

THE KING OF THE WORLD

Groggy from heat, Pilate watched in lazy detachment as a fly landed in his glass of beer. It made a valiant attempt to free itself but the tiny little wings were waterlogged and the insect quickly drowned. There was no disgust in Pilate's mind or throat. The beer had turned too warm anyway, and the few cups he had already drunk were making him sleepy. In fact he almost felt grateful to the fly. It had distracted him from his boozy haze and made him wax philosophical, thinking to himself, reflecting on the brevity of life. He smiled as he pondered what an odd place to die an ocean of beer was and how it's not such a bad one when one thinks about it, but that little bit of wit left as quickly as it came. Melancholy was the order of the day and Pilate did not wish to fight against it. "*Strange how it comes even on perfect days,*" he thought. "*Yes, it's too hot but, sun, sea...*" He winced when he remembered his days working in the German provinces and how repulsive he found snow and darkness concluding in a self-admonition that he should be thankful for his lot.

The fly made him think of his mother and how she told him once, when he was a boy, that a moth's lifespan was one human day. "*What a rubbish joke! One is born and then dies almost immediately?*" The story stayed with him for years. He pitied the moth and found it the saddest creature in the world. He recalled fighting, teary-eyed against believing his mother about the cruelty of such a short life. Even after praising the gods and trusting

in their wondrous munificence which they bestowed upon the world, and Rome in particular, he refused to believe the story about the moth. It was too cruel. What is a day? For weeks, if not months, he tried to catch a moth and hold it captive to disprove his mother. Eventually he captured one and it died within hours. The theory was confirmed. Life is a flicker. Later, after being appointed governor, he often recalled the line from the Jewish holy books: “All is vanity.”

The sea gently washed the shores and kept licking the sand—motherly, like a cat washing her kittens, while the sun’s eyes grew wearier and so did Pilate’s. And the water looked warm, warm...

Pilate certainly did not miss Germania where he had spent most of his military career, but Judea’s heat was sometimes too much even for him, despite being a full-blooded Roman. He often found himself in need of sleep, overheating. This made him wonder if it was just the temperature or if there was something wrong with his liver or perhaps that problem with melancholy that he struggled with, and if so, which humour was at fault. (*Bile, perhaps?*) He rarely took naps—they would guarantee a foul disposition upon waking—so he avoided them as much as possible. Mostly he felt that he could never get enough sleep or rather get one decent night’s rest. It seemed as if almost every night, after a few minutes of forcing himself to dream he would have to get up again, whether to piss, drink water, or sometimes just to sit and think.

He was not alone. He had his wife Claudia and her plump flesh and sweet breath always made his heart feel warm, squeezing her meaty ass in the morning, tasting her sweat when they woke in the heat of the Israeli summer. Yet for weeks now, Claudia did not even exist for him. She tended to household chores, bossing around the slaves and the gardeners. She had her own life and he was scraped by loneliness.

When Pilate would rise in the morning, his heart racing, wide awake and exhausted, he would slowly lift himself off the bed, sit for a few minutes and then realize how tired he truly was. Presently, he would lie down again and force himself to close his eyes but the eyelids would pop open almost automatically. Thoughts of his mother would weigh heavily on his ability to sleep. What bothered him most were certain phrases she would utter to him as a child, then as a teenager, and even as a young soldier in the Roman army years later. “You will be famous one day... world famous...” And so he was, at close to fifty years of age, a hated, mediocre bureaucrat presiding as governor over the toilet of the empire.

“I’ve seen Jews who have lived to a very long age but maybe they’re lucky or maybe their blood can handle this place. Not me... I could die any minute and my accomplishments will mean nothing. What accomplishments? Ha! Another cold beer would be good...” He looked over at the fly cemetery in his cup. For a brief moment shame set in. Who was he to complain? He lived in what was essentially a palace by Judean standards and managed to rise to the position of governor at a relatively young age. And then Claudia, busy with her own chores... He did not dare to interrupt her or tell her how he felt. It would be unseemly for a man who supposedly possessed the power that he had. Shame gave way to self-pity once again and Pilate felt weak and old.

“I will be fifty this year and I’ve accomplished nothing. And perhaps... No, not ‘perhaps’ but most likely, this has been my own fault. I have suckled on the armored nipple of the Emperor. I should be grateful to him and to Claudia too, of course, but the truth is I will never amount to much. I shall never be famous. I have amounted to some things in my own right but...” He smashed his fist down against the oak table in self-loathing rage. *“I will still be*

forgotten as quickly, just as quickly as I have been remembered. I am nothing. All is vanity... emptiness."

The emptiness of the universe perversely gave Pilate periodic hope. Gazing up into the meaningless space above during twilight hours and seeing the stars flicker, he would sometimes look forward to death just to see what it would feel like, to finally experience living on the other side.

At forty-nine years of age he was either too young or too unprepared to face death. He knew he could still do something. He could quit his post, leave Claudia, perhaps find another wife, retire, perhaps move back to Italy, or even stay in Judea and buy a farm or a vineyard. What was fifty anyway? The emperors had lived into their eighties. But he was no emperor and never would be. Self-doubt and self-hatred flowed through his veins simultaneously like wine and water, the way the Greeks mixed it.

"I'll be fifty this year. Half a century... the worlds, the world, it spins. My time. I should love every day that I possess, every day which is given to me, yet all I feel is sand in my mouth, a pain in my gut and a stranger in my heart. I should be grateful but I want to spit. It's too brief. It's a mockery. This can't be real."

"One day you'll be famous." His mother's words continued to taunt him. *"Famous for what? For following orders? I've had nothing to contribute. A stinking province. A land burnt by the sun that produces nothing but garbage and criminals. Let me go back to Italy and die in Rome and let my mother die before me so she will never have to suffer the shame of the fact that her son who she claimed would be famous disappointed her so hideously."*

He looked over at the cup of beer again. Another fly had committed suicide by diving. It too struggled to leave but

perished even faster than the first few victims. Another angry living thing felled. At this point, Pilate became repulsed by all the little corpses. He picked up the cup and poured it and its victims out over the balcony and went indoors.

Tomorrow was another day of life.

The palace was cool and dark and while it offered relief from the heat, he could not stay inside for long. It reminded him of a tomb and though romantic ideas of death had often lulled him to sleep in the past, now he felt he could not breathe and went back out onto his balcony.

Looking out onto the beach, he saw a peculiar sight. A woman was struggling with the birth of a child right on the sand, screaming, holding her enormous belly. "Oh God, oh God" she screamed, followed by a string of obscenities. Pilate had never fully learned Aramaic, but he knew enough to understand her cries, particularly the choice bits with which he was familiar and it made him chuckle. Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, a young Jew, a fisherman perhaps, rushed to the woman's aid. The young man must have known what he was doing, for soon enough the baby appeared, covered in slime, screaming for dear life while the warm water of the sea splashed its gentle waves.

The sea was warm and appeared endless. It would be there forever and there would be countless more children born on its shores. Plus ultra, non plus ultra, quid est differentia?

This odd episode, witnessing the birth of a human, briefly snapped Pilate out of his melancholy. He had a fondness for children. In a roundabout turn inside his brain, it made him think of happier times. He wondered what this child's lot in life would be and considered that perhaps his own life was not all that

dreadfully pointless as he imagined. Of course, his appointment as Governor of Judea by the Emperor himself was a huge honor. He tilted his head and closed his eyes, thinking back on that sunny spring day in Rome, so many years ago...

When Pilate first learned that he was nominated for the gubernatorial position, he had a fear, which seemed insane to him now when he'd reflect on it, that the Emperor's palace was probably made of marble and there would be no dirt around for him to dig a hole to bury his face when he came into the presence of the divine light of Imperial Majesty. Luckily, his military training and discipline (he had recently finished twenty years of service in Germania) proved that in this situation he was able to stand tall, asshole clenched tight and to remain humble with military professionalism—but never groveling.

He remembered that day with perfect clarity and what he remembered most were the colors. Standing in the Emperor's palace he felt as if the entire universe were composed of only two colors—gold and white. Even the sky, which would normally appear blue, seemed parched by Sol Invictus, the yolk of an egg, a drop of honey in a glass of milk. It was overwhelming.

As he stood in that blinding whiteness, his mind made yet another detour and he drifted off to other scenes. He remembered how in Germania, sometimes in the green, green groves, a fire flickered in the distance. A pagan ritual in progress, he pushed through the branches quietly and watched the orgy from afar in wonder. The grove and the gold of the fire still vaguely remained in the muddy ocean of memory and in the cesspool of time.

What surprised Pilate most when he entered the reception hall in the Emperor's palace was the Emperor himself. A slight old man, gray-haired, affable and pleasant, avuncular one could say,

and yet the ruler of the known world, from Scythian lands to the east and Germans to the north and everything south and west of there until the Pillars of Hercules. So much might in such a small frame and yet he was just another man and hardly a god, unless it was one of those instances where God hides himself in the frame of a butterfly or a hummingbird, but the stories told of greater incarnations, a bull or a swan for example. In fact, Pilate felt a bit of a disappointment at first but when they began talking he immediately forgot about the Emperor's physique and demeanor that was in such contrast to the vastness of his possessions. The Emperor was old but he wasn't senile. His mind was sharp as a blade. He recalled how His Majesty explained the tasks to him, taking his time, feeling out if the man was right for the job.

"Come, soldier," the Emperor smiled and took Pilate gently by the bicep and let him out onto the balcony that overlooked the miraculous city of Rome, truly a modern marvel and a wonder of the world. In between instructions and palaver, the Emperor would need to take breaks. "Excuse me..." he would say. "Come this way and wait for me. I will return in a moment". The Emperor's guts were rotten and he had to interrupt his conversation with the gubernatorial appointee several times to make visits to the latrine. Pilate felt embarrassed listening to the sounds of excrement of the Emperor God splashing against the walls of the imperial toilet. He would remind himself that there was no need to be embarrassed until he realized that it was meant to embarrass him. The Emperor's shit was the shit of God and he should be grateful to be in the presence of such divine sounds.

They returned to the balustrade and that was when the Emperor decided to get down to business.

"How well do you know the Jews, soldier?"

“I know them but I don’t know them very well. I’m sorry, your Majesty, my service was in Germania.”

Pilate stammered, his heart raced, he did not expect to be quizzed on the Jews. He had never seen one before and did not know anything about them. The Emperor smiled kindly. He wasn’t testing Pilate, he was just curious for he had never seen a Jew before either but as the holder of the divine throne it was his duty to hold the empire together down to its most sorry bits and those sorry bits were the Jews. There was too much trouble in Judea right now and if this plague went on and Judea went, then so could richer more prosperous lands. “What would be next? Syria? Asia? Then what?”

“They are an interesting lot,” the Emperor continued, as Pilate clenched his jaw and sweated, wondering, “*Will I get the job?*” It seemed stupid to him now, so many years later, how he toadied up to this man, Emperor or not, he was a man after all. And this man continued to lead him, Pilate walking a few spaces behind to show his respect.

“What I am telling you now is useful information. I do not expect you to know them as we have very few Jews here in Rome. They are an interesting folk by all accounts. Unique, one could say. You know, they think they are an entity unto themselves, a chosen people. They have one god and they are his beloved. Everyone else can go to hell. Have you ever heard of such rubbish?” the Emperor chuckled.

“I have heard of it.”

“And that they entered into a special covenant with their god who they considered to be the one true god? Have you heard of that?”

“I have...”

“And hence you know the origin of this insurrection.”

“I do, Sir.”

The Emperor stopped and looked directly in his eyes. Pilate felt as if he had woken up from a peaceful dream to find a mongoose sitting on his chest staring him squarely in the face as if he were a snake, but the soldier in him came through and this was his time to shine. He did it as a soldier and a civil servant, not as a lackey and he did it well, without a hint of a stammer.

“Your Imperial Majesty, I believe that the people who do have a covenant with God are us Romans. Look around Imperium Romanum. We rule the world. Jupiter smiles upon us and our lands... all our lands. Your wise rule which brings us prosperity, happiness, and glory is a living testament to it, and it is obvious to all but fools. And fools these Jews are and they need to be taught a lesson.”

“How odd of God to choose the Jews,” the Emperor chuckled. “Have you ever heard that line? One of our poets made it up. I think it’s quite droll.”

“It is, Sir.” Pilate wished to hasten and return to his speech, to prove his worthiness but the Emperor cut him off.

“What is not droll, Pilate, is the ‘insurrection’, as they call it. These fanatics will not stop, do you understand? They do not value life for they believe they are already assured a spot in their heaven and hence they will stop at nothing! Which is why they need to be exterminated!” The Emperor’s voice rose to a volume and intensity which Pilate didn’t think possible coming from this old man, and he understood that the old man wasn’t Emperor for naught.

“Crush the insurrection! Crush them like flies! Destroy them completely! Show no mercy! We are facing an enemy that is ruthless and cold-blooded. They kill their own, you know, and they don’t care if they themselves die. They hate our way of life. The most dangerous are the Sicarii, those who attack in broad daylight and know they will be killed but not before they take innocent people with them. I will give you plenty of reinforcements and will ask Flavius Augustus to organize an army for you. I do not wish to move any troops from Syria just now. Your reinforcements will have to be moved from other places in Asia and Thrace and it will take weeks. When they are ready you will land by night. Do it in daytime and it will cost you much trouble. I want them to wake up and see our ensigns everywhere. It will infuriate the insurgents. These insects will crawl out of the woodwork hotheaded and brazen. They will increase their attacks and that is when I want you to move in swiftly and capture every insurgent on sight. Those you can’t capture, kill, and the ones you do capture, crucify! I want this insurrection stopped especially as it threatens to spill over the borders. Syria is much more valuable to us in the long run, but for right now Judea is the centrum of this malice and we cannot threaten the security of all our lands. Syria is filled with people of many faiths. What if each of those peoples got the bright idea that they too are the chosen ones? Romans are the chosen people, you are correct, Pilate. You will be on the forefront of this war, which is nothing less than a war on terror.”

Pilate saluted the Emperor.

“I will not disappoint you, Sir!”

“I have a feeling that you won’t. I have faith in you. Excuse me once again for a moment... Governor...”

The Emperor smiled and went indoors. His rotten intestines beckoned him to his gold-plated shit bowl as he left Pilate standing on the balustrade. The new appointee's brow broke out in a bucket of sweat with the relief that the job was his. His heart beamed with the tingling delight of success. The Emperor was the king of the world. It was no small honor or privilege to serve as governor even if Judea was the armpit of the empire. Armpit or not, it was the Emperor's armpit, and it was far, far better to live like a louse in Tiberius' underarm than to continue to buzz around like a fly around his toilet. At least he was inside his tunic, inside his flesh, a commander, a governor, and someone who may even make history one day.