

Ivo Balenović

House of Big Misery

Translated by Martina Topolovec

1

My name is Vladimir and I started this morning on the wrong foot. I live in residential N, building B. Building B is between the buildings A and V. From my window I can fully see the facades of buildings G and D. If I could peek through the window, I could partially see the buildings Ž, Dželo, I and Ize. In the place of building J stands a five-meter tall coffee cup (S) made from Plexiglas with the logotype Doctor Ek-ecological food. Building J was demolished 3 years ago, and its tenants deported to a holding station. They felt safer there, which they also confirmed on camera, then in their own homes. They worked hard, and a lot. Our residential is surrounded by a six-meter tall wall. The top of it is decorated with a galvanized wire through which electrons flowed free and peacefully until one day a Serb from Lika started changing their direction. Part of the wall is defaced by an ugly growth which sticks from the ground. It's gnarly, crooked and branches all the way up to its green ends. Elders say that it is a tree. Once upon a time there used to be many trees. Formed into groups they would create forests, and the forest would cover large amounts of Earth's surface. They were filled with hideous creatures.

I dragged myself to the bathroom. Ever since my parents gave me Polio for my birthday, my right leg has been merely a decoration so I had it tattooed with a winged lion eating a leaning tower. Polio is my infantile paralysis type 2, cuddly, soluble and thermolabile. Low maintenance, doesn't shed, and especially loves kids.

I bathed and shaved. I bathe every day, and every three months I change the water. I put dental coatings on my incisors. They are green and don't make my waist look huge. I injected my biceps with 700ml CX silicones; they swelled up just enough. People used to spend a lot of money, time and effort for those.

I rested my forehead on the bars and looked out the window. A tall flame was rising from the top of the cup S. Every fourth year the town council would light a fire inside the cup. With this act they would commemorate the not so long ago times and barbaric traditions of our ancestors, called the Olympic games. "Never again" the town council president would say, whilst placing a plastic wreath at the base of the cup S.

I entered the kitchen. Father and mother were sitting at the table and drinking coffee. Father was flicking through official papers from building B, G and Ize of residential N. I don't read newspapers since my cousin died. He was a driver. Even though he hadn't car accident for years, almost every day, sometimes

a few of them daily, nobody except family, friends, neighbors and a couple passengers knew about him. One day, when he had a car accident, all the papers, except the Hunter papers, wrote about him.

That is why I hate newspapers, they distort our perception like drugs. I wished my parents good morning and sat down at my place. Father was massaging his temples. His eyes are bloody and face swollen.

-If there wasn't for hangovers I would probably already be an alcoholic- he said. He would say that every morning.

-Fire is fought with fire- said mother and brought booze in front of him. Mother poured me some coffee, and father told a joke about a drunk who shaved and then grabbed a hairbrush instead of a mirror.

Father told this joke only when he was in a good mood. Since he told it twice this morning it meant he was in a particularly good mood.

The only time he told it three times was when he found out his brother had hairy cell leukemia. Subconsciously, as they would say.

The old man crooked his head, gave me a significant look and placed his arm on my shoulder. The arm, in all honesty, weighted thirty kilograms. His fingers smelled like urine because he kept scratching his balls. He looked me straight in the eye with his arm on my shoulder in place. I was surprised by this emotional outburst. It was as if his words were stuck in his throat, and his eyes filled with tears.

-Son, we are proud of you- he barely uttered.

He then pulled a white envelope from his pocket. It was an announcement that I had been chosen to join the House of Great Misery. I fulfilled all the requirements: thirty years, limp palsy of right leg, live in building B in residential N, and also my old man had deposited thirty thousand to the producers account. Dad read the announcement nine times before he had it framed.

- I knew there'd be something of you. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree- pride could be felt in his voice.

-It's no small thing- added mom.

-Definitely isn't! Definitely isn't! - roared dad. - That is my son! -

- I even feel bad for little Vladimira now. - sighed mom whilst putting the dishes into the dishwasher. Vladimira was my sister who father forgot in the betting house one day. There has been no trace of her since. Mom would later often tease dad how that was the best financial benefit that came from the betting house. Dad didn't take that well. The children's ombudsman banned him from visiting the betting house for two months but dad complained and his punishment was cut in half.

While mom was emptying her gall bladder, dad sang *Sorry I'm a lady*.

A big crowd gathered in our apartment at night. Although she had been cooking and cleaning all day, mom found some time for herself. For this occasion, she connected her eyebrows and put extensions under her armpits: ten-centimeter long ginger braids. She dreamt of becoming a Bingo girl one day.

She greeted the guests in a Hello Kitty tank top.

Dad greeted the guests half naked, not so much as to show his torso as to show a finger-wide scar in his left lumbar area - a memory of the show I'm Swapping my kidney. Knowing my old man, he enjoyed the guests' envy more than his own success. Some of them couldn't hide it.

- So what, I have an artificial hip - said neighbor A, as if that could be compared.

Two years ago dad swapped his kidney with a plumber from Yellow Pond. After a few months of fair fighting body of the man from Yellow Pond rejected my dad's kidney. Apart from the attention of the media dad also earned a set of coffee mugs with the logotype of the show. Since then, because of the immunosuppressive therapy he had to take every day, he has been prone to respiratory infections. The bowl for spitting was emptied every day by mother, and on Sundays she would scrape the bottom.

The guests sat themselves around the table while I unwrapped presents and gave thanks. In return I gave out a picture of me in a wedding dress under which was written: *Thank you for enriching this day with your presence.*

Mom carried rainbow colored food out to the table.

- Yum, smells so good - said neighbor A from the first floor who came accompanied with his wife A1.

-Must be the doctor Ek ecological food- added neighbor B from the second floor. His wife B1 held his arm.

- We also only consume doctor Ek's food- bragged neighbor C from the third floor. Mom didn't invite his wife C1 because she is a stinking floozy originating from building C (therefore her place is in the holding center and not with us at the table).

Apart from the neighbors, two unknown communal guards found themselves on the guest list.

- It's healthy, nutritious and ecological that doctor Ek food- mom pointed out proudly.

Doctor Ek's food differed not only by color, but also by aggregate state. The taste was a constant. Dad mixed all the ingredients in the big yellow basin before we dug in.

Good thing about doctor Ek's food was that it could be, beside nutritional purposes, used as hair shampoo, shaving foam, universal glue and DVD-player.

For this occasion we even let grandpa off the chain. Grandpa happily gathered leftovers from the table and told stories nobody was interested in. Around midnight dad kicked him in the ribs and told mum to tie him up again but shorter this time.

Grandpa verbally cussed dad out and threateningly pointed his index finger towards dad whilst being dragged towards the stairway by mom. Grandpa's groaning could be heard through the basement bars for some time and then everything went quiet. Grandpa was asleep. The slurping of satisfied guests was the only thing that could be heard. Few days later an insufferable stench from the basement said that grandpa hadn't just fallen asleep.

- Maybe I tied him up a bit too tight after all - mom commented calmly, kissed grandpa on the forehead and took him to be recycled.

Grandpa worked as part of the highway before he was tied up. Mostly on the Macelj-Bregana relation, but if needed also filled in elsewhere. He was very flexible and a real workaholic. When they discovered some of his faults, primarily on his face, they retired him, but without picture and watch.

-I was set up by those slackers from junction st. Rok and Maslenica- groaned offended grandpa. After dinner we took a look at the past week's weather report. It was spot on. Then dad let the commercials play. He owned an impressive collection.

- Oh, if only our Vladimir was like you- sighed neighbor A1 nostalgically and placed her hand on my groin.
- His tongue is quicker than his thoughts- laughed neighbor A and stroked my thigh.

Vladimir was their daughter who is serving a long-term prison sentence. At a given moment she critically commented on the work of the town committee for relations between genders. The parents just carried out their citizen duty.

Around midnight the guests vomited the eaten food back into the yellow basin and left. They kissed me and wished me luck. The communal guards pulled out the three-seater in the living room and fell asleep.

Mom poured out the contents of the yellow basin into small plastic bags. Tomorrow we will get a refund for them. All night, with almost no brake, she actively secreted urea into her renal pelvis.

Father opened a window and yelled into the cool spring night: - Screw you all! -
He held his fist clenched high above his head.

Somewhere in the distance single bursts were heard.

3

My parents didn't want to leave anything to chance, so they called doctor Hipocrate to examine me before going to the House. He had a long white beard and the face of a dying man. Even though I was fit as a fiddle, dr. Hipocrate radiated me and prescribed seven chemotherapy cycles.

- You never know; malignant diseases strike insidiously...with no warning- he said in a daze.

- It would be horrible if you got some kind of cancer right now- added my old man. -A real irony

-Primum non nocere-concluded Hipocrate.

Seven days later, completely bald and weak I was clenching my suitcase's handle and saying goodbye to my parents.

-Son, make us proud- mom said.

-We probably won't be alive when you get out but know that we loved you- added dad.

-Almost as much as the mayor.

-Don't exaggerate!

-I'm sure you'll find a life companion in the House- said mom wiping her tears. At the same time, though unknowingly, splitting molecules of glucose from the Pyruvic acid.

-You don't have to get married my son but at least dip your dick somewhere- dad friendly nudged me - it's time my boy-

And then quietly whispered in my ear, so mom wouldn't hear: -That damn computer of yours. Almost broke my dick the other day.

-Vladimir! Shame on you. You speak like a heathen- mom scolded him- you don't say "dip your dick somewhere", you say "get your dick wet".

Later I realized that dad was alluding to sexual intercourse. I wondered how is that possible without a computer. Once upon a time people even procreated through sexual intercourse. This included the mutual sharing of fluids whilst rubbing one sex organ with another. It could be performed regardless of political views, race, sex, and even political party membership. Individually, in pairs or in formations of various sizes. Allegedly, apart from the population, this method also spread viruses. Because of which people often died due to poor antivirus programs.

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At the residential entrance stood a white limousine which was supposed to take me to a new life. Presidents used to drive around in those cars.

The delegation of residential N's town committee sent me off: committee's president, the director of parking and the stenographer. The smog was so low we had to walk crouched down. The president held a speech, the parking director handed me a gift card, and the stenographer sang "It's early for sorrow". On my departure the director of parking licked my outer ear and part of the auditory canal clean. He really surprised me with the gift card.

A parade of pedophile-homosexuals passed by us. They sung and carried banners.

-Pah you faggot son of a bitches! -spat the director towards the parade.

-This is a small step for you, dear Vladimir, but a big one for residential N- said the president with a shaky voice, a tear in his eye, and absolutely no sympathy.

I was looking forward to the new life under the reflector lights.

I felt a bit sorry about leaving school and ending my relationship of many years. I sent a mail to my mentor and teacher Great Central Processor who logged me out of my chosen courses: Usage of major scale and the circle of fifths chart from the early Mate Bulić, and Magic world of septic pits. I also logged out of my relationship of many years.

I sank in the back seat of the car and in the mirror saw, for the first and last time, the wall that surrounded my district. The canal around it gave it a new dimension, and the gun ports breathed life into it. I wouldn't be surprised if it spoke or waved to me.

Outside of the walls a field stretched out all the way to the resident G. People dug in waist-deep poked out of the field. They all wore sunglasses and were young people. Some were wailing, some asking for water, and a good part of them was already dried up. Burrowing was a part of our city fathers strategy used for attempting to keep young educated people in the ground. That project was called "It's better to keep the youth in the plot, then Pol in Pot", and it was financed by the exiled Cambodian government. In between them they planted cabbage in order to try and use every piece of arable land. It was truly high quality cabbage.

We were rolling down Favorite Mayor Street which was the lifeblood of our town. On the right side of the road was the museum of military equipment, then the gallery of organic waste and the concert hall of Milli Vanilli. There were merely a few bearing walls left on the way to the Palace of injustice on the other side of the road. The unsightly towers of the former cathedral poked out in the distance. From them burst a thick smoke. A cathedral, in the past, was an organization of group labor which provided with telecommunication services with God. At one point it even had a monopoly over the market, pushing out local firms like Zeus ltd., Jupiter and sons, and Golden callf. But soon some pretty strong competitor corporations emerged, such as Turkish telecom which overtook a large part of the market. They came directly at your door and didn't pick their means.

The cathedral is now a silicone implant factory which employs seventy citizens under twenty years of age. The remaining thirty are volunteers. We drove from the Favorite Mayor Street into the Favorite Mayor Boulevard which led to the river. An armed Guard patrolled the river in motorboats. It was thick, sticky and flowed at the speed of two barrels per minute. Fish's bellies shined on its black surface, like scattered pearls, and birds sprang around on its coast. Crude oil dripped from feathers that were stuck together. The armed Guard shot at anyone who would try to snatch the crude oil from the river or drain it out the birds.

On the other side of the river there were mass demonstrations in motion, from those unhappy with the city council program. Those gatherings made me cringe. They often ended in violence.

-We are way too free! - yelled the protestors.

-We want to pay for the air we breathe! -yelled a man at the front of the colon through a megaphone.

-Limit our rights! - roared from the mass.

Somebody was carrying a large banner saying: *Increase the taxes or leave.*

- My child wants to work in the mine too! -screamed a frantic woman into the camera.

-Ungrateful assholes- cursed my driver and spat into the windshield.

I was silent. He might be a provoker, I thought.

We drove alongside the Favorite Mayor Ally river. Our mayor simplified life in the city, and we all loved him for it. Once upon a time, streets all had different names what brought, apart from ideological confusion, also a great confusion in navigation. The Town Fathers' stretch in the industrial zone was an exception that confirmed the rule. Evildoers called it opportunism and lack of Favorite Mayor's political will. Grandad even remembers a time when the main square was called Square of Brotherhood and Unity. From it spread, like sunrays Mass Graves Road, Ethnic cleansing Street, Concentration Camp Avenue and Martic Street.

The sun used to be a flaming ball that caused skin cancer. Today a thick layer of smog protects us from it.

There it stood, where the river ended...the House of Great Misery.

5

To get to the House of Great Misery we had to pass a row of fans. Looking at them I would say there was about seven hundred and ninety-three of them. They were screaming, throwing flowers and candy, trying to touch us, and the bravest ones, that managed to scramble past the guards hugged and kissed us. A gorgeous girl threw herself at my neck and shouted: *Take me, take me, I'm yours...*Cameras were flashing and the crowd screaming.

The House of Great Misery was composed of a couple of rooms. They were all big and lavishly decorated: living room, bedroom, sanitary facility, confessional and kitchen. The kitchen was from the line >Abortion and Cookies<, and that was a kitchen every housewife dreamed of. It was also adapted for minor surgical procedures. With the purchase of such a kitchen you also get a gift-card for a crash course in criminal abortion sponsored by the doctors' association. It really was an investment for the future, as the ad itself said.

On the wall of the living room was a large screen above which hung a picture of Bulgarian Prime Minister. We sat in the comfy leather sofas and waited. I observed my future roommates, friends, rivals, lovers...Quite a lot of attention seeking scum was gathered. We sat in silence.

-Screw you guys! -yelled one of the residents, just to break the awkward silence.

The ice was broken and communication established.

The next minute two residents were rolling on the ground in passionate ruckus. This must be the dick dipping dad talked about. Getting your dick wet!, I heard mom correct me.

Then there came a majestic light upon us. Under such light those of us who are blond become six centimeters shorter. Few moments later the fanfare started and two beautiful young people emerged in a cloud of reddish smoke. The kind of people one can only see in chicken liver Pâté commercials. They radiated with happiness and satisfaction. The girl was clothed in a white silky dress and the young man was in a black tuxedo. The bow tie was tight around his neck. The girl had long wavy hair the color of Marshmallow Tea, and the young man had short chestnut brown hair. Their movements were smooth, they glided full of confidence, predestined for great things. They stopped right in front of us.

-Dear all, welcome- they said in chorus.

And with their very first sentence, they made a strong impression on us competitors. We stared at them, as if we were infected with the tick-borne encephalitis.

After the introductory speech held by Mobutu Sese Seko, we were reminded of the importance of maintaining public relations as well as the game rules. Mobut's speech ended with an Amen and walked out into a brighter future. He was wearing 3D glasses and a leopard fur hat.

In The House of Great Misery we were to spend the next forty years under the watchful eye of the cameras. The viewers will be able to follow our lives on their TV screens or the www.great-misery.com site. Our dear sponsors made sure we wouldn't fall short of anything in that time. Every year the viewers will nominate two competitors to leave. Who leaves will be decided in elimination games between the competitors.

-Here you will work, learn, have fun and recreate yourselves, sleep, fight small love wars, die, give birth...- listed the Host.

-Oh no! That not! There will be no giving of birth. - smiled the Hostess - our dear sponsor, clinic New Life is Born, will make sure that the abortions are done by all the rules of the practice.

-I was just joking- answered the Host.

-And so: enjoy The Great Misery, because we are all part of The Great Misery- they said in chorus.

-But before we begin with the competitors, our introduction is in order.

-I am Vladimir- said the Host.

-And I am Milena- said the Hostess. -But, so you don't get confused, call me Vladimir.

They stood there for a few seconds, motionless, as if only they existed, and then the young man clarified:

-With time you will come to realize we are, in fact, the same person...

-...just like my grandma and stew were- added the girl.

-But, that is a story for another time.

Her eyes watered upon the mentioning of her grandma.

And at that moment I realized it was almost, apart from the tone of their voices, impossible to tell who is who. The young man's was husky-green like a forest lake, and the girl's was transparent like a tampon zone. Besides that, her voice was constantly followed by the bass section of Paranoid, what caused additional commotion. They stood there, young and beautiful, simply alluring admiring glances.

From now on, they were our mother and father...even the mayor, I would dare to say.

VLADIMIR RETURNS HOME

The driver left me at the residential entrance, a faithful replica of the Otranto Strait. While Valona was barely visible on my far right, the Italian coast couldn't be seen because of the fog. I exited the car and stepped on to the pontoon bridge that, like a severed reproductive organ, floated on the brown canalization water. Below me, lazily flowed a thick mass of feces. The same speed at which a funeral procession moves. Immediately the fuming of biomethane pleasantly stunned me. I felt something strange happening within me. I was consumed by divine pleasure, all my troubles suddenly became irrelevant, and the shortness of life seeming. It was as if all fears and anxieties had vanished in a cloud of decomposition gasses. I stopped for a moment, inhaling with my entire lungs whilst sinking into an unimaginable softness and silence. Where did this happiness come from? The smell of the sewage brought me back to the carefree days of my childhood. A picture of my dad and me sitting on the edge of the sewer appeared in front of my eyes. My feet bare, knee-deep in cloaca. I'm wearing a bow-tie and shorts with suspenders. Dad is smoking and talking with acquaintances. The older kids are swimming. I'm happy with just having my feet warm. Black circles are left on my shins like socks. The swarms of mosquitos are so thick they can be spread on bread. Like inside a kaleidoscope, images started appearing in front of my eyes of faces from people and places dear to me: mother, main sewer, father, secondary sewer, grandpa on a chain, radial sewer network...

The first cigarette, drunkenness, crush and young love...all embedded into this place. Here I kissed a girl for the first time, and on one warm night lost my virginity when five Waste water's workers raped me. The sound of a siren brought me back to reality. I composed myself and kept walking. A black rat is looking

at me from the other side of the canal. There is a big chunk of skin missing from its back and its front paws are pressed together as if it is praying. Below floated a bloated female corpse. The multiple rocket launcher system factory could barely be seen through the mist that was rising above the Central septic tank. On the factory's grey wall it was written in big red letters BEGIN THE WAR IN OUR RESIDENCE. Below hung a picture of the mayor. He had a smile on his face and medals on his uniform. Besotted by the fumes I walked in the empty streets of my residence. I will never forget that cold morning on which I left, nor the warm tongue of the director of parking in my ear.

The wind howled through the streets. It growled, wined and pounded on the bars of windows. It scattered plastic bags and papers everywhere and rolled cans and bottles down streets. It would be bending trees if there were any in the residence. It blew as if mixed alcohol with antiseptics. I turned to my street. I was gone for a long time but I still knew the order of what came when: building A, spiked wire, building B, spiked wire, building V, spiked wire building D... Suddenly everything became silent. The plastic bags and papers fell to the ground and the bottles and cans settled down. This silence frightened me. I turned around. Not far, sitting on the curb with his back against the wall, was the wind. His head resting on his hands. His face was red and bursting with veins, his hair tangled and messy.

He had vomited on himself.

- Never again booze with barbiturates. Never. - mumbled the wind to himself. I approached him and hugged him, but my hands just went through his body like through air. He just looked at me coldly and got up but fell down right away. A few dry leaves followed him and then everything was calm.

- You'll see tomorrow...I will rip that tree of yours out of the ground, I'll tear everything down...there will be blood...nobody will poison me...motherfuckers...- he rambled to himself, completely disorientated in time and space. His inner hate towards reality was almost tangible. I left that freak and moved on.

And then I saw my building. Sticking out above the mist, it was so surreal that it seemed as if it was watching everything that was going on in the residence. It looked the same as when I last saw it twenty years ago. At the door stood father. He looked about twenty years older. On his head was a cap, on his feet black boots, and above his kidneys were his adrenal glands. He wore a long leather coat with a swastika on its sleeve, as if he was making a point. When he saw me he forcefully slammed his heels and extended his right arm high up in the air. I approached him and said: - Father.

- Son - said father.

- Father - said I.

- Son - repeated father.

After that outburst of affection, I handed him the eviction letter from the House of Great Misery. On it, next to my name, stood the diagnosis: 'Delirus seu penis', and below that the recommended therapy, and

below that the head physician's unreadable signature. We walked through the doorway. It reeked of cyanide. In the basement of the house dad opened a Nazi shop. The shop's door was arched, outlined with stone paneling. Above the door shined a neon inscription ARBEIT MACHT FREI. The shop's window was eye-catching. In front of it stood a family with three children, each the height of the others ear. A big seasonal sale was underway. In the center of the shop stands a blue fountain in the shape of the Reichstag. Instead of a dome on the top was Hitler's head made of plaster. Embedded in the supporting columns were the faces of the Nazi leaders. They all looked alive, frozen in motion. At the bottom of the shop stood a dartboard with the smiling face of Claus von Stauffenberg. Somebody wrote PUSSY on his forehead with spray paint. Dad paced proudly through the shop.

- Son, one must be ahead of time. That is the secret of success in this cruel world of business. - my old man said. - Do you understand?

- Yes.

- Do you think Bill Gates would have succeeded if he had been making beads for abacuses? Like hell he would have! Would he have succeeded with abacuses? - the old man was face to face with me. He looked at me like boxers look at each other before the beginning of a fight. His clenched fist stood by his face. - I asked you something!

- He wouldn't have- I said.

- There you go. That is why I succeeded. - dad lowered his fist. -Because I'm ahead of time. I don't sell abacuses.

Through the children's section we entered a room with a low ceiling and gentle red lighting. The first thing that caught my eye was a blow up Eva Braun. Her lips are bright red and her mouth is in the shape of letter O. In the closet next to it was equipment for domination, and on a small table were scattered comic sexy articles. Someone somewhere was messing about with a piano. Dad picked up a dick-shaped object from the table, stroked it, then nearly stuck it up my nose.

- Do you know what this is? - he asked me whilst holding the oval object in front of my face.

- No - I said.

-You don't know? - the corners of his mouth sank, and his eyes disappeared under his eyelids.

- No.

- A vibrator - he said and let out a long and slow sigh. He couldn't hide his disappointment with my lack of knowledge. - Vibrator Benito Mussolini. The popular V.B. M. An absolute hit on the market, just this month I sold 457 of them.

- It's nice.

- The Italians really are masters of design - he added contently and returned it to its place.

I took a closer look and saw that the top of it had been modeled in the shape of Mussolini's head. On the other side was a socket for batteries. Dad boasted how he enrolled in a communicational management academy since good marketing, amongst other things, is necessary for any job. We climbed back to the central area of the shop. Military boots covered in blood were aligned along the wall. Mein Kampf was sold in bulk. Dad then handed me a small wrapped box with a bow.

- I saved this specially for this day- he said and wiped a tear.

- Thanks dad.

I unwrapped the gift. It was handmade mustaches made from hairs stuck in the drain of a shower. The most beautiful that I have ever seen. I stuck them under my nose and stood in front of a mirror. I couldn't be happier with my appearance. They especially highlighted my upper lip. I twirled around a few times and then, standing still facing the mirror staring in my eyes, spontaneously raised my right arm high up in the air.

- They fit like a charm - said dad. - And now let's go home and surprise mom.

- Can't wait - I said.

Dad then turned to the clerk: - Abraham, I'll be gone till Monday! Don't screw around!

- I won't boss - replied Abraham.

- And get rid of those moronic sideburns! -my old man yelled.