn't it? I knew your father.

GREGAN

He fought for you.

HIGH GENERAL

Yes.

GREGAN

He died for you.

HIGH GENERAL

During the Ottowan siege, yes. (exhaling) I remember the carnage. I remember the memorial. I recall I put down a wreath.

GREGAN

(gritting teeth)

They put down their lives.

HIGH GENERAL

It was a fine wreath. (beat) So what, are you here to kill me or not?

Gregan inhales quickly, gun pointed at the General's head.

HIGH GENERAL

Well, my skull still feels intact... Did you poison the wine?

GREGAN

(shakily)

And if I did?

HIGH GENERAL

Than I'd ask for another glass, because this batch seems to be a tad ineffective. (drinks) You should've. I imagine it's the easiest way to go about this. You complete your objective and you get to preserve some anonymity.

GREGAN

(shaking head)

It needs to be with a gun.

HIGH GENERAL

Right - for the statement. It's always about the statement. They need to know that it was one of their own. "The revolution is not an apple that falls when it's ripe. You have to make it fall".

The sound of footsteps fast approaching from offstage catches Gregan off-guard.

Gregan keeps his gun on the general for a brief moment before sprinting towards the sound and closing the door in between. A banging can be heard on the opposite side of the door as Gregan returns to the scene, gun pointed at the high general.

HIGH GENERAL

(unimpressed)

That's - that's one way to do it.

GREGAN

(returning)

Shut up. (beat) Look: to be blunt, I'm having a - I'm really not comfortable doing this. Not that you don't deserve it, God knows you do. You really do. It's that I can't-

SERVANT 1

(from outside door)

High General! Are you all right? High General?

Gregan makes a pass at an intimidating gaze aimed towards the High General, who remains tranquil.

HIGH GENERAL

Everything is fine, Peterson. I just need a moment of privacy with our Mr. Gregan here.

SERVANT 1

(from outside door)

...As you say, sir.

HIGH GENERAL

Now what were you saying?

Gregan looks flabbergasted as the High General.

HIGH GENERAL

We were having a conversation. What were you saying? You can't..?

GREGAN

(softer)

...I can't kill. At least I don't think I can. I shouldn't even be telling you this, but I'm not much of a killer. It's a very, very difficult thing for me. I'm not like my father.

HIGH GENERAL

You think your father was a killer?

GREGAN

He was a soldier. I would say those two things tend to go hand-in-hand.

HIGH GENERAL

(beat) Did he love you?

GREGAN

What - what kind of question is that?

HIGH GENERAL

A relatively straight-forward one, I hope.

GREGAN

Of course.

HIGH GENERAL

Of course what?

GREGAN

Of course he loved me.

HIGH GENERAL

Well then he wasn't a killer. No, he was a fighter.

GREGAN

A what?

HIGH GENERAL

There's no room for love in a killer's heart. A killer's heart is just sheer rage and indifference. They're primal. Bloodthirsty. They might look like the most typical man in the world while underneath animal blood courses through their veins. (beat) A fighter, on the other hand... A fighter's got something to lose, and they will do whatever it takes to protect it.

Your father wasn't shooting to kill, he was shooting to fight - and he was fighting not for me, nor for the country, but for you. He cared about you. He was protecting you. (beat) I didn't honor any killers when I laid down that wreath, Gregan. I respect this country too much to ever do that. I only honored fighters.

GREGAN

(sly)

... How ironic.

HIGH GENERAL

Do you really think of me as a killer?

GREGAN

Yes, yes I do. (beat) What, does that surprise you? Too many nights I've been woken if not by your firing squads then by the mournful wailing that follows. Too many a friend I've had disappear for showing the slightest amount of discontent for your regime. Too many a horror I've witnessed become of my own country as I walk to work, to serve you, the perpetrator. (beat) You are the very worst kind of killer - the kind that acts with impunity.

HIGH GENERAL

That's difficult to hear.

GREGAN

Really? That's the - that's hard to hear? Everything you've done - all your crimes and all your murders...

HIGH GENERAL

I never meant to hurt anyone.

GREGAN

(chuckling)

... Are you saying it was accidental? 'Whoops, I've established an autocratic dictatorship that aims to bring hell to the moral Earth?'

HIGH GENERAL

Well, if you'll let me explain myself...

GREGAN

(sudden spurt of anger)

No! No, no, no! I am pointing a gun at you! I'm am going to shoot you and end you! You're going to hear the - the loudest most damning sound you've ever heard, and a metal projectile the size of a pebble is going to carve a hole right through your thick skull like a drill until I will see the blood-stained carpet on the other side!

A moment of silence between the two. The High General keeps his composure.

HIGH GENERAL

(continuing)

...I never liked hurting anyone. At the end of the day, I do what I do not for any kind of personal fulfilment or sadistic need; no, I do it for my countrymen. (beat) If I truly desired it, there are easier ways to cause terror than to become a politician. I could be an axe-wielding murderer. I could be a carnival clown.

The two of them share a short and deliberate pause.

HIGH GENERAL

You're with the new resistance group, right? Whatever they call themselves.

GREGAN

People's Ensemble.

HIGH GENERAL

Ensemble? What, like a band? Fine. You want to know my thoughts on the 'People's Ensemble'?

GREGAN

Not particularly.

HIGH GENERAL

They lack empathy.

GREGAN

They... lack empathy?

HIGH GENERAL

Now that's irony right there. Oh, they can feel the suffering of the lowest common denominator, but when it comes to me... well, I am evil incarnate as far as they're concerned.

GREGAN

You are evil.

HIGH GENERAL

What's your goal here?

GREGAN

You said it yourself: “The revolution is not an apple that falls when it’s ripe. You have to make it fall”.

HIGH GENERAL

Che Guevara. Credit to where it is due. The point is: What happens next?

GREGAN

Next?

HIGH GENERAL

After this. After what is happening now - you pointing a gun at my head and all preceding chapters. What is the conclusion of this great epic? What is your objective?

GREGAN

I’d like a functioning country, for starters.

HIGH GENERAL

Really? What a coincidence! You think I’m just doing this for the money and power? Gregan, my fellow patriot, I’m here because I want to make a difference! I’m here because I want to change our world for the better. That’s the only reason I do what I do.

GREGAN

No, no, no. You are not my ‘fellow patriot’, you are a dictator! I’m the one trying to change things for the better-

HIGH GENERAL

(interrupting)

Wait. No, this is perfect! I just had a brilliant thought! This is beautiful! For all of our differences, we’re both working towards a common goal, right? A better country. See, this is what your little organization, “The People’s Assembly”-

GREGAN

Ensemble.

HIGH GENERAL

It’s what they will never understand! We want the same things - and think of how much more efficiently we could reach our common goal if we decided to work cooperatively rather than whatever it is that we’re doing now.

GREGAN

You’re saying that nobody has tried to negotiate with you yet?

HIGH GENERAL

I suppose they all jumped to the assumption that I'm a leader that enjoys seeing their own country implode onto them.

GREGAN

...But you want to help?

The High General smiles. He pulls up a chair and, with a welcoming smile, invites Gregan to join him at his table. Gregan sits hesitantly.

HIGH GENERAL

Gregan, I know the country from the balcony. I know the higher-ups, the upper crust, the money. You know the disparaged, the downtrodden, everybody else. Imagine what we could accomplish together. We can unite the socioeconomic classes and put an end to all of this horrible bloodshed that has tormented the both of us. We can make peace without a single drop of blood shed. What do you say?

A short moment of quiet contemplation is broken by Gregan.

GREGAN

We work together?

HIGH GENERAL

(smiling)

It's an idea.

Gregan's grimace contorts itself into a half-smile.

HIGH GENERAL

What do you say? Want to be remembered as the peacemaker or as the assassin?

GREGAN

I told you I'm not a good killer.

Both smile and share a light chuckle.

GREGAN

God, that takes a huge weight off my shoulders. I wasn't prepared to kill anybody, you know? I'm not that kind of person. But peaceful diplomacy, that I can try. (beat) It's funny: Brother told me that negotiation with you wouldn't be an option. I guess I'm just that good of a diplomat.

HIGH GENERAL

Brother?

GREGAN

Our manager of operations. His real name's Arthur and he's really passionate about the ensemble. We'll have to organize a proper meeting between the two of you eventually.

HIGH GENERAL

Splendid - I'd be grateful to meet him. We'll have a proper banquet in honor of new friends!

Gregan sets his gun on the table excitedly - his hand still loosely around the grip.

HIGH GENERAL

(gesturing down at gun)

Do you mind?

GREGAN

(looking down at gun)

Don't worry, it's not the greatest gun in the world by any measure. Not very accurate and reloading takes an eternity and a half. But I'm told it gets the job done adequately and efficiently.

HIGH GENERAL

Whatever that job may be.

Gregan gingerly hands the gun to the High General. The General inspects the gun in his hand - pressing a small button.

GREGAN

What's that?

HIGH GENERAL

The safety.

Gregan stares at the High General, a look of sheer terror overcomes him. Before he can react, the High General fires a clean shot that cuts through the nape of Gregan's neck with a bang. In an instant, Gregan's body slumps over, dead. The door outside is brought down, as in rushes Servant 1.

SERVANT 1

High General? Is everything all right?

The High General let's out a deep exhale as if he'd been holding his breath the entirety of the scene and reclines backwards in his chair in an exhausted state. He unloads the gun.

HIGH GENERAL

It's nothing, Peterson. Nothing. Just our... just our friend Gregan here. He's -uh - not in his prime. (drinks wine) Do me a favor and run a bio on a Mr. Arthur, code-named the "Brother". Seems we've found ourselves a recruiter for the rebellion.

SERVANT 1

At once.

HIGH GENERAL

And execute the head of security. To think a vendetta is just as valid as a visiting pass.

SERVANT 1

I'll see to it, High General.

Servant 1 exits, pulling the deceased body of Gregan with him.

HIGH GENERAL

How's the weather?

SERVANT 1

(exiting)

The sun rises over this empire of dirt.

The High General chuckles nervously before downing his glass of wine with a swig.

End.