

Additional Notes on the Elevator in the Dictator's Palace

Peter LaSalle

1. It is on the second floor.
2. Or, more exactly, the elevator is stopped and left forever open like that for display on the second floor of the palace.
3. The palace itself is in Catete in Rio de Janeiro, today but an everyday neighborhood and far from fashionable.
4. The palace is a faded pink block-shaped building, three stories, with ornate white trim and many long windows; it was built in the mid nineteenth century by a Brazilian coffee-growing magnate of German descent. The building's facade, and its set of big carved wood doors for the entrance, is almost flush with Rua do Catete, there in the neighborhood's main commercial pocket. The area has some colonial buildings and more nineteenth-century buildings, pastel masonry, with apartments upstairs and all manner of open-fronted enterprises lower down—cheap lunch counters, cluttered shops for anything from kitchen appliances to stationery, and who knows how many *botecos*, or bars; the *botecos* are of the sort where the flimsy plastic tables and chairs provided by the major *cerveja* companies—royal blue for Antarctica, canary yellow for Skol—are constantly arranged and rearranged on the sidewalk out front by attentive waiters and where the tall brown bottles always come served in insulating sleeves, rather grimy foam plastic, also provided by the beer companies.
5. The street has four lanes and is one-way. At the intersection where the palace is, on the corner with Rua Silveira Martins, the taxis coming down busy Rua do Catete, packs of them, float to stops, jockey for position in the lanes at the traffic signal—then, when the light changes, they move off again in a collective swooshing acceleration. The sidewalks in Catete are lumpy, uneven black-and-white mosaic tiles like just about all the sidewalks in Rio, something tracing back to the sidewalks in Lisbon, apparently; street boys sleep in nooks here and there, shirtless and shoeless

in the heat and dreaming whatever street boys do dream amidst all the graffiti—graffiti itself being an entity that sometimes seems to define Rio. There is also a fine public park behind the palace, once the palace's private gardens, shady with flowering fruit trees and mop-headed palms and many massive ancient banyan trees showing sturdy trunks of thick vine-like growth entwining upward, like the fingers of some fairy-tale giant. There is an ornamental duck pond in the park (*"I get so scared sometimes," you said to me*), and there is a decidedly formal garage building, six doors in front and its faded pink hue matching that of the palace; there, the big Cadillacs of the dictator were once housed, and it is where his police, under the direction of his brutal, hated brother, swerved in at all hours of the dark tropical night in their own unmarked sedans, transporting another suspect sitting beaten and cuffed in the rear seat, to be brought through secret passages to the adjoining old residences, which back up to the park and face the Rua Ferreira Viana. Those residences had been commandeered and the buildings converted into interrogation rooms and holding cells, it is said, as the considerable promise of the dictator's first years in power in the 1930's, a man of the people indeed, metamorphosed into the growing paranoia of his last years in power, the early 1950's, after he did put that brother in charge of the police; his closest advisers, many of the generals, told him that appointing the brother was a large mistake.

The sea is not far away, beyond the far end of the park and across the very busy oceanside freeway that winds along Flamengo Beach. Flamengo Beach is too polluted for swimming now despite its long, wide sweep of handsome white sands (*"I mean, I get so scared about everything, Jack, I really do," you said to me, whispery*); the beach, maybe a couple of miles all told, and the shimmering blue water of Guanabara Bay that it faces are tucked in by the kind of jagged green mountains that simply sprout up everywhere in Rio, as common, surely, as those dreams upon dreams fueled by the broken street boys sleeping.

6. The palace, now called the Museum of the Republic, hasn't been regularly used as a palace since the death of the dictator, on the morning of August 24, 1954. The dictator committed suicide in his bedroom on the third floor after he was informed that the military was on its way from the central barracks and coming to the palace, to demand his resignation; he was over seventy, and in a botched attempt to have a journalist assassinated outside of the journalist's apartment in Copacabana—a journalist who had ignored censorship and had been altogether too daring in his loud criticism of the regime—yes, during that attempt an Air Force officer who was with the journalist had been accidentally shot and killed, and the military and most everybody else, including influential businessmen, simply could not accept that. There was public protest in downtown Rio and rallies for the opposition in the city's main square, Praça XV, also in other cities throughout the country; there were charges that it was the dictator's son who ordered the murder, then charges that it was the dictator's manipulative adult daughter, to whom he had often turned over routine affairs of state as he got older, who ordered the murder. However, as it turned out it was not a family member but one of his inner circle who did so—the dictator had nothing whatsoever to do with the crime. In another of those odd facets of Brazil that marks its complicated history and maybe more complicated national character, it was the sole black member of the inner circle, head of the elite palace guard and a man who had worked his way up from poverty, who personally ordered the killing, totally on his own; historians inevitably point out that he was somebody who the poor in the *favelas*—those hillside slums that continue to grow, continue to threaten to swallow and finally devour the entire city whole some day—often cited as one of their own and good evidence of the dictator therefore being one of their own because he had entrusted the man, a *preto* with humble beginnings, with such an important post.

7. The truth of the matter is, the dictator wasn't a thug.

8. He was from an established land-owning family in the beautiful southernmost region of the country, Rio Grande do Sul, towards Argentina. He had attended a prestigious military academy as a young man, then studied law; he spoke French fluently. Of course, he had seized power by force in

1930, and he had subsequently dissolved the legislature in 1937, proclaiming his so-called Novo Estado regime, the New State, and himself the supreme head of it, a dictator, but he had also raised wages for workers and built schools and many agricultural facilities throughout the country. Even when finally ousted, after elections were reinstated following World War II, he quietly retreated to the south for a few years and then, after minor political dabbling, managed to come out of his exile like a hailed returning Napoleon, summoned to leadership by his network of cronies who had stayed on in the capital, never disbanding; managing to play along with the people's current need for this ritual of an electoral process, he became a legitimate candidate and won the vote, installed himself in the Presidential Palace once more. And once more he was basically what he had always been, the democratic process of elections restored or not—the dictator.

9. Of course, the palace had no elevator at the time of original construction. The elevator was added to the building some years after this coffee magnate's mansion was converted to the Presidential Palace in 1897. The palace served as such until 1960, the year the capital of the nation was moved from Rio de Janeiro to perhaps that strangest of all strange dreams, a completely new major world city of miles and miles of daringly futuristic architecture and looping freeways leading nowhere there on the windswept high plains of the far interior, Brasilia. Or, the Presidential Palace was at least officially designated as the residence until 1960, because after 1954 and the suicide, no head of state spent all that much time at the palace (*what did you say that afternoon? what did you say to me after we each went our separate way there in the museum, as we always did when in a museum? and I, who had been wandering the rooms on my own, I found you standing in front of the elevator, no longer used today and only a display in itself, and silently staring at it, looking so lovely, with your auburn hair loose and wearing simple white slacks and a simple white blouse, the rope-soled canvas espadrilles, blue, that you thought would be good for walking now that we had both realized that this trip to Brazil and the week at the beach there in Ipanema wasn't working, as we finally admitted that none of that was helping any of it—we couldn't get away from what we had to get away from back home just by resorting to geography, just by taking ourselves several thousand miles from home on a jet hissing on and on in the night through*

so much darkness, another continent altogether—and I suppose that morning we agreed at the hotel, exhausted with talking any more about any of it at that point, realizing that that was getting us nowhere, we wearily agreed that if in Rio we should at least see some of the city other than the beach and its tourists out there in Ipanema, there was downtown Rio, its wide boulevards and many monuments, there was the Opera House, and there was the infamous Presidential Palace in Catete, and how did you put it when I came up behind you in the empty museum? you were standing there, half lost in thought, I suppose, still staring at the elevator, your voice whispery as you turned to face me, your very rare gray eyes looking right at me and suddenly more lovely than ever, but more fragile and vulnerable than ever, too, as I felt worse than ever about what I had done, asking myself yet again how I could ever have done what I had done—you said to me: "I get so scared sometimes. I mean, I get so scared about everything, Jack, I really do"), and, in truth, the Presidential Palace was seldom the full-time residence for any head of state after 1954; in 1960 plans were announced for it to become a national museum. The elevator, which is left open that way for the display, on the second floor, was built by the American company Otis.

10. The Presidential Palace, a place usually quite empty even as the museum that it is today, has on the first floor several newly renovated galleries; they are darkened windowless rooms of black walls and modern track lighting, with artifacts and photographs and framed copies of old newspapers, documenting significant events in the history of the Republic.

11. Also on the first floor, in back and overlooking the well-groomed gardens, there is the long room called the Ministerial Hall, which was used as an operations headquarters during World War II. It was here that the dictator gathered his ministers and top brass from the various branches of the military around the huge table for reports and decisions, and set out in front of the twelve high-backed chairs now are old green-leather portfolios, stamped with the official escutcheon of the nation in gold. At this table Brazil formally declared war on Germany and Italy in 1942, though that came about only after much sympathy with, and even outright admiration of, the fascistic Axis cause; perhaps, in essence, the declaration was merely a gesture to ensure the dictator continuing approval from the United States,

plus the substantial military aid that did result.

12. A marble staircase, milkily white and flanked by smooth, thick marble railings, is carpeted in red and leads up to the second floor. It is a large, wide staircase that conjures up words like "grand" or "ceremonial," and the rooms on the second floor have kept the names given to them by the original inhabitant, the coffee magnate who built the place, once one of the wealthiest men in the country, probably in all of South America as well. They are laid out around the periphery of the main staircase.

13. There is the Noble Hall, running the full length of the front of the building, with a gilt-trimmed embossed ceiling, glistening chandeliers, and long pleated drapes, also a true expanse of polished wood floor in a herringbone pattern; it was a room for balls and the formal receptions honoring diplomats and heads of state.

14. There is the Blue Hall, also called the French Hall, where that is the color of the motif for the wallpaper and furniture and intricately patterned carpets, Louis XIV and XV, apparently.

15. There is the Yellow Hall, also called the Venetian Hall, and the decor works on a motif of that color in its various shadings and gradations, thoroughly Italianate.

16. There is the Chapel, which is a single room, but with the drapes drawn a rather dim one, dust motes suspended in the shafts of sunlight that do peek through the uneven meeting of the drapes here and there; there is dark-wood furniture and a small, carved dark-wood altar up front, though the furniture is arranged in clusters, more or less as in a parlor rather than what it is, a chapel—in large country estates of the day in Brazil there was always a separate chapel building on the premises for family worship, yet here, in the city, that had to be incorporated into the mansion proper.

17. There is the Moorish Hall, an exercise in abundant geometric patterning for the ornate trappings and, in a way, a good reflection of the fascination with things whimsily exotic, the categorically Oriental, of that nineteenth century.

18. There is the Banquet Hall, located directly above the Ministerial Hall below, in the rear and again overlooking the lush gardens, where the hibiscus seem to perpetually blossom their full fleshy scarlet, the oleanders show their repeated punctuating stars of bursting bright white; each place at this table is set with fine china and silverware, and along the walls are glass-doored cabinets, ceiling-high, with more gilt-edged china, more silver for place settings and at least a half dozen polished tea services.

19. It is true that even on days when the museum does have more people—when it isn't as empty as on a weekday afternoon in the heat, maybe on a Sunday when there is no admission charge—most of those who visit probably go directly to the third floor and the bedroom that has been kept exactly as the dictator left it; actually, it could be that few visitors as much as even linger amongst all that very faded opulence of the several named rooms on the second floor. If a wide marble staircase leads to the second floor, there is but a narrow angular set of steps, though again white marble, leading to that top, third floor, so cramped, in fact, that if there might be heard somebody coming down the steps, then somebody going up the steps would most likely wait before ascending, just to avoid having to squeeze by. At the head of the stairs there is a uniformed guard like all the uniformed guards, female, who maybe politely nods, and then there is the bedroom itself, the only room open to visitors on the third floor, which formerly must have been devoted entirely to living quarters. It is large but uncluttered, unlike the formal named rooms below, with plain pale-green walls devoid of any pictures, a dark wood floor, gold drapes for the long windows; the furniture—the double bed, the several sideboards and chests with mirrors, the two night tables—are of a design, vaguely art deco and a tortoiseshell-grain veneer, that must have been considered fashionable in about 1930, when the dictator and his wife did first occupy the premises. The spread on the bed is dark-blue satin; there is a small bedside lamp with an amber shade on each of the night tables, and attached to each lamp is a frayed electric cord operated by an old-fashioned click switch on the cord. In the somewhat stark expanse of the room, or emptiness, there is a newer chaise-longue recliner upholstered in olive faux leather; there is a single, round tortoiseshell-veneer table precisely in the middle of room's rectangle with two wing-

back chairs upholstered in the same functional olive faux leather, and set on the table is a black bakelite telephone from the period, bulky and rotary-dialed.

In the far rear corner is a showcase. In the showcase, displayed flattened out for viewing, is a man's silk pajama shirt, seeming very old. It is gray-and-white striped, with a torn hole the size of a small coin right at the embroidered monogram on the breast pocket, where one's heart would be, and the puncture is edged with dried brown blood. Also in the showcase, placed beside the pajama shirt on the black velvet, is a revolver, nickel-plated and the handle pearl, and beside that is one lead slug; dull gray, pitted as if by corrosion, the slug really isn't in the shape of a bullet, but now more like the lump of a pebble, lopsided, even amorphous. There is a photograph copy of a small page with the handwritten note that the dictator left, the text of it firmly, albeit melodramatically, proclaiming to the nation what he personally saw as his selflessness and utter patriotism right to the end.

There is also a certainly dated bathroom, quite large, high-ceilinged, and with two more of the long upright windows; the room is essentially aging white tile for the floor and walls, and aging white porcelain for the sink and the bidet and the toilet and the bathtub on legs, the old chrome fixtures lusterless and the finish worn through to the yellowish brass in spots.

On one of the sideboards in the bedroom, next to the door to the bathroom, is a clock in a casing of frilled gold, the only object distinctly decorative in the room; alongside the clock is a standard office-style prop-up calendar on a brown plastic base, a pad with one page for each day, and, true to the event that transpired here, the page left displayed shows the large numeral "24" in bold red and below that the day of the week, "Sexta-feira," and the month, "Agosto," both in bold black. Actually, the room's pale-green walls aren't completely bare because there is one oil painting, above this sideboard, and it is a portrait of the dictator.

20. He must have posed for it later in life. He is wearing a formal black cutaway, the green-and-yellow silk sash that indicates his position as head of state making for a diagonal across the vertical row of pearl studs on the starched, high-collar shirt and bearing several medals. Looking at the painting, it is easy to discern that he wasn't a very big man

in stature—there's something about the way he appears to be purposefully jutting out his chest, cock-of-the-roost fashion, that betrays the truth that he had to assert himself, he wasn't imposing. His eyes are dark, his nose thin and somewhat beak-like, his receding gray hair combed back straight from his forehead for this semi-profile pose. In a way, he does look in this portrait rather thuggish, and granted he did come from an old, established land-owning family, granted he was very well educated and did speak and read French fluently, having a fresh supply of history books in that language delivered to him from Paris periodically, other anecdotes in the biographies indicate another side of him.

21. On Sunday evenings he would sometimes leave the palace, with his wife and a single body guard, to walk to the garage in the gardens in back and get behind the wheel of a Cadillac, not one of the armored official limousines but the powder-blue soft-top convertible he kept for his personal use; wearing casual clothes, he would drive in the Cadillac—slowly, ostentatiously—the few blocks along wide Rua do Catete to the other end of that Catete neighborhood, still elegant then and not run-down like today, and go to one of the three movie theaters on the Largo do Machado, the central square there. Or, to be more specific, he would never fail to go to a film in such a theater whenever there was a new American Western playing on what must have been the sort of huge screen common in that period, the sound track blurring loud with guns whistlingly ricocheting and overdramatic stagecoach-chase music in that large darkness engulfing the shadowy audience; he often spoke of how much he enjoyed a good Western.

22. And in the journals he kept regularly, the jotted notes of his daily activities, he expresses in one entry several lines of remorse about having to have his police beat up, bloodily, the son of a prominent architect that morning, the young man being a student who was arrested and suspected of having Communist sympathies at the university in Rio; then in the next several lines summarizing the rest of his day's activity, he casually notes how pleasant a time he had later that evening attending a lawn party for a *churrasco*—barbecue—at the lovely home of society friends of his wife's family in the definitely exclusive Gávea district.

23. In the palace, if there is the narrow set of steps that leads up to and then down again from the dictator's bedroom, it only makes sense that beside those stairs, functionally positioned, is where the elevator would be installed, doors left open now, as said, for the display back on the second floor.

24. The exact year that the elevator was added to the palace was 1912.

25. It was ordered from that American company Otis, as also said; the manufacturer is announced on a bronze plaque affixed to its rear wall, right next to a routine square white card in a small frame providing information—in a cursive black script and entered on the lines provided—concerning the capacity, in the number of persons the apparatus could accommodate as well as the weight limit in kilos. The elevator is not very big; it is, very much so, a residential elevator.

26. Seeing that the varnished mahogany doors are now left open for the display, a swaybacked gold velvet cord across the entrance ensures looking but not entering by those who visit the museum. And how the elevator is outfitted is in keeping with such a setting as this, a Presidential Palace. It has two gilt-framed mirrors within, one on the right side and one on the left side. The carpet for the little square of the floor is the same rich-red broadloom as that on the marble steps of the building's main staircase (*and there was a clock ticking somewhere, not the one upstairs in the bedroom, of course, but the sound of a clock ticking steadily, hollowly, perhaps the sound coming through the open doorway to the room beside the elevator, there on the second floor, coming from the so-called Banquet Hall, where the long windows overlooking the park in back that had once been the palace's gardens were open to what was such a hot and very humid afternoon, and outside dark clouds had been amassing beyond Pão de Açúcar, the boomerang rise of the landmark mountain at the end of the sweep of Flamengo Beach just beyond the streets of Catete, which meant a tropical downpour was about to move in from the sea, and the uniformed female museum guards came from the other rooms, the Blue Hall and the Yellow Hall and the Moorish Hall, they came to gather at the row of open windows in the Banquet Hall to chat some and watch the soaking torrent once it began, and the downpour surely interrupted the dreams of the street boys out on the Rua*

do Catete sleeping in those nooks, huddled, perpetually hungry, and the rain surely scattered the men drinking at the tables on the sidewalk in front of the many botecos there, they maybe picked up their large bottles of beer and their glasses for a few moments and stood under a dripping awning themselves with the waiters, who would laugh about the rain, they would all watch it intensify, louder and harder, then diminish before long, stop, and the waiters, in their own sort of practiced dream scenario, what they perhaps performed in their own somnambulistic imaginings at home night after night, the waiters eventually would stroll out to the plastic chairs and tables on the sidewalk when the sun came out in earnest again, to carefully wipe away the wet with their bar towels so the men drinking could sit down again—Rio smelled rich and heady, like sweet mud, in the warm sunshine after such rain, the sky stretched so large and blue it seemed solid, near impenetrable above the soaked, steep green-jungled wall of mountains rising up right behind Catete there away from the sea, Catete being a wonderful pocket of the city, really, the statue of Christ the Redeemer with arms perpetually outstretched atop the highest mountain, the peak called Corcovado, clearly visible now), the walls in the elevator have a patterning running in a wide band around the middle, showing embossed white grape bunches and bunting against the light blue of the elevator's walls; the motif resembles, even as large as it is, that of Wedgwood china.

27. The fixture for the lamp built into the elevator's ceiling is brass, a wire mesh covering the half-sphere of it, and the controls for operating the elevator are on a panel inside the open doors of the elevator. They are on the right-hand side, if the operator were facing the doors.

28. There is a small dial to indicate the floor number. There are two cast-brass levers, tapered slabs to be gripped at the thick end, one a large lever and the other smaller. There is a brass wheel, for the operator to spin it like a bank-vault's wheel and engage the safety-latching mechanism.

29. Also, all the brass in the elevator is polished. It is polished very bright, gleaming, in fact.