

Something Has Died Around Here

by [Armando Simón](#) (May 2025)



Peace, II (George Grosz, 1946)

It was Captain Teófilo Rojo, in charge of security at the Revolutionary People's Palace, that first noticed the smell.

He wrinkled his nose, frowning, sniffed the air, muttered those fateful words, "Something has died around here."

It was a faint smell, barely noticeable, but now that he had brought their attention to it, his subordinates sniffed the air around them at which time they, too, noticed it for the first time although, to be sure, it was barely noticeable.

"It's probably a dead rat that ate some poisoned bait and went off to die somewhere," he said to his subordinates. "Let's find it before it gets worse with the day's heat." Both he and his men fanned out and searched every nook and cranny for the dead rat, behind curtains, inside closets, behind bookshelves, under desks, night tables and end tables and dining room tables, among canned food, and under sacks of vegetables. They were hampered in their search by the fact that the odor, in being faint, was neither stronger nor weaker in any one particular room or area. This fact led them outside to search the grounds of the building, particularly near the wall and among the thorny bushes but without success.

"Ah! I'll bet it's in the ventilation ducts," exclaimed Captain Rojo in a fit of inspiration and had the ventilation ducts broken up and examined. When they yielded no rodent, dead or otherwise, they were reassembled. No one seeing them now could tell that they had been taken apart.

The captain shrugged.

"It'll turn up. I'll bet you anything that in a day or two, at the latest, we'll find it by its smell," he declared. His only worry was that The Magnificent Leader might return before then

from his wanderings around the country where he kept dozens of hideaways, thereby foiling any plans at being overthrown and/or captured and/or assassinated "by the agents of colonialism, capitalism and imperialism." But two days later, the location of the dead rat still remained a mystery and, in fact, the smell had not intensified as expected. Because of this, the staff half-heartedly suggested other reasons for the smell, none of which were very convincing.

In a week's time, contrary to expectation, the smell had neither intensified nor disappeared and, truth to tell, nobody really paid any attention to it anymore.

Unfortunately, at the end of that week, Captain Rojo was awakened in the middle of the night by, of all people, Foreign Minister Raúl Roa Ybáñez to inform him that The Magnificent Leader was returning to the capital and to the Palace that very night in order to prepare for a meeting with the Soviet Premier, who would be paying a state visit three days' hence.

Rojo grumbled as he got out of bed and began to get dressed. These sudden appearances of The Magnificent Leader were typical, as was his displeasure if not finding his underling ready to eagerly welcome him at his destination. Still, it was worth it, he reminded himself looking around at the fine mansion with which he had been rewarded for years of faithful bootlicking and unswerving devotion to The Revolution. It had originally belonged to a rich family who had been executed for no other crime than because they were wealthy, and their belongings distributed among "the exploited," "the people," and "the poor," which is to say, whoever threw in their lot with The Revolution and The Magnificent Leader and applauded the executions and cheered similar acts of "nationalization" and "liberation" and other atrocities, hoping to get a richer share of the loot.

The Captain was at the Revolutionary People's Palace when The Magnificent Leader drove up in his bullet proof limousine,

escorted by dozens of bodyguards armed to the teeth.

Paradoxically, it was a quirk of the leader of The Revolution to want to be thought of as "just one of the guys" at the same time that he always wanted to be acknowledged as the unquestioned, supreme power in the country. This was the standard to which everyone, from the fisherman and carpenter in a remote town, to the dreaded Minister of the F-7 and the Ambassador to the United Nations, to high school and college students was to follow. It was easy, really: always call him by his first name, talk casually and at ease with him, but never, ever, criticize him, The Revolution, or his government policies (and, of course, stay out of his way whenever he was in one of his darker moods). The casual banter was taken as proof that there was now total equality in the country, thanks to The Revolution. The affectation was pretty straightforward.

So that when the limousine made a full stop and the captain put on his best smile, he opened the door and casually greeted his master.

"Welcome back, Infidel! Say, did you have a good trip?"

"Not bad, chico, not bad," said the uniformed dictator with the yellow teeth and scraggly beard.

"Comrade Roa Ibáñez let me know that you were coming less than an hour ago, so I didn't get a chance to check to see if everything was the way you like it."

"Don't worry about it, Teófilio," he said, patting Rojo in the back. "Don't go to any trouble. I just need any old place to lie down on until tomorrow when I start getting ready for the Premier's visit on Wednesday."

His escort now disbanded to their barracks now that Rojo had assumed Infidel's security. After half an hour of bantering, he decided to turn in and it was then, with his concentration away from his master, that he once again detected the smell.

At first, he became alarmed, then relaxed, when he realized that it was still faint. He made a note of it to try once again to find the source of that odor first thing in the morning. Then he went home.

Returning to the Revolutionary People's Palace in the morning, he was shocked to notice that the smell had gotten stronger. Sweating with worry, he dispatched the whole staff throughout the palace in order to locate the dead rat, or bat, or cat, or whatever in blazes was giving off that stench. He ordered the search to be done discreetly and not to inform The Magnificent Leader of the reason for the activity, unless Rojo himself mentioned the stink to him.

Two hours later, a frustrated staff resolutely informed Captain Rojo that the source of that fragrance could not be found and, furthermore, that it was now on the grounds of the Palace as well. The source could not be found because the smell was equally strong throughout the Palace and the grounds.

Captain Rojo ordered guards to the university to bring back a couple of professors to see if they could pinpoint the prime cause for the smell, thinking all the while that it was some chemical seeping through the ground of the Palace lawn. He had heard of toxic chemicals being buried in steel drums and the chemicals corroding their way through the metal and oozing out, spreading silently and unnoticeably.

Meanwhile, he ordered flowers to be gathered and placed in every room.

He then placed a call to the Minister for the National Economy, Julio Riaño.

"Comrade Riaño, how are you?"

"Fine, fine, Rojo. How can I be of service?"

“This is going to come as a strange request, but do we have any incense sticks around, anywhere in the island?” Since under a Marxist economy, all products and foods, and imports and exports, were controlled by the government and their use allocated, he would be the man to know. Of course, this was also why the population was half starved and lacked elementary consumer goods.

“Incense sticks?” The Minister sounded surprised. “You mean the type that the Indians use to perfume their houses?”

“The very same.”

“No, of course not. You won’t find any in the whole country. It’s a bourgeois product. Totally frivolous in my opinion. Hence, it has no place in a planned, Socialist economy.”

“I didn’t think so. Just thought I’d ask, anyway,” he said, stifling heretical thoughts about the competency of their over glorified, planned Socialist economy.

However, he brightened at the idea that Riaño had given him and he called up the Indian Embassy. Sure enough, he was able to cajole a large box of incense sticks from the staff as a personal favor. The captain sent two of his guards to pick up the gift just as a vehicle pulled up, bearing the university professors that he had called for.

As they all got out of the vehicle, one of the professors (he sported a goatee) frowned and looked around, wrinkling his face.

“It smells like something’s dead around here,” he uttered.

“I need a college professor to tell me that?!” the security captain snapped.

“Well, what do you want with us?” he snapped right back, not intimidated in the slightest.

"I want you people to take air and soil samples and analyze them for chemicals or whatever it is that you do. I want to know if it's some kind of toxic chemical seeping through the soil."

The civilian nodded, conferred with his colleagues and they began to work.

Captain Rojo's walkie-talkie came on and he responded.

"Infidel wants to see you right away," one of his subordinates' voices crackled through. The security chief headed inside, worried, but The Magnificent Leader just wanted to inform him that the Minister of the Interior and the Foreign Minister were on their way.

"Oh, and by the way," the dictator said as Captain Rojo was about to step out the door, "nice touch, the flowers," he motioned to a clump of colorful red roses in a vase.

"Yes, I thought they'd livened up the place," he responded and almost kicked himself at the unintentional pun.

"They smell good, too."

"Uh-huh," he whispered at the sound of the word "smell." "Well, I have to get things ready, chief," and he left, feeling even more nervous than before.

The scientists had left with their samples to their laboratory. An hour or so later, the two ministers arrived to confer with their country's "liberator." The first, Roa Ibáñez, was friendly enough, and Rojo was glad to see him, but the next one, Antonio Pérez Guzmán, the chief of the secret police, was a sinister one who always gave him the creeps, no matter how often he attempted to seem friendly. This time he made Rojo's heart do a somersault when he got out of his car and said, "Say, what *is* that smell, anyway?" Then, he shrugged, having more important things in mind and went inside

to confer with the other two.

Several hours passed and the scientists returned saying that, so far, they had negative results.

“If the government spent less money on tanks and machine guns and more on sensitive scientific equipment, then I could have had definite results by now,” the professor with the goatee informed Captain Rojo with undisguised bitterness and the latter filed the man’s name (Professor Zayas) for future reference as a potential dissident. “Nevertheless, we’ll try again,” he concluded and the scientists spread out.

“Those tanks and machine guns are what’s keeping away the Yankee invasion,” the security chief informed the professor, who was walking away from him.

“Yeah, right,” the civilian muttered over his shoulder.

Quite a few yards away, towards the entrance to the walled compound, the scientist stopped and frowned intensely. He called over his two other colleagues and they huddled. The captain decided to see what the matter was.

“What’s up?” he demanded.

“The smell’s spreading,” Zayas told him.

“The smell. It’s spreading. I’ll swear by it. In fact, I’ll stake my reputation on it! The smell’s spreading. When we came earlier, those hedges distinctly marked the boundary of the stink.”

“You mean, it’s gotten stronger.”

“No, I ... don’t think so,” and his colleagues shook their heads in agreement. “It hasn’t gotten stronger, but the circumference of the effect has widened.”

“Wait a minute,” Rojo demanded. “How can it spread in a wider

area without it getting stronger at the central spot? It doesn't make sense."

Professor Zayas thought for a minute then said, "You're right, it doesn't make sense." He shrugged. "We'll do more tests." They spread out to gather more samples, leaving a puzzled captain, walking back to the building.

It was true what they said, now that they had brought it to his attention. The smell had spread. "Maybe I'm overreacting to the whole thing," he told himself.

The ministers decided to stay over for dinner and Rojo made sure to festoon the dining room with bouquets of flowers.

"Looks like a flower shop," Infidel joked, and the ministers made sure to laugh.

The next day, the captain called up Professor Zayas from his office in the city where he had gone to for some documents. The man sounded sincerely apologetic, a different attitude for him. Rojo realized that his professional pride was hurt.

"I'm sorry, captain. I can't give you an answer. It's a conundrum. We'd really like to know, too."

"Well, let me know if you come up with anything."

"I'll definitely do that."

Driving back to the Revolutionary People's Palace (he had gone to his office that morning, straight from his home), he stopped the car streets away from it, shut off the engine and rolled down the window all the way down.

He could smell it all the way out here!

A wave of fatalism engulfed Captain Rojo. It came over him suddenly, washing away his anxiety. He would go and face the music, whatever fate brought on.

Yet, arriving at the compound, he was not called up by Infidel. As the day passed, the whole staff, except Rojo, walked around as if on eggshells, waiting for a stormy summons, aware of the rotting fragrance in spite of the flowers. Amazingly, the only who seemed unaware of it was Infidel himself, whom he saw several times that day. Several of the staff initiated brief, surreptitious searches on their own which, as usual, resulted in empty hands.

“The Soviet Premier’s visit, that’s when the dam’s going to burst,” he told himself, and in the meantime ordered more flowers. He now knew that The Magnificent Leader’s nose was impervious to the smell. He had read somewhere of some individuals who lacked a sense of smell and complained of, among other things, food being tasteless as a result of a sense of smell.

Wednesday finally arrived, along with the Aeroflot airline, which clunked down the runway and taxied in front of the airport terminal. Rojo was not there for the welcoming ceremony but, instead, waited at the Revolutionary Palace, awaiting the arrival of the two dictators. Presently, they arrived, along with their entourages, and Rojo’s staff stood at attention as they walked past. The Soviet Premier was talking, a stone-faced interpreter by his side.

“Chichinsky potovinsky puk travinsky. Muk nyek. Wud tiok trabusky ket drakasky wud nyek kamatunsky.”

Captain Rojo had heard Russian spoken before, naturally. To him, the Russian language sounded like a poor duck that was slowly being choked to death.

Neither the Soviet Premier nor his entourage remarked on the rotting smell, and it wasn’t until many days after the dignitaries had departed that the Minister of the Interior confided in him that the Soviet airline likewise reeked of the same smell. By then, of course, the mystery had been solved to

everyone's satisfaction, well, maybe satisfaction is not the right word.

It was the afternoon after the Premier's departure that it all began to unravel. The various Ministers were meeting at the People's Revolutionary Palace for a conference to discuss the visit. The Minister of the Utilities, Crespo, took Rojo aside, "Does Infidel look ill to you, comrade?"

Rojo, who had been picking his nose, now looked at The Magnificent Leader and became conscious at last of a vague feeling that had been at the back of his head. The dictator definitely looked ill. His teeth were yellow. So were his eyes. His beard was even more scraggly and yellow, and his paunch sagged. The skin was like parchment. Rojo nodded.

"Now that you mention it, he does."

"I thought so! And have you noticed that stench that hovers around him?"

"You've noticed it?" he asked, surprised that anyone else was mentioning it.

"Noticed it? How can you help not noticing it?" demanded Comrade Minister Crespo. "It's all over the capital. And it's emanating from every one of his hideouts."

"But what's causing it?" Captain Rojo wailed.

"Haven't you guessed, yet? Infidel's dead! And no one's told him!"

So that was it! It finally made sense. The Magnificent Leader had been dead all this time and that's why they had not found the source of the stench, when all this time it had been right there in front of them, under their very noses. The dictator was rotting, but he was the only one that hadn't noticed it and kept on going as if nothing had happened.

"It happened a few years back in Russia, too," said Comrade Minister Rojo. "Leonid Brezhnev and Foreign Minister Gromyko were both dead for years, but nobody had told them," the minister went on drawing the parallel.

"There's only one thing left to do," said Crespo. "We've got to bury him."

"I don't think that he'll go for the idea."

"But he's got to be buried! He's dead!"

"He still won't like it."

"It's for the good of The Revolution! It's for the good of the country!"

"Come on, let's be honest here, just the two of us! He won't really care if the country gets worse as a result."

"Nevertheless, it's got to be done! What other choice is there? He's got to face reality. Facts are facts. He's dead! Regrettable ... but it's true. Now ... we simply have to bury him."

"Good luck on that score, Comrade Minister."

"Mmmm."

The ministers had their conference with Infidel which lasted over three hours, with Infidel doing most of the talking. Crespo consulted with several of the other ministers right afterwards, the ones whom he thought were reasonable, among them the Foreign Minister. Together, they returned in a group and asked to see the dictator.

They gathered together with him in the main Reception Room, among burning sticks of incense, and broke the news to him as gently as possible.

"Infidel ... you're dead," said Crespo.

“You’ve got to be buried,” said Minister Riaño. “It’s only reasonable.”

“The whole country’s beginning to stink,” Roa Ibáñez appealed to his Socialist idealism. “Some say it’s been stinking for years. Me, I don’t believe that. Now, you wouldn’t want The Revolution to have this rotting smell about it, do you?”

“It’s over. It’s time to bury you, Infidel,” said Crespo. “In fact, the truth is, we should have buried you a long time ago.”

“We’ll give you a State Funeral. Think of it! The whole country will mourn you and sing your praises! Days and days of tearful speeches recalling your life, glorifying your achievements, highlighting your pivotal role in the Revolution! And, naturally, how you tried to bring about a nuclear war—that was unparalleled! I tell you, Infidel, it will be glorious! Not a dry eye left in the nation! Monuments will be erected! Cities, rivers, universities will be renamed in your honor! God, I’m half tempted myself to let you all bury me, instead, and I’m not even dead yet!”

Infidel, for his part, argued well. He calmly explained that he felt fine and never looked better in his life, that The Revolution needed him now more than ever, that burial was a luxury that he could not afford, not with an “imminent” Yankee invasion (the invasion had been “imminent” for forty years), that he appreciated their concern, but it was misplaced and they should instead focus their efforts at continuing their search for, and root out, counterrevolutionaries, that proof of the fact that he was neither dead nor needed burial was the state of the country’s economy, the international esteem of the government, indeed, the solid philosophical and moral principles of The Revolution were admired and emulated around the world and the strength of its armed forces and secret police. The ministers eyed each other: the economy was a shamble, the system of government was viewed with contempt and

openly referred to as a fossil, the philosophical underpinnings of The Revolution widely ridiculed and discredited, and only the strength of the organs of repression functioned as smoothly as ever. The Ministers realized that in keeping the true state of affairs from The Magnificent Leader, out of self-preservation, coupled with his penchant for self-deception, now worked against them.

Even so, they continued trying to convince him that he was dead, that he was giving off a stench of rotting flesh, and that he simply had to be buried. Blast it all, it was his duty to let them bury him!

He was adamant against it, and the Ministers left the Revolutionary People's Palace in a gloomy spirit. As they were leaving, Comrade Minister Crespo said something that stunned Captain Rojo.

"Maybe he's been dead all these years and we've only just now come to realize it, the zombie!" he grumbled.

Now there was something to sober you up quick.

That night, Ministers Crespo, Riaño and Roa Ibáñez, along with their immediate subordinates and their families, found themselves deep within the dungeons of the Minister of the Interior. In the next couple of days, there floated several pieces of persons down the Almedros river, which passed by the Ministry.

As a result of this purge, there was a sudden upward movement of careers within the respective Ministries.

Within the next couple of months, the whole country was suffused with the fragrance of The Magnificent Leader's putrefaction.

There was a new exodus of people out of the country.

Infidel was furious.

He gave Minister Pérez Guzmán strict orders to arrest and shoot anyone who referred to the stench, or who said that either The Revolution or Infidel, The Magnificent Leader, had died and needed to be buried.

Hundreds of citizens disappeared.

The various schools of indoctrination and government-owned sources of mass communication (all of them were government-owned, without exception) began to discourse at length on the heavenly scent that the motherland now exuded, as a result of The Revolution and its glorious leadership. All such proclamations and commentaries ended with, "Thank you, Infidel!"

"The tyrant is dead! Somebody please bury him!" were the graffiti found on walls which were immediately erased by the organs of persecution.

Infidel decided to give one of his five-hour speeches "to boost morale" at an open-air mass meeting and to remind the people that, if not for him and his genius, a Yankee invasion would occur and, in all probability, succeed.

In spite of his hysterical arm spasms "oratory" and his foaming at the mouth whenever the topic of the Yankees came up, quite a few people dozed off in the middle of the harangue, out of boredom. It was old hat. Besides, no one who had ever sat through these diatribes from beginning to end could ever really, exactly, say what in blazes he had been blathering about, anyway. Agents of the Ministry of the Interior were dispersed throughout the crowd, a captive audience if there ever was one. One and all thanked their lucky stars that it was an open-air meeting. The tropical breezes carried the stench out to sea where dead fish floated up towards the surface, as if a bloom of red tide had occurred.

The governments of Venezuela and Mexico, with their blinding,

maniacal hatred of the United States, encouraged The Magnificent Leader to stay in power, and if need be, execute as many people as possible to achieve that end. The Mexicans' rabid hatred of Americans, through a twisted logic all of their own, led them to return people who had desperately asked for political asylum back to their point of origin and, thus, to their torture and death.

One prominent writer, a Nobel Prize winner in Literature, who had previously chummed it up with Infidel, an admirer of his works, got a whiff of things and flew over in a mercy mission.

"Give it up, Infidel, you're dead!" he urged. "Face facts: you're stinking up the whole Caribbean. Your time is up. Be reasonable! Let them bury you. You're an anachronism. You belong now to the dustbin of history." But Infidel stubbornly, and in truth, very selfishly, refused to let himself be entombed. The writer sighed and flew back.

Captain Rojo, along with other faithful followers, became adept at ignoring the stench and continued to encourage and bootlick their master. They kept telling him that he had never looked better and assured him that The Revolution was still a great success, still forging ahead, admired by the whole world, especially for his, Infidel's, courage at standing up to the Americans. Intellectuals from England, France, Mexico, Germany, Italy, Canada, Venezuela, Uruguay and even the United States journeyed all the way over to reassure him of their admiration and continued support and in general to kiss his backside.

And when you came right down to it, Captain Rojo, Minister Pérez Guzman and all the others really had very little choice in propping up the cadaver and telling it that it had never looked better, in spite of small pieces of skin occasionally peeling off. After all, what was the alternative? To renounce their power and their stolen goods and to be put on trial for their past crimes? No, thank you very much. We'll pass.

And so, another year passed, with the ambulatory corpse still in power and The Revolution “forging ahead.”

And another year.

And another.

And another.

And the stench continued to become unbearable.

But the supporters of The Magnificent Leader insisted that things had never been better, and The Revolution had achieved wondrous things and had benefited The Poor.

And the intellectuals applauded.

Meanwhile, the stench continued to get worse.

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Armando Simón is the author of *The Only Red Star I Liked was a Starfish* and *Very Peculiar Stories*.

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