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Hotel Jugoslavija

By Dragan Todorovic

Game: Partisans and Nazis

The rules:

The participants separate into two groups—the Partisans and the Nazis. The Nazis first arrest a few Partisans, and then the rest of the Partisans try to set them free and arrest or “kill” the enemy.

The reality:

The strongest boys are always among the Partisans. Identification with the Resistance runs high enough for participants to soon forget it’s only a game, so the other

side gets beaten, spit on, and hit with the weapon of the day. The Nazis play half-heartedly, for they know they have to lose. But they do play, because they hope to be the Partisans the next time.

The usual duet, an ordinary song

My father's health started deteriorating while I was still in the fourth year of high school. It was mysterious and slow. Dušan complained of dizziness, but only sometimes, and no other symptoms appeared. A year later, on some days he would be quite OK, while on others he would be so unsteady he couldn't get out of bed. Another year later—he would try to sit and then immediately fall to the side. The doctors in Kragujevac—an industrial town about a hundred kilometres south of Belgrade—with all the tests coming back negative, kept pronouncing him healthy. At some point one of them called him a malingerer, which in communist Yugoslavia was the Mother of All Shames. I thought it was psychological, and hoped it would go away.

Then again, this thing with Dad *was* troubling: he was always in perfect health, never avoided heavy work, and never even had a cold. The doctors terminated his sick leave several times, forcing him back to work, and he would indeed go, only to fall at some point in Zastava car factory and be brought home by ambulance. And it kept dragging on like that. He became desperate, and so did Mom and I. In the meantime I started studying law—without much élan—and worked as freelance journalist for Belgrade magazines. Writing was what kept me going.

In November 1980 I got a job offer. Ratomir Mirić, one of the best editors in

Serbian journalism at the time, called me from Belgrade one day: he wanted me to work as an editor with his magazine *Omladinske novine*, for which I was writing very frequently. There was no opening on the magazine itself, but there was an opening with their publisher—the Socialist Youth League of Serbia (SYLS). They needed a new Culture Secretary.

On the map of the Yugoslav political system this organisation was the light green of everywhere. Anyone within the elastic borders of youth was considered a member. But the communist cadre was recruited from that playground, so it carried a certain weight.

Although Ratomir understood that I wasn't interested in politics, he thought he would be killing two birds with one stone—I would get an insider's perspective before I joined his editorial team, and they would get their man in the publisher's office. The salary was beyond my wildest dreams, and something I would probably never be able to achieve if I remained where I was.

“Stay there for a year, two tops, and then come to the magazine and do what you really want to do,” he said, as if he was sending me to jail. Then he remembered: “Oh, by the way, I got the whole idea when they gave you an award today.”

“What award?”

“You are now the Best Young Journalist in Serbia. Congrats. Take a couple of days to think it over. Don't let me down, old man. You will rot if you stay there. It's a backwater. Come to Belgrade.”

Just two days earlier, after several months of trying, my mother had finally succeeded in finding some connection who'd made it possible to get Dušan an exam with the country's top medical specialists, at the Military Medical Academy in Belgrade. The

first thing the good doctor said when I took my father into his office was, “Except for Parkinson’s disease, what else is wrong?” And, indeed, there was something else—Dad had diabetes. We were both relieved that he wasn’t a malingerer; but we also understood from the specialist’s carefully chosen words that Dušan would not only never work again, he would be increasingly confined to his bed.

So, in the same week, I received a curse and a blessing. The curse was like a behemoth: heavy, grotesque, and motionless. The blessing, as usual, was there on its flight to someone else.

I shared the news of the call with my mother, and she cried. “You cannot leave,” she said, “your father needs you.”

I told my father about the offer, and he said, “You have to take it, you have to go. I’ll be OK.”

Shine

One morning early in January of 1981 I found myself in an ugly concrete building in New Belgrade, a mushroom-city that sprang up in the early sixties, with its Government and Party offices, and blocks of stern, discouraging, monolithic dormitories that communist regimes were proudly erecting all over the Eastern Bloc, showcasing them as the fruit of their care for the working class. This whole area sat on marshes filled with stone and sand, leaving long stretches of barren land between the buildings. Public transportation was never good, and—although New Belgrade was just across the river—it took me around forty-five minutes to get here from Belgrade’s Central Bus Station.

As I sat in the corridor, my shoes and my trousers sprayed with slush, my yellow duffel bag dirty from the bus floor, I watched people passing by. Some of them went slowly, reading thick typewritten materials. I seemed to be among the youngest employees in the headquarters of the Socialist Youth League of Serbia.

After almost an hour, someone came and took me to meet the current President and his deputy. The President, some ten years older than I, was a medical student from Belgrade, tall but stocky, his round face shiny below thinning blonde hair, his glasses constantly sliding down his greasy nose. I recognized the type: probably a good student in high school, recommended early and made a member of the Communist Party, unlucky with the girls, boring to everyone except those interested in politics. Thousands like him out there, so he must have been chosen by the “key”.

Every political function in Yugoslavia had to be filled using the so-called “key”, meaning that, for each position on the federal level, every nationality and every republic had to have its shot. On the lower level, in each of the republics, different cities would have their go in different years. Also, if the position in the last three rotations had been filled by men, this time it would have to be a woman, and vice versa. Add to this the occupational quota: you couldn’t have students only, you had to give a chance to workers, dentists, writers, whomever. In theory, this was a good way of preventing jealousy and making sure that all groups had their voices heard; in practice, pushing democracy to this extreme mocked it. The cadre selected by way of the “key” was overwhelmingly incompetent, in milder cases just funny, in the worst, destructive to the very cause they were supposed to represent. But the system won either way: if the representative was good, it was because the selection mechanism was fine; if the person performed poorly,

she would be more susceptible to orders from above.

Sitting in a leather chair across the table from the President, and listening to him welcome me in bureaucratese on the edge of comprehensible, I was wondering if they took me in because my three predecessors were all smart.

The deputy, Tomović, was another story: tall, dark-haired, with piercing eyes and a poker face, he had a square jaw and big hands, giving away his factory background and toughness. When we shook hands I felt my bones cracking. He spoke in short sentences, never a redundant word, and his eyes seemed to be cutting through the usual blandness of the situation. While I was trying to decide if I liked the deputy or not, the President finished his fifteen-minute speech. Deputy Tomović just said, “Welcome. You, along with all our new colleagues, will be staying at the Hotel Jugoslavija in the beginning. The driver is waiting to take you to there, and back, if you’re fast. Try to be fast, because we have an important meeting at 1:00 that you have to attend. You’ll meet your secretary, Irena, after the meeting. See you later.” And he crushed my hand again.

At twenty-two, I was in. My official title was Secretary for Culture of SYLS, my salary was two times higher than my parents’ combined wage, I’d just moved to the capital, I had a driver at my disposal, a private secretary, and my future was so bright that I had to buy new, darker sunglasses.

A view of War Island

Hotel Jugoslavija was a five-star affair on the bank of the Danube. It was built and decorated without much taste, but it was imposing, sitting alone on a beautiful stretch of

the river, in the area where the concrete buildings of New Belgrade come close to the old brick houses of Zemun. It was built after WW II to provide accommodation to various foreign state officials visiting the nearby government buildings. The interior of the hotel looked much better than its façade. The two huge restaurants, strategically positioned looking out over the river were luxurious, with marble floors and tables and leather chairs, there was a small swimming pool with a sauna on one side of the lobby and a whole bunch of shops on the other. Known as the hotel for diplomats, spies, and journalists, it was a magnet for high-class prostitutes. At any time of day or night one could find beautiful girls sitting alone in the foyer or in the restaurants. Their pimps were the receptionists.

I was put in a room on the third floor. The whole floor was reserved for the hotel entertainers and longer staying guests—the higher floors were less noisy. Mine was a relatively small room, decorated in a brownish palette, with textile wallpaper, a single bed, a radio and a small bathroom. The painting on the wall was a depressing landscape of the same sad valley by the blue river that every hotel manager of this world loves. The light green of art.

The day after I arrived I went out and purchased some theatre posters, some postcards, and some tape, to make my habitat less clinical. The several books I'd brought with me I dispersed around the room. I hung my only jacket on the back of the desk chair. Now it was starting to look like a normal place. I went to the supermarket nearby, purchased some instant coffee, some crackers, and some dry sausages since the room didn't have a fridge. I always got hungry around midnight, and ate while reading, which would put me to sleep. Finally it felt like home, and I took off my sneakers, made a

coffee and lit a cigarette. My room had a view of War Island, a long, wooded stretch of land that separated the Danube in two. The trees across the river looked naked and helpless against the sharp north wind. The radio was playing some slow music, the lamplight was subdued, and I dozed off in the recliner by the door to the balcony.

In the dream, I was a writer. I was sitting at my desk in my parents' home, typing a novel. On my left, there was a thin bundle of finished pages, and on my right was a fat bunch of blank sheets. The room was warm and lit just the way the writers like. There was an Al Stewart record on the turntable, a coffee by my side, and a plate of hot cookies my mother must have brought in just recently. My right hand was bigger, yet softer than my left hand. Another odd thing: every time I would finish a page, take it out of the typewriter, and put it on the left bundle, that pile would grow thinner, while the blank group would get bigger. But that was OK: I just needed to type faster.

So I typed faster, with the same result. Finally, I had only one finished page on my left, and the blank bunch on the right was so big I couldn't see the door anymore. While I was thinking what to do—I was afraid to type another page, because somehow I knew that everything would disappear then, including me—the door opened. My father came in. He was tall and straight, with no wrinkles on his face. He just stood there and looked at me.

“How are you?” I asked.

“Good. See, I don't have Parkinson's anymore. But watch out for your mother. She is sad. Sadness breaks your wings. Sadness can dry trees out. Look through the window, at those poplars in the cemetery. They were sad a long time.”

“What should I do about this?” I said, nodding toward the only remaining page on the left.

“You are doing it wrong. Instead of typing, you should be erasing. Then you will have your autobiography.”

“Autobiography? But I’m writing a novel.”

“No,” said my father, “it’s your story, it always is, that’s why you have to erase.”

“Do you know why my right hand is bigger than my left? Yours are normal, mother’s too.”

“Your hand is normal, it’s only your middle finger that’s longer, that’s all.”

I looked again at my hand, and he was right. “Oh, I understand now,” I said, with a mischievous smile.

“You are wrong. It’s not like that so you can show it to everybody whenever you please. It’s to put you in danger.” And he left.

Confused by his last sentence, I opened the door to ask him and it wasn’t our apartment on the other side—it was a white surgical room. There were people everywhere, some naked, some in white robes with surgical masks over their faces. There was a group of tables in the centre, and I came to one of those under the bright light and saw that they were making a new man by stitching together pieces of other people, who were lying on the surrounding tables and chatting merrily with the nurses and doctors who were cutting them. There was no blood anywhere in sight and the whole atmosphere was relaxed. Then I looked closer at the face of the man in the making, and he was me. His left eye was still missing, but it was undeniably my face.

“What will happen to me?” I asked a doctor next to me. He was a pleasant,

middle-aged guy, with a soothing voice and very fine hands that held a cigarette.

“Oh, don’t worry, comrade,” he said, “what do you think this is, Dr. Mengele’s office?” Everybody laughed and looked at me. He slapped my shoulder in a very comforting manner, and said, “See how everybody is smiling here? This is a happy thing. You will become a much, much better man now, and your old self will stay here for other people who need parts of you to be perfect. In the end, we all become better here.”

While I wanted to ask more, a gorgeous woman came to me. She had the body of Raquel Welch and the face of my secretary Irena, and she was a nurse—this I recognized by her small white cap, the only piece of clothing she wore. “Follow me, dear, there’s a table ready for you.” She took my hand in hers and led me to a table on the side, where a team was already waiting. They stripped me, laid me on the table, and she handed me a huge joint. “Take this,” she said, “and inhale deeply.” While I was smoking the joint, they were telling jokes around me, laughing and enjoying themselves. “He is ready now,” Raquel-Irena said, looking at my eyes. A jovial doctor brought a scalpel to my face. “Your mother needs your eyes,” he said. “She cried hers out, and yours are nice and dry.”

I woke up in a sweat and went to the balcony to take a sharp blow of wind. War Island was dark.

The next day, when I returned from work and unlocked the door to my room, I stood shocked. Somebody must have stolen all my things. I stepped back to see the number on the door, and it was 309, my place. But there were no posters and no postcards on the wall, and everything was back in the same place and the same state as when I first came in. Even the recliner was as it had been, at exactly 20 degrees northeast. I stepped in and

found my jacket in the closet, my shoes in a drawer, and my books hidden between the bed and the night table. My food had disappeared completely, and the posters and postcards were neatly tucked inside the writing desk drawer.

I was angry. Why would they want to erase the traces of me? I unpacked everything again, stuck the posters to the wall, threw the books around, added newspapers, put my shoes under the bed, and then brought a plant from the corridor into my room. There.

The day after, the same: the invisible maid removed everything, including the tiniest particles of dust, aired the room, and, yes, she found the shoes. I sat down and wrote a note. It said that I was supposed to live here, not just sleep, that I was to stay for a longer period, possibly several months or even longer, so she simply didn't have to bother with my room. Then I messed up the place. I left the note on the desk before I went to work the next morning.

And found everything tidied away when I came back. So I wrote a letter this time. I went soft, mentioned my childhood, happy family, my recent move to Belgrade, and my new life far from my friends. I described how small details meant much to a guy living alone, how I wasn't trying to ruin anything, just cut my piece of space in the big city. I left a flower on top of the envelope.

No result. The woman's soul was replaced with a vacuum cleaner. My next note was stern, mentioning my high rank in a political organization (I didn't specify), my need for privacy, the sensitive files I was bringing from work, and possible repercussions. The room was even tidier after that one.

In the coming days I visited the reception desk to complain about the obsessive

maid, I talked to the manager, and I tried to find out who she was by inquiring with the hotel staff. They were not able to tell me who the person was, or if it was always one and the same woman. The only result was that the hotel personnel started eyeing me in a strange way. I probably had the reputation now of an utterly annoying weirdo who hated hygiene.

After three weeks of this silent war, I gave up. I wasn't allowed to leave any traces in Hotel Jugoslavija.