

Meet The Commander

An excerpt from the unpublished novel *Don't Take Too Much Sunlight for Yourself*

Rico Cleffi

2023

Inching his way downtown, he hits the first food cart he can find, not an easy feat in this neighborhood. The cart stands in front of a worn old church converted into a disco, famous for getting shut down repeatedly. He devours a stale, greasy, half-cooked knish.

Across the street from the cart, appearing as a mirage, a bookshop. Real fringe spot. Rollie has been inside a few times over the years. He generally avoids that sort of place, owing to the aspects of their ideology he finds offensive. But none of that matters. Now, it is raining. Now, he needs to use the bathroom. Good reasons to enter a place as any.

Black posters in the window announce in vitriolic type font: *Communism, why it requires proper leadership. Come see this DVD of a talk given by New Emancipation Party for Workers Revolution Commander Stan Weckyl. Commander Stan is indisputably the true interpreter of Marx/Engels/Lenin/Mao/Hoxha Thought (MLMH™). The New Emancipation Party for Workers Revolution is an Amerikkkan-based organization that has its eyes set on taking power in the US.*

Rollie wonders if they hadn't drawn the attention of the cops with that one. A bearded man, a determined, peeved-looking gaze squints out from the poster. Must be Commander Stan. Had to be an old photo, possibly decades old. Rollie ventures inside. A scruffy older man wearing a "Mao's the time" T-shirt talks on the phone. Rollie browses the book titles. One wall has multiple shelves stocked with nothing but the writings of Commander Stan.

What would life be like under the leadership of this Commander guy, under his lackeys? Rollie has had it with bosses. He is tired of being told what is in his best interest. How stifling would the days be under these guys?

No alternative in what they are offering.

If he hadn't had such a distinct distrust of authority, maybe this Commander Stan stuff would've appealed to him. Far as he is concerned, the Commander and his ilk are selling something he doesn't need. He doesn't want a new commander, or boss, landlord, or self-help guru.

On the back wall, another photo of the Great Leader, this one much larger. Looking at the portrait, Rollie feels frozen, helpless. The commander has this bland intangibility about him. He doesn't exude any particular charisma. Still, Rollie is transfixed by this avuncular dictator in search of a cult. None of the books hold much appeal for him. Probably not much appeal for anybody. Countless Mao speeches. *Comrade Stan Speaks, The Selected Speeches of Chairman Hoxha*, that sort of thing.

Under a sign marked: "Classics," an entire shelf of Mao's Little Red Book, a larger shelf of Commander Stan titles underneath. Official our-great-leader shit by the bushel. Rollie doesn't feel so comfortable browsing, anyway. He was going to ask to use the bathroom, but the place is making him paranoid. Every inch of the joint has got to be surveilled. If not by the cops, perhaps by a rival faction's henchmen. Maybe they film you for possible extortion fodder, eyes peeping out of the Commander's portrait above the toilet. Smile for the Commander Stan Toilet Cam.

"We're having a showing of a talk Stan Weckyl gave next week." Man from the counter speaking. Rollie, pondering the impossibility of the sentence the guy just uttered, must have looked like easy prey, staring at the Com-

mander's portrait, biting his lip. "We have several of his writings...," he continues. Rollie has a hard-time focusing on the words; he's still drawn to the photo.

"We're focusing on reaching people who know that there's no difference at all between the candidates. We know that they're both part of an imperialist racket, and we're connecting with people everywhere, like you, who know it, people who are tired of the way things are." Trying to cram as much of his script in as he could, the guy appears satisfied with his delivery. He doesn't seem to care whether Rollie is listening or not. Rollie must be giving just enough uncomfortable nods for the man to keep delivering his lines. He wonders if he has scripted rebuttals prepared, the way telemarketers do.

"Commander Stan's such a charismatic character, he used to be in advertising. He could be successful at anything he wants, but he chose revolution. We're really redefining our brand identity. This is such an exciting time for people like yourself to get involved. To actually have your voice heard."

The guy ducks behind a curtain. Now, Rollie can leave. Not so fast. Crisp applause fills the room. The continued applause has that same reverberating crackle found on many of old live records. Sound of a bygone era.

"I'll just play you some excerpts from the lecture, to give you a taste. We're selling copies of the DVD for \$35."

"I'm kinda cleaned out right now," Rollie says. "Thank you. Ahem. As I was saying before the break... "The Commander has a slightly affected tough accent, fictional waterfront Brooklynese, the kind you hear in old movies. This has got to be a farce. The entire thing sounds like it was recorded in a past that never took place. And that applause. Rollie has heard it before. He racks his brain to try and place it. "Live at Budokan," maybe? "Frampton Comes Alive?"

"...Jive-ass CP members can't get down with our new formulation. Uhh-hunnh. Anarchists throwing bricks through the windows of Nike Town can't get down with this, no. Imagine the productive capacity that could be harnessed if we controlled Nike. We could fly the red flag over Nike Town, baby!," Commander Stan almost rapped.

The counter guy now preoccupied with some French tourists who had wandered in, presumably to get out of the rain. Rollie figures much of the foot traffic they're getting is probably due to the weather. Next to what looks like a death mask of the Great Leader, an abundant supply of red umbrellas, bearing Mao's face, with the text, "Mao we're talking." Strategically displayed by the door. Rollie makes a dash for it. "Care to buy a paper before you leave?" The counterman holding up a newspaper, the headline blaring, type redder than the blood of a dozen martyrs.

"Next time."

"Don't forget, the film next Thursday—also if you have any friends, or coworkers, who might *also* be interested in a revolution, but might not feel it's possible—"

He continues, but Rollie is long gone by then.

Rico Cleffi writes from Brooklyn. *Don't Take Too Much Sunlight for Yourself* is his first novel, which will hopefully be published in the near future. Set against the bleakness of the early Bush years, *Don't Take* is an anarchist tale of bibliomania that deals with book collecting and book burning, and the struggle to assert one's dignity in a world that grinds the life out of anything living."

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