

Controlling Time

JOHN J HEARTFIELD

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DEDICATION

To Michelle

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CHAPTER 1

KO

*Manhattan, South Of Canal Street
Winter, 1999*

The old man said, “Ko, I’ll have my cigar now.”

Ko stood behind the old man’s left shoulder, regarding me without emotion. From what I’d seen in the past, Ko didn’t find emotions to be all that useful. He preferred to indulge his appetites.

I was quick, but without a weapon, I harbored no illusions about my chances against Ko.

He was five-nine, but as wide as two men pressed together. The city’s most talented tailor made Ko’s charcoal-grey suits fit as well they did. However, even that master craftsman was unable to mask a visible tightness in certain lines of the cut. Tonight, in addition to a blood-red silk tie knotted over his crisp pale yellow shirt, Ko wore invisible restraints forged by his respect for the old man.

He stood waiting, perfectly balanced, and every now and then, with the slightest motion, he would lean towards where I sat. It gave me the impression that I had placed myself too close to the wrong end of a stretched bow or a cocked revolver.

If the old man let him have his way, Ko would happily choke the life out of me while thinking of it as a light workout. Perhaps daydreaming about such a pleasant activity was the reason that he responded too slowly to the old man’s request.

“Have you forgotten my cigar, Ko?” the old man said. “After all, you’re already up.”

One corner of the old man's lips rose slightly as he shared the double meaning of his words with me.

Ko did not move. He was certain I would never try to harm the only person worthy of our loyalty. However, Ko must have felt that, after what had happened, placing any amount of trust in me was an unnecessary leap of faith.

In a voice just louder than a whisper, but with a much different tone, the old man said to him, "Go now."

Ko immediately left us. The old man lowered his eyes and studied a delicate cup on the small round table that separated us. We were sitting in the dimly lit room where he spent most of his time. The old man didn't care for sunlight. Too many people were in it.

In one quick smooth motion he raised the cup to his lips, tipped it back, and replaced it almost precisely in the same spot. The movement struck me as a good model for the way he conducted business. Once he decided on an action, it was carried out as efficiently as possible.

After he drank, he turned his attention to me. His gaze forced me to think of all the things that I had done and all the things that I still wanted to do. If I'd known him only by his reputation, I'd have felt like a man watching a knife being slowly forced into his chest.

But I'd been in this room before, standing beside him rather than sitting across from him. A wall clock clicked louder than it had on those other nights.

For some reason, he decided that before I heard his decision I needed one final lesson.

"There are only two kinds of men in the world," he said. "Those who act on what they believe should be done and those who don't. Sometimes, overcome by passion, a man will behave differently, but that's not the same as a man who has time to consider all the consequences of his actions and then moves ahead, whether minutes or years pass between the cause and its effect. When such a man also possesses intelligence, he'll be respected. If fortune favors him, he'll acquire power. There's no shame in being the other type. It's simply how you're made."

He shrugged so gently that I couldn't be certain that I'd seen it.

"Ko tried to warn me," he said. "I don't understand why you allowed that traitor to beg for what no longer belong to him. How did he persuade you to give him time to prove his innocence? Was it your old friendship? It doesn't matter. If you had trusted my judgment, then nothing he said could have made you so weak. I sent Ko as soon as you told me what you'd done, but it was almost two days before he made his way through those who took in your friend. Some of my associates are complaining that Ko acted too harshly. Well, people always talk. That kind of talk fades away. However, Ko believes cleaning up after you was beneath him."

He looked down at his hands.

"I don't need to tell you that Ko will always act on his beliefs."

I also looked at the old man's hands. In the past, I'd imagined him to be immortal, but suddenly I noticed that he was showing his age. I realized how much his disappointment in me had contributed to that and I was ashamed.

"If you were my blood, it might be different," he said. "But not as things stand. I can't allow you to remain with me, a reminder to my enemies, strengthening them, informing them that you disobeyed me and I forgave you."

So he had decided. It was a death sentence. Ko was close. I prepared myself by forcing my mind to clamp down on only one thought.

I will not allow Ko to crush me like an insect.

I tried to remember his favorite moves. He enjoyed prolonging the struggles of opponents who allowed him to get too close. He had taught me when it served his purpose. I concentrated on ways to give Ko as much pain as possible before he finished with me.

The old man reached into a deep pocket of his simple black cloth jacket and took out an envelope.

"Take this," he said. "Go away and never come back. It must appear as if you were buried where your body could never be found. Only Ko and I can know what happened here tonight."

"What about you?" I said.

Of course, my question didn't want an answer.

"Have you suddenly decided to consider my interests?" he said.

His tone cut deeply into me.

"Don't concern yourself," he said, sounding weary. "The ones I can't control still need me."

There was nothing left to say. As I walked past him on the way out, I resisted the impulse to show him some sign of what I felt for him. For almost seven years, he had treated me as if I was his favored son.

Ko stood in the hallway, managing to look as if he was leaning against the wall. It appeared as if he was smiling. But Ko only smiled when he was sure someone else couldn't.

"I can't believe you're walking away from this," he said. "You know what will happen. I always knew you were weak, but I didn't think you could spend so much time with him without learning a damn thing."

I'd learned it was essential to treat Ko with a certain wary respect. I'd seen what happened to those who made the mistake of thinking otherwise. But I'd never liked him. I finally had my chance to speak my mind, knowing that the old man had given me a safe pass.

I moved my face to within inches of his unreadable expression.

"You came into this world ready to kill anything in your path," I said. "What did you learn?"

"What did I learn from him?" he said. "Patience. He taught me to wait for the right moment."

His hand disappeared inside his jacket as quickly as a small deadly snake. Then he slowly removed an object from his pocket.

I couldn't believe Ko would go against the old man. I tried to get ready.

But all he held in his hand was a cigar, a Montecristo, not five hours off the plan from Cuba.

"You should hurry in with that before it gets stale," I said.

He smiled with the corners of his lips. Then he turned and walked away. Suddenly, he stopped and turned around.

Ko said softly, "I promise you. There'll be another night, little boy."

I was careful when I stepped into the street. I slid into a deep shadow, glanced inside the envelope, and saw that it held a stack of hundred dollar bills. Later, when I carefully counted them, I discovered they added up to twenty-five thousand dollars.

I stashed the money in my jacket, zipped up against the cold, and considered how to get out of the city in the least visible manner.

The next night, sitting at the counter of a truck stop diner, I celebrated my eighteenth birthday.

I took a bite of stale cake.

It tasted very good.