

Ivo Balenović

Metastasis

Translated by Suzana Čolak

01 FILIP Attack of the great white shark

The sun was rising when I arrived at the train station. Just like my namesake, the dickhead what nicked his old lady's cash and partied for three days and three nights with whores and waitresses. Then his old lady said get lost and locked the door on him. She simply tells him to piss off. I mean, she didn't really say that, but you could read between the lines. In a nice way she fucked him off. You stole from me, I don't give a fuck, there's no such thing as a free lunch. That was the message.

He went back home after spending a bunch of years fucking around somewhere on a building site and everything gave him the shits. And that's pretty much that. A novel as boring as Sunday's Osijek-Cibalia derby. As far as I can remember the guy was also a pervert who got off on fat and old cunts. And after all of that he wasn't even my namesake. He had some stupid name.

I came back after three years. I also stole from my folks, and I was also sick so they kicked me out of home, but because of completely different reasons.

A commune, fuck it.

I signed my capitulation three years ago after a powerful force of various morons surrounded me from all sides and left me with only one way out – a work-therapy community. My folks, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, police, judges and another heap of useless people consolidated themselves and after a few failed attempts of methadone therapy they managed to send me to that shithole where I was supposed to become a useful member of the community, contribute to society and other bullshit like that. In other words, I was meant to be trained to watch HTV, become credit worthy, use the health system, set myself up with a fridge, washing machine, wife, children, participate in local elections, and on Saturdays kick back with mates to live music and a pig on the spit in some suburban bar.

Since I was miles away from that way of thinking, the whole council concluded that my behaviour was socially unacceptable and that a work-therapy community was the right solution for me. And that's how I ended up in the commune, in Santa Maria del Val in Spain.

I spent three years in that shithole among the worst scum from all of Europe, which is where I also belonged. We lived in a former monastery, planted peppers and tomatoes, fed chickens, did basket weaving, prayed and wanked. This was formally called a work-rehabilitation programme, but really, if you ask me, it was cocksucking. The only ones that benefited from it were the hermaphrodites from them health organisations who used us for their promotion in the media. And anyway we all mainly went back to our habits soon as we stepped out of this institution.

One of the work-therapy community leaders was Father Juan, an old bum who everyone loved because he had a lot of understanding for us, former addicts, fallen people who need an outstretched hand, as he'd say. That was interpreted as his faith and love, but he was actually the worst addict I met in my life, addicted to booze like all fuck. He got us so well because he himself knew well what a need was. And he was our only connection to the outside world because they all avoided us like the plague. He read the Bible to us every day and wanted us to discuss the messages that it carries. When he'd get hit with a major disruption to his thought process he thought he was one of the guys from it, but usually he was so drunk that he could hardly stand, let alone think.

Actually, he wasn't a bad guy, but that booze business really stuffed him up. Worse than the rest of us. When I was leaving old Juan gave me a Bible. It was bound in leather and smelt like the olden days.

The last thing my old lady told me before I left was to be careful that nobody plants drugs on me. Poor old thing, even after my seven-year career as an addict her brain didn't process the fact that her son was the worst junkie and parasite. Somewhere on the border between the living and the dead. A touch more alive than the plants on the balcony.

The train was a few hours late. Instead of harakiri the driver knocks back a double brandy. I take down my bag, throw it over my shoulder and get off the train. The female voice on the loudspeaker announces cities, platforms and times. After three years I'm standing on Zagreb asphalt again. Empty and clean. Ready for a new start. The train station elite have just woken up and are wandering the platforms searching for their morning booze. The guests of the Red Cross shelter on their morning stroll. Whores, drunks, druggies, derelict oldies all prance through the train station corridors and it all looks like some morbid performance of once were people. The wind blows around bits of paper and plastic bags. A few grey pigeons help themselves to spew that's still warm. The train station buffet serves all sorts of brandies for only four kuna. A puffy waitress wipes the metal countertop with a look of disgust.

After three long, long, years I am in my city again. The smells of spring and smog combine above the Main train station. The city is dirty and grey. The tram stop is full of people who don't seem very thrilled that they managed to be implanted into their mothers' wombs. They radiate sadness and despair. At the doors of the tram a fat cow skilfully blocks her space and shoves her elbow into my ribs. For this bunch of fucked proletariats life passes by on the tracks, between a one-bedroom flat in Prečko and a failed factory in Žitnjak. They're on their way to steal one more day from God. They got money for cigarettes and Vlahov liquor, but not for fucking soap. It's like this day after day. Cigarettes, coffee, cheap alcohol, a stupid job, crowds, trams, loans, taxes, fines, bans, cuntin'g shit... until they get diagnosed with some malignant growth and end up in the hands of some Mengele. Every so often, the horde presses me into the window because this fucking Joža Podravec with the record breaking long fingernail on his pinkie is driving the tram like he's getting ready to ride a bull at the county fair in Gudovac.

I get off at the last stop, walk through a dark, pissed in underpass and emerge at the other end. My folks live in one of those dull, grey suburbs. I stop at number five, my building, an ugly four-storey building covered in corrugated steel. Mould and moss grows on the facade, which is good for orientation but not for living. I observe this professional mistake for a few moments, and then I go into the dark entryway. It smells of fried food, stagnant urine, pigeons, and a months-long council cleaning strike. I ring the doorbell on the third floor. On the door it writes Marinko Novak. My old lady opens the door. She looks like a seamstress from Nada Dimić – because she was in fact a seamstress in Nada Dimić, up until the takeover when Nada pissed off with some Herzegovinian tycoon, and my old lady was left without a job and now has to spend her days cleaning entranceways.

-Jesus! – she screams.

-It's not Jesus, it's me – I tell her.

-Jesus, she repeats, and presses her palms against her face, just like a Mexican soap opera addict. The amount that she watched I wouldn't be surprised if she started telling me in Spanish that she's been having an affair with the neighbour's turtle since the old man ran off with her great-grandmother who convinced him that the nits and spawn in her pubic hair are his offspring.

-It's me, fucken hell.

-Jesus... Filip...

-Warmer, warmer.

-Filip, my boy...

-Congrats, ya got it.

-Marinko, Marinko – she screams while looking at me with an expression sponsored by hormones from an overactive thyroid which leaves the impression that she just survived a great white shark attack.

-Am I interruptin'? I ask her.

-My boy, oh my boy... my boy... you've come back to your mother... my boy... – she throws herself onto me and starts crying hysterically and kissing me.

I feel like we're filming a commercial for a HDZ election campaign. The only things missing are a flag flying in the wind and some old bullshit fortress is the background.

Peeping out suspiciously from behind her is Marinko, i.e., my old man. The head of the family. As Džoni once said: Azra that's me, the Sun King: the state that's me, my old man could also use the same logic and declare: the Family that's me. The old lady was like a simultaneous interpreter between us. I'm glad to see him in blue work overalls which write Elka, the one outfit he looks like a man in. All of his other attempts would usually suggest that he's about to go on as a back-up singer at the Mostar Song Festival. He firmly squeezes my hand and looks me straight in the eye with the stern look of a breadwinner. My old lady pulls me into the kitchen, sits me down on the bench under the Last Supper and gets started with cooking and a whirlwind of words that make no sense. Kraš Chocolate's Girl With a Lute painting is still hanging in the same spot in a gold-coloured plastic frame.

That morning I found out that Marica closed down her shop because she couldn't compete with the big shopping centres where everything is much cheaper (Which Marica? Which shop?), that Mladen's Reks died of pneumonia (Which Mladen? Which Rex?), that Valerija's wedding is in three weeks (Which Valerija? Which wedding?) and that last summer her and dad spent two weeks in Novi Vinodolski (Which Novi? Well, Vinodolski). Then I learnt all about what's been happening in some Mexican soap opera, the small pensions and high prices, some politician's affair, and at the end that Europe is still keeping a close eye on us. I was forced to eat homemade soup with noodles, two pork chops, a stack of mash and three pieces of apple strudel. As well as that, she showed me three new Wiehler tapestries, a tablecloth, a few photos of some kid and the canary that dad bought to sing to him.

The old man felt the need to give me a lecture about the importance of a steady job, a pension plan and health insurance, a term deposit and the responsibility of every individual. And then he mentions some Marić, who I never even heard of, but I stayed quiet about that so he wouldn't start going on how I

couldn't care less about what was happening around me. As far as I could tell this Marić is some cunt from some council office who can help me get a job. At the end he also refers to the harm done by drugs.

-I hope that it's behind us – he concludes his presentation. I felt like getting up and rewarding him with a spontaneous round of applause, but... it's only the first day.

I go to my room. Everything is untouched. Like I fucken died. On the wall Mick Jagger makes a face at me, and above the bed Jordan scores over Malone. The shelves are full of comic books like Zagor, Alan Ford, Tex, and Dylan Dog, and my favourite books. I close the curtains and throw myself onto the bed. From under the bed I pull out a CD.

Stir it up, little darling, stir it up... Good old Bob.

I wake up drenched in sweat. The Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie is lying next to me in bed devouring a pineapple. He politely asks me to be silent because, he says, he needs to rest, as his water has broken, and as well as that he is about to dissolve parliament and open up an early vacancy for a sales representative position. Given that he is pregnant with my old lady he will hire me even though I don't have experience in paper wholesales. He then spreads his legs and shows me the expanded back part of his bowels into which his urinary tract and genitals enter. He is satisfied, he says, with his career. He tries to push his foot into my mouth, which makes me want to vomit. He has a meeting in Jarun tonight with the minister of finance and Hilkih's Jeremiah who is going to get him into a concert of local dance music groups. This makes me scared so I jump through the window and run toward the Sava. Blagoje Adžić is jogging along the embankment dressed in black leather and leading a naked John Lennon on a chain who is singing: Comrade, let's plant flowers. I throw myself into the Sava with dead birds floating along it and I swallow dirty water. My old lady waves at me from the bridge. There are two gaping holes where her kidneys used to be, out of which small white worms crawl. I run out of breath. I am suffocating. I scream. Nobody hears me...

I open my eyes. Somebody is holding their hand to my forehead. My old lady. She sits in silence, in the dark and is looking at me.

-You're burning up – she says quietly – surely it's not...

She doesn't dare finish the sentence. Her eyes radiate concern.

-Nah mum, it's not. Just a little cold.

-I'll go and call Doctor Bezjak.

-Don't mum, I'm OK, just a normal fucken cold. Make me tea.

-It's on the table – she hands me a hot mug.

-How are ya kidneys? – I ask her.

-Ah, fine, I'm hanging in there. Now go to sleep.

In the morning I wake up and feel guilt and helplessness, with a deep empty abyss inside that I can't see the end of. Anxiety has set in like a thick fog above a river. A heavy black depression kept me in bed for weeks. The only things I do are go to the toilet and nod at stupid questions. Maybe I'll never even get better. Of course, my old lady brought in that ancient shit, Doctor Bezjak. To give me a bit of a check-up. Fuck, the old fart looks like he still uses leech therapy. After crapping out a few Latin phrases and leaving me some tablets, we couldn't get rid of him until he drank a bottle of grape brandy dry. And he also recommended the Crisis Centre. Yeah, right.

The first sign of neurotransmitter recovery was the desire for beer. I go down to the shop and buy a case of Karlovačko. It's warm outside. Birds jump around and fight on the green treetops. It could've been about five-six in the afternoon.

My old man is in the living room watching TV.

-Wanna beer? – I ask him.

-Which one?

-Karo vačko – I say.

-Why didn't you get Ožujsko?

-I'm askin' ya if you wanna beer and I expect a short and sweet answer, without unnecessary sub-questions. Yes or no?

-Alright, is it cold?

I hand him a can and sit down next to him.

-There wasn't colder?

-No!

On the screen there's a guy who looks like an emancipated homosexual asking another guy, who looks like a minister in the Serb Republic government, unbelievably stupid questions. The one that looks like an emancipated homosexual is a faggot and the host, and the one that looks like a minister in the Serb Republic government is a minister in the Croatian government and a moron. They're having an imbecilic conversation where nothing can be understood except that the host is shamelessly arselicking, and the minister is even more shamelessly talking himself up. Terms are being thrown around at each other: Euroscepticism, local government and self-government, implementing experiences, a flood of rules, utopian pragmatic engineering and conflict of interest. I can't take it. It's not enough that they lie and steal, we also have to watch them every fucking day, that dirty and cheating. When a fat moron in parliament says to me: Everything for Croatia, it's the same shit as when Krpa says: Everything for Dinamo. The same stupid fucking reasoning. But, as opposed to the narcissistic liars sitting in parliament, Krpa pays for his travel himself. Here and there, he might fuck over a cop or a fan, but these lying cheats in parliament always fuck the lot of us over.

-How can ya watch those morons? – I ask my old man.

-I can – he says pissed off.

I feel that he is ready for an argument.

-Then watch – I say appeasingly.

-You should also take an interest in what's going on around you, and not just spend your whole life with your head in the clouds.

No way, I didn't need this. I've stirred up a hornet's nest.

-Unlike yerself, I live my life and I stand behind everythin' I done!

I look behind me and tell him that I don't see him there, but he doesn't get it because he's expanding the boundaries of his 'me' with a tirade about his beliefs, morals and firm positions. At the end he mentions seventy-one. Fucken hell, in this fucken country there isn't a single person who doesn't think that he was persecuted for his beliefs.

I can't listen to him anymore. I go get another beer, lock myself in my room and put on The Beatles 'White Album'. The best album anyone ever recorded.

03 MRTVI Anyone who'd say everything with me is OK is lying

My name's Davor, but they call me Mrtvi (Dead). Anyone who'd say everything with me is OK is lying. My mother's dying. She's been lying in her room for days with big black bags around her eyes. Her body is slowly falling apart and it's only fat veins that are keeping her in one piece. When she's not sleeping she's moaning in pain, when she's not moaning in pain it looks like she's sleeping. When I thought she was sleeping, I stole her painkillers. I needed them more. I've already sold the jewellery. She melted away like dirty snow on the side of the road. When there was nothing left to melt she stopped breathing. On the radio they wished us Happy Easter. I stopped counting the days ages ago. I light a cigarette with a burning butt. The ashtray is full so I put it out on the table. My nails are bitten down to the pink meat. My hands are full of scabs and open wounds. There's blood coming out of some. The kitchen floor is full of pieces of something burnt, dirty clothes, broken bottles, crushed cans and old newspapers. The window is broken, and the sink is full of dirty water and floating butts and mouldy plates. It stinks of rot and damp soil.

When it seemed that she had died, I took off her ring. If I hadn't taken it off it would have fallen off by itself. A cold and bony hand grabbed me.

-I'm still alive - the hand said.

-I thought you'd died - I replied.

It was ten-twenty on the clock. At ten-twenty seven the hand drooped. Mum died. In her other hand she clutched my brother's picture. I'm sure that malignant cells remained in her womb after she gave birth to us. The clock kept ticking as though nothing had happened. That clock was the only thing that worked like she wanted it to. On the inside of the ring it wrote Franjo. Franjo was my father.

According to the amount of heroin that I got, the ring was valuable. I'm sure that it was worth even more.

I tried heroin for the first time when I was fifteen. In the basement of Dejan's skyscraper. I vomited, but it was nice and pleasant. In the beginning, Zuk gave it to us for free. Later on this paid off for him tenfold.

In that basement we lived some sort of parallel life. Dejan, Filip, Slaven and I. People who we wanted to be different to lived up above us. My brother Mario, Krpa, Zuk and Kizo lived somewhere halfway between us and them. We lived pressed up in the middle of a mass. We were like a closed fist. With time this fist became sicker and fingers started falling off on their own. Slaven fell off first.

When we were seventeen, the war loomed like weak light under a door. One morning we stole a bag off an old lady who was walking hunched over like she was looking for something. We used the money to buy heroin. We went into the basement, divided it up and injected. Slaven's pupils disappeared, and I lost the need to breathe. When I opened my eyes I saw Filip and Dejan. They were trying to bring me back to life.

-Breathe Mrtvi, breathe – Filip said and was hitting me on my chest. Dejan was holding a small mirror to my nostrils. Slaven was lying next to me. He didn't look the best. He simply died. We left him on a bench in front of the medical centre. The next day in the newspapers they called us unknown perpetrators and him S.B. (17).

At the funeral Slaven's mother screamed and yelled unclear sentences. If they hadn't been holding her, they would have buried her together with the coffin. She wanted one of us to be lying inside of it. When a train roared past in the distance, she screamed even louder. She was trying to let everyone hear how big her pain was. Black crows took off and landed on the field. Filip, Dejan and I stood there like a thick mass. You couldn't tell where one ended and the other started.

-One fucken junkie less – Krpa commented on Slaven's death.

A year later my mother is in the same pose. In the coffin wrapped in a flag lie the remains of my brother Mario. There were many people in uniforms around. They gave speeches. More for themselves than for him. I imagined Mario running through mud while someone else screamed chaaaaarge!!!! I wondered if they managed to shove all of the pieces of his bloody body into the coffin. If people were plants, he would've been an olive tree. He was full of joints. When the first clumps of black soil started falling on the coffin I became aware of his death. I thought about naked women so that I wouldn't start crying.

Mario was killed somewhere in Bosnia. From that day mum's vision became foggy. I think that she could see as though she was underwater. Dad turned to the bottle. Whenever I would see him without it, it seemed that a part of his body was missing. One day he hung himself in the attic. He took with him a stool and a rope for drying laundry.

This was all easier to handle with heroin. Nothing else was important anymore. I didn't look for enjoyment in horse, but for an easier way to put up with people. I lived from hit to hit. The gaps became shorter and shorter and the amounts bigger and bigger. I bought heroin from Zuk. It's like there was a short circuit in Zuk's head. He was almost perfectly evil. Right beside him was Krpa. They both radiated evil cells. In nineteen-ninety he ended up in Lepoglava for murder. He slashed some unlucky guy's throat with a broken bottle because he thought the guy was hitting on his girlfriend. He came back in ninety-one in a camouflage uniform full of tattoos and nationally awakened. He loved war. He spoke about it the way other people speak about pets. When the war ended, Krpa didn't know how he should behave anymore. My brother Mario followed him into war. He came back at the state's expense.

Last year ambulance sirens announced Zuk's death. I took advantage of the funeral to break into his flat.

07 KRPA Dinamo – Rijeka X 3.10

We're walkin' toward the stadium and we're psyched. There's a fuckin' cop on every corner. Stuck up cunts, armed to the balls hidin' behind their uniforms. It's easy for 'em to fuck around like that. Zvonimirova is full of 'em.

There are still three hours to go 'til kick-off, just enough for booze. We sit in front of a shop on Ružmarinka. The pimply moron on the register shit himself when we walked in. There's nothin' to be scared of 'cos his pus-filled face is the best defence. I wouldn't touch that with a ten-foot pole.

-Krpa, whata ya want? Cic asks me.

-A Žuja, as long as she's cold.

While Cis is payin', Kina and me shove things from the shelves into our pockets. A fuckin' good feelin'. Outside Sinke is tryin' to pick up some chicks. He's not wastin' any time. He's goin' on about some shit and they're just gigglin' like the biggest idiots. The taller one has a suckin' mouth and like, she's not bad

at all, but right now fuckin' around with some sluts is the last thing I want to do. We're all psyched to the balls 'cos Armada isn't a joke like those retarded Zagorje serfs who scam like the biggest cunts as soon as they see us. I don't get what the fuck they even come for. Armada is somethin' else completely. Even though Rijeka is the shittiest city on the face of the earth, full of Yugoslavs and other vermin, I have to admit that we all have respect for Armada. Last year Cic got stabbed there, and Kina left two teeth on the stinkin' Rijeka asphalt. I got an STD from some slut in some gross massage parlour. That's why we were all especially pumped up. Pavelić was so right when he gave that disgustin' city to the Italians. He elegantly got rid of that crap. Then I see Dejo and Mrtvi comin' across the school football playground. The fuckin' addicts want to pretend to be bad boys. They don't weigh thirty kilos between 'em. They just wreck our reputation.

-Krupa, ya buddies are comin' – Cic says.

-We need guys like that, ya shit yerself as soon as ya see 'em – Kina fucks around.

I send Mrtvi for booze straight away, and fuck around with Dejan 'cos of his nationality. A Dinamo scarf on a Serb's neck looks like a saddle on a cow. We have a few more rounds and head to the stadium. The street is full. There are more fuckin' cops than fans. Kina says that tonight we need to make at least one commie family sad and that he'd rather kill a Primorje-Gorski Kotar Chetnik than have two blowjobs from Sharon Stone. We laugh.

-Fucken hell, in that Chetnik city the commies're still in power – he adds. We enter the stadium. At the stadium some faggot feels us up from head to toe and I feel like askin' him if he got a stiffy. I try to remember his face. The wall-eyed moron with a pig face enjoys coppin' a feel from men. He'll go for a wank later I bet.

We hang up our banner in the stands. Armada enters accompanied by cops. We start yellin' and throwin' lighters and coins at 'em, and everythin' that we can find in our pockets.

The game starts and we're singin'. The weighin' each other up has been goin' on for half a fuckin' hour, they're mainly playin' around the centre. A few more nothin' plays and it's the end of the first half. The only memorable things were a crossbar, a slidin' tackle that made 'em take that gypsy off on a stretcher, and our abuse of that nigger. As soon as the monkey gets the ball, we jump to our feet and scream: Hu hu hu hu hu hu hu! Then in one counter-attack Kizo pulls a banana out of his pants and hurls it onto the pitch. The nigger starts complainin', goin' on about some shit to the ref, spreads his arms out, and we're laughin' our arses off.

-Go back to the jungle ya come from – Kina yells at him.

-Go pick some cotton, ya fucken black motherfucker – screams Sinke.

We all hated blacks, even though we didn't even know one. Just like Jews. We hated 'em 'cos they're dirty vermin with little hats who plot against Croatia. It shits me when I see 'em scratchin' that wall of theirs. We hated Serbs 'cos that was totally normal.

The second half is even more borin' and it's time for us to do somethin'. There are too many cops and it's impossible to run in among Armada. I'm a ragin' bull 'cos they're already in injury time, and it's still 0:0 and I'm pissed off about the fucken five hundred kuna I put on these cunts. Motherfuckers, instead of trainin', they just bang models and fuck around with their cars. Then, furious, I kick a chair and it snaps in half. I take the piece and fling it at Armada. The red plastic flies over the column of cops and smacks a Primorje Serb right in the head. Fucken hell, what a shot. I'm laughin' my arse off 'cos I smashed some cunt right up. The guy's curled down on the floor holdin' his scarf to his head. Blood's streamin' over his face, fucken cool. Kina pats me on the shoulder, and then he pulls of a chair and holds it high up in the air. It hurls down towards the Rijeka shits, but they are ready for it, so I think of this one as a miss. After a few minutes the sky's covered in colourful chairs. What a fucken sight. We rip off chairs, knock off chunks of concrete and throw 'em down at the Rijeka cunts. It's twice as good as when we stoned the train with the Torcida shits. We couldn't give a fuck about the game. Armada is givin' as good as they're gettin'... fucken motherfuckers, they're destroyin' our stadium. No way they're gonna get away with that.

Down by the fence some of our guys are fightin' with cops. A few of 'em are already on the pitch. Fuckin' cops, instead of stoppin' the Primorje Serb rampage they're bashin' our boys. I rush over to help 'em. I think it's that crew from Dubrava. I push my way through the mob with a chair like a shield above my head. The fuckin' cop cunts have surrounded a few of our guys and are bashin' 'em with batons. Two of 'em are kickin' some kid on the floor. I hit the cop in the head with the chair and he staggers, and then I kick him in the balls and he tumbles down the stands. While I watch him rollin', some faggot hits me in the back. For a second I see black, and then I see a bunch of black boots in front of my face. I feel the hits and realise that blood is pourin' down my face, but it doesn't hurt, my vision just gets foggy...