

Problemski Hotel

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Our Sad Children Are the Future

The Prosineckis' little boy came home from school today with a beaming smile. He was grinning ear to ear and it's a shame he lost part of his face in a bombing raid because otherwise he would have been a beautiful child for as long as that smile lasted. Stipe is the little rascal's name, he's as old as his sorrow, and if I ever accidentally have a son myself, it would be a consolation if he turned out like Stipe. Preferably, of course, in a version with a whole face.

Stipe's got talent, even if being suckled in hell increases your chances in that department, and that's something I'm quite willing to believe. Talent is a dungflower. But still. He's not the only kid here who, encouraged by the child psychologist, spends his evenings in the activity room confronting his brief past with a box of coloured pencils. They all draw the same gory scenes with bombs and knives and machetes – the predictable themes. Stipe's no different from the others in that regard. He too reaches for the red pencil more easily than, say, the green. The wounds he draws, or rather, carves into the paper with his needle-sharp pencil are no more expressionistic than the little masterpieces of the other kids his age, but I always find his composition slightly more intelligent. The lad has a feel for perspective too. For someone his age he's a good chess player, he's not bad at table tennis and he's a keen singer, even if he can't hold a tune. And when he sings, he always misses the right notes. Actually, I'd rather he didn't sing. Little brats who play the choirboy always make me cry; I'm a sucker for those artistic platitudes. Maybe later he'll be able to afford an extra tin of dog food a day by playing tearjerkers on a fiddle in the high street; a busker with a stuffed-up face can still do quite well. Anyway, I like him, and it did me good to see him coming home from school with his mouth forming a broad bridge between the perfect half of his face and the caved-in half.

School attendance is compulsory for our children here in Belgium and as a result they're more streetwise than their seniors and quicker to learn dirty words in Dutch. Stipe's latest linguistic acquisition is 'fuck you' and he's proud to see his vocabulary growing. Every weekday the children are dragged out of their beds a half-hour earlier than the adults so they can get their schoolbags ready before being carted off to the local council schools on public transport by a social worker. They all go to different schools because of the dispersal policy. Like everything else, this measure is for our own good. The reasoning is that if the children from the asylum seekers' centre were all in the same class, they wouldn't be so keen to integrate. It's probably true.

Which leaves Stipe sitting somewhere at the back of the class chewing the end of a biro. Unless his classmates take the trouble to use simple words and speak very slowly in Standard

Dutch, he doesn't understand them. He doesn't understand them. Playground football is the only language they have in common and the one thing he's picked up from his education here is that Belgians can't shoot. Stipe has a more graphic take on it, he claims that Belgians kick the ball as if it's a person. I told you he has talent.

But he can't read or write. The lessons go too fast for him and he really has nothing better to do than sink his teeth into his pen and pass the time until the bell rings gazing at his teacher. It's too bad for Stipe, but if I was him I would have demanded another teacher if she's only there to be stared at the whole day long. Mr. Prosinecki recently asked me to go to the school with him for some kind of parent-teacher evening and I got a look at her. If Stipe used his crayons the way she uses her lipstick, he'd fail art. If you ask me, her hobby is knitting in front of the telly. During this famous parent evening she didn't have much to say about Stipe. What did she know, after all? The boy sat there in the last row under the map of coveted Europe sucking his pen and staring at her. Drawing, he was good at that. And gym as well. ('It's a shame the Eastern bloc's been abolished, Mr. Prosinecki, otherwise I'm sure we would have seen your son shine at the Olympics. I love that, gymnastics. Especially the exercises on the horse.') He always got an F for reading and writing, but could just manage the sums. She was sorry she couldn't spend more time on him, but well, we had to realise – '...you see, you know, you understand, don't you, Mr. Prosinecki?' – there was no point in teaching the boy to conjugate verbs when it was quite possible, just to pluck a figure out of the air, that three weeks from now he'd be kicked out of the country and never hear a word of Dutch again. She had another thirty-four children in her class and although some of them might not have had the intellectual capacities of a guppy, she could see some point in pounding certain information into those tiny little heads of theirs.

We saw, we knew, we understood.

Stipe can really drag his feet after one of these days at school. Sometimes when I go to pick him up from the bus stop he gives the impression of being about to collapse under the weight of his own superfluosity. But not today. He was smiling. And that came as a relief because it was his birthday, his sorrow had just turned ten. He's all his fingers old.

The displacement of air during the bombing attack in his drawings sucked the right eye out of his skull. Apparently that's not too bad when it happens, the pain comes later. Stipe has, or had, brown eyes, but the only glass eyes in stock were blue. Although possibly fashionable, something like that does tend to spoil the appetite of table companions and makes dawdling in front of the mirror fairly uninviting. This morning at breakfast the management of the asylum centre presented him with a brown replacement eye. It doesn't always have to be a comic book or a teddy bear. Stipe couldn't have been more pleased and things only got better. At school his class made it into the final of the football competition and he scored the winning goal. The other boys carried him round on their shoulders. And after that, after that, he celebrated a traditional Belgian birthday. I'm not that familiar with Belgian traditions, but Stipe told me about it: everyone gets to write a birthday wish on your body with a thick greasy felt-tip. Once they've all written their wishes on you, they stand around in a circle and applaud. He had wishes all over his stomach and all over his back, did I want to see them?

Stipe pulled up his jumper proudly and I read, 'Go back to your own country you filthy wog.'

'Well? Well? What's it say?' he asked. 'Can you translate it for me?'

‘Stipe football champion!’ I said and his grin grew even wider. It was the best birthday he’d ever had. For he’s a jolly good fellow.

And so

say all

of us.

A Swastika That’s Pointing the Wrong Way

Was Probably Drawn by a Fascist

Maqsood has found it, eureka. After studying his file and combing through half the laws of Belgium, he has come to the conclusion that becoming Belgian is unbelievably easy: you just have to marry a Belgianess.

A Belgische.

All he needs is a woman, preferably with the full quota of ears and limbs, and then he can get his papers in order. No more bothersome interrogations at the Aliens Registration Office, where you queue up for three hours for an interview of a maximum of five minutes in which the interpreter mistranslates everything and the answer’s decided before they ask the first question. Maqsood was so overwhelmed by the realisation that it was possible for him to acquire legal status in bed that at dinner he couldn’t eat a bite. I’m always glad to see Maqsood upset, it means I get enough to eat. The cook insisted that it was tuna with rice, both on my plate and in the bowl Maqsood gave me.

Until it starts growling again, I decide to concentrate on my stomach and enjoy. Afterwards I’ll point out to Maqsood that his gut has been ripped open and his eyes are in such a state that it looks like someone’s plonked two scoops of strawberry ice cream down in his sockets and that men like that aren’t exactly in demand. For the time being though, the poor sod is living in the delusion that he will soon be marrying a Flemish wench who will fry herring for him on Fridays and cut up six or seven potatoes to make home-made chips every Sunday. He’s already asked me to be his witness at the town hall. Gladly.

Western women are still won in discotheques. At least, according to Maqsood, the playboy of Kashmir, and the usual procedure is apparently to select a girl, march straight up with an expression of complete confidence on your face, ask her for a light or the time, then buy her a drink. The most expensive one on the menu, sweet and bubbly, with a slice of lime and a straw. And alcoholic. Until they’re boozed up, Western women tend to act like Western men. You wait patiently for a slow number – those in a hurry can request one of those cloying songs in the meantime, after all, a deejay’s only purpose in life is to bring people together – and then, while shuffling over the dance floor with your hips swaying, one hand on her shoulder and the hand of God in her trousers (not too deep, just a couple of millimetres under the elastic), you politely ask her to marry you. The most important thing with Western women is to convince her from the word go that she won’t have to wear a burqa, you won’t hit her, you won’t insist on her having more than five children, and you’ll help with the washing up. Her answer will be a firm no, but you should

never forget that when they say no, Western women almost always mean yes. And once you've crossed that threshold, you can set a date and get measured up for your wedding suit.

Thanks to this solid theoretical basis, Maqsood succeeded in getting beaten up on his first campaign of conquest. Still, it can't be proven in black and white that his broken wrist was a direct consequence of his strategy, he simply failed to ascertain that his target was already in possession of another – unfortunately more muscular – man, the kind of guy who builds up his circle of friends at the gym. The first steps are always the most difficult.

Nowadays Maqsood breaks the ice by asking women to sign his plaster cast. And he's come to value my company during his hunting expeditions. After all, we only get one evening off a month, one lousy chance to flout the curfew and venture out into the testosterone-drenched Flemish night, after handing in a signed promise that we won't come back drunk. Vamos!

Picking up a woman in a disco is not the biggest problem. The biggest problem is getting into a disco in the first place. Invariably there's a brick shithouse on the door – ten to one in sunglasses, even if it's three in the morning, even if it's fifteen years since the sun last shone on the bruiser's head – and he stands there glibly insisting that it's a private club or full up or you're wearing the wrong shoes or you need a moustache to go inside or it's a theme night and everyone has to be dressed as a giraffe or that admission costs 800 Belgian francs (being 20 future euros) and 1,200 francs for non-members (being 104 Lithuanian litai, being 108,250 Rumanian lei). And meanwhile he's waving in gorgeous potential fiancées who don't hand over a penny and on closer investigation aren't even disguised as giraffes. Without a moustache between them. The only place in the whole neighbourhood where we can get in past the obligatory brick shithouse is the one club Maqsood no longer dares to enter. He's scared of getting his other broken wrist as well.

Thanks to his stubborn refusal to lose faith in humanity, Maqsood has spent his entire life being fucked up the arse by the entire human race. He's a total innocent – and therefore perfect husband material – but the road to a wife is paved with dangers he is always completely oblivious to. If we pass a pub in which, theoretically, his future flame could be sitting bored at the bar puffing away at a cigarette, constantly racing off to the lady's to touch up her lips, always grinning sweetly at the barman, who is too busy pouring beers fast enough to make sure his customers keep grinning... then Maqsood is convinced that all the people in the pub have been awaiting his arrival for years. 'Look, there, friendly people!'

That's not something you see every day, so I ask where.

'There, at the door of that pub, they're waving to us.'

'Keep walking, Maqsood, that's the Hitler salute.'

And since there are thousands of different salutes and people in the asocial Western world usually just ignore each other, Maqsood returns their attentions with a friendly Hitler salute of his own. And a smile. I also Hitler salute your mother and all your sisters. And then we get to test our aerobic fitness, pursued by fourteen single-minded skinheads. The pub in question was called the Welkom.

But a man who wants a wife-cum-passport is not easily deterred and Maqsood had vowed to get himself a woman before returning to the asylum seekers centre. In the end we found an

establishment without any sunglasses on guard duty. A poster on the door said, 'NEW WAVE PARTY'.

New Wave, unless I'm very much mistaken, is the exact English translation of Bossa Nova, being sultry Brazilian music that sounds as if for centuries there's been a universally affordable cure for cancer, the kind of dance music that makes you want to swing your hips. You keep an invisible Hula-Hoop in motion while giving testosterone-drenched looks to a Hula-Hooper of the opposite sex. There's nothing else to it and you walk out of the party tent and straight down the aisle. We opened the door. An ashen-faced kid at a kitchen table asked us for eighty francs admission, four Bulgarian levas. The proceeds of the show, he assured us, were going towards new corrugated iron for the scout hall roof. Congratulations. The dance floor was completely deserted, unless we were willing to take into account three almost stationary, witch-like apparitions in black rags. Maqsood was wearing a tie with embroidered cartoon characters and I had fished my whitest tennis socks out of the washing machine for the occasion, but still we didn't feel at home.

'Did someone die here?' But the barman had either gone deaf from years of working in this loud gloomy music or couldn't be bothered answering. And the disc jockey had just heard from a reliable source that God didn't exist as well, because when we requested a solid swingalong number like Michael Jackson's Billy Jean, all the world's misery suddenly convened in the middle of his face. Things picked up for a moment when the godless killjoy pulled something out of his record box that actually got twenty people out under the mirror ball. The German singer kept repeating that he wanted to be a polar bear – I'd like to be a polar bear, I'd like to be a polar bear, at the cold Pole, I'd like to be a polar bear – and that all the way through the refrain. Besides arms, we now saw the odd foot moving in a suggestion of a dance step and, with every passing minute, I felt sadder about having been refused admission to the giraffe party.

'I don't understand,' I told Maqsood. 'Would you like to be a polar bear?'

Maqsood didn't understand anything anymore, least of all the fact that you had to pay here to take a leak. 77 Slovenian tolars per piddle. 'Why do they want to make money off that? It's my piss!'

Anyway, we went home, to Block 4, in the cold – it's still much too cold to creep into a container – and decided to postpone the wedding ceremony a little longer. Better luck next month. If we're still walking around here. If we're still walking around.

Sheltering in Eddy Merckx Country

Bastard of the day is Ifeanyi Akwuegbu who can't ride a bike properly.

The election of Ifeanyi to bastard of the day is the first notable fact on a Tuesday that is so unnoteworthy that it might just as well have been a Wednesday or a Friday. The second prominent feature in the landscape of our boredom is that General Tomatski received a deportation order but decided to jump before he was pushed. He disappeared last night. We all know that Tomatski paid the Mafia a substantial sum for seven attempts to smuggle him to England. He still has three attempts left to go. In the confusion of his flight he left a bottle of whisky in his room, and in the corridor an intense debate is now raging about who has the most right to that bottle. The debate is whispered, a wall of quiet mumbling, because when it comes to alcohol the house rules are

implacable: anyone found in a state of drunkenness will be ejected from the centre immediately and without exception. The incident also goes on your file, thus ruining your chances with the Aliens Registration Office. Inasmuch as you had any chances in the first place.

For now we don't get any further than agreeing to decide possession of the bottle over a game of chess. We could also put it to democratic vote, at least, if everyone on our corridor understood what those things mean: 'democratic', 'vote'.

Sad lives too are subject to change, Ifeanyi has provided ample proof of that, and what constantly changes is the life, not the sadness. Until yesterday we were able to go to the reception desk to borrow a bicycle, or at least, something with pedals, a seat and handlebars. We were able to get our minds off things now and then by riding into the village. Just looking at the shops was enough, it doesn't take much to fuel a dream. Most people use the bikes to go to Mass on Sundays. And since nothing much goes on around here except the occasional fight between a Chechen and an African, with a lot of cigarettes being bet on the Chechen, it can only make you more Catholic. Some guys I know make a habit of attending every available celebration of the Eucharist, from early Mass to midnight Mass, plus baptisms and funerals. But Ifeanyi has put an end to all that. Now there's a chance that we'll have to cover the whole distance to the village by foot, which can only lead to a drastic reduction in the number of faithful.

It's like this. Ifeanyi comes from one of those African holes that can safely be considered the provincial capital because there's a well with filthy water. As long as you kick it hard enough, a donkey is the most efficient means of transport. The greatest dilemma in Ifeanyi's hometown concerns that same donkey, an animal created by African gods for a dual purpose: vehicle and roast dinner. If you eat the donkey, you have to do without your racing machine. If you ride it, you go hungry. Before leaving his native soil, Ifeanyi had never seen a bicycle, let alone a bike path. No surprise that the apex of cycle racing in all of Black Africa is the Tour de Burkina Faso: just follow your nose, the start is the last straight line, a bit like life itself. Anyway, it's hard to find anyone there who can take a corner on a bike. All well and good, and after reaching Europe, Ifeanyi was introduced to the wondrous vehicle. In all honesty I must admit that he was surprisingly fast at finding his balance on the rusty thing. It would be easy enough to laugh at him for dismounting at every corner, but I know of very few people who have the courage to learn to ride a bike at forty-five. I don't want them putting me on a camel at my age either. Hats off on that account! The unfortunate thing is that Ifeanyi thinks that the middle of the road is by far the easiest place to ride. The car drivers annoy themselves a triple ulcer and beep furiously, convincing Ifeanyi that the Belgians are altogether the nicest people in the whole world so that he answers their beeping with two rows of shining white teeth. He would have preferred to wave, but he really was wiser to keep both hands on the handlebars.

Asylum seekers are not insured, not for anything, for bugger-all. If a deranged fool takes it into his head to run us down, it's up to us to glue our body parts back together again. And we can pay for the super-glue while we're at it.

And so the management has decided that from now on we have to take a bicycle test, theoretical and practical, all equal before the law. So that everyone knows that a traffic light is not a Christmas decoration. They need to be sure of our bicycle skills. It's ridiculous. Are we supposed to slalom around traffic cones, corner, brake, ride uphill, ride downhill, with light, without light, ring the broken bell, pump up the tyre and put the chain back on the sprocket under the watchful eye of the centre's managers, who meanwhile assess our navigational skills? Anyone who fails to graduate

with honours will be excluded from borrowing a bike. Childhood is pleasant because it's over, no one is grateful to Ifeanyi for making us all feel like we're suddenly seven years old again.

Ifeanyi may not understand traffic signs, and he might have been chosen bastard of the day by unanimous decision, but he can still cut the knot when it comes to allocating a bottle of whisky. It's because he thinks in terms of distribution rather than allocation. His suggestion is to play chess for shots. The winner of the game throws back a glass of whisky and gets to take on the next candidate. Anna, the whore, is absolutely delighted by this luminous idea and, after a little scheming amongst ourselves, we all agree that Anna will play Ifeanyi in the first game and that I will act as judge for the duration of the tournament.

Anna has well-known skills that are highly valued and rewarded with cigarettes, but she is not a good chess player. She loses with white in next to no time and Ifeanyi triumphantly torments his body with a stiff drink, thrown back in one gulp. I can't help but wonder if he actually likes the stuff.

Ifeanyi just keeps winning from, respectively, an Albanian, the Algerian lawyer (although very narrowly), a Kosovan, a Chechen, a Serb, a Croat, a Gypsy without papers and another Albanian. He could have taken on a Korean as well, but the bottle is empty and his liver is working overtime.

The smirking losers congratulate Ifeanyi on his masterful moves, but the biggest prize is yet to come, seeing as Anna is already on her way to the office to inform the management that Mr. Ifeanyi Akwuegbu is shitfaced drunk in Block 4.

The Transmission of the Sigh

Lidia doesn't need to shout, she can talk calmly, almost as quietly as when she talks to me at night; thousands of miles away her voice can still be heard. She's sitting here in my room – Room 26, Block 4 – but at the same time she's also in the middle of a conversation in a mountain village on the Illyrian-Pelagian border. Telecommunication is a marvellous thing and losing the ability to be constantly amazed by it should not be allowed.

Look at her sitting here on the edge of my bed wearing little more than knickers and a pink T-shirt while her voice effortlessly travels the enormous distance to the village of her birth. She doesn't even need to squeeze into a container to get there. If I didn't know better, I would hold my nose to the receiver to smell the wheat on the other end of the line, the dust, the brown coal, the sulphur, the lanes with all their scrawny cats... her roots.

For the first time since arriving here, Lidia has phoned home to talk to her mother. Or rather, since her mother's house does not contain any marvellous devices, she's phoned the village post office to ask them to call her mother to the phone.

'Who did you say you are... Yes... And who you would like to speak to... Yes... No idea, madam, there was shooting again last night and a few houses burnt down, I'll go see if we can find her. Can you hold the line?'

Far away in this instant someone leaves a post office. Far away in this instant someone walks past the rubble and asks a passer-by if he knows where Lidia's mother is – alive, if possible – because she's wanted on the phone. Lidia sighs. Somewhere faraway from here, and in this same instant, a receiver is lying on a table in a post office. And from that receiver this sigh emerges. Does anyone hear it? Someone in the queue for stamps for instance? And do they sigh as well, considering the contagious character of sighs?

There are two possibilities. Either someone now drops a knife, immediately stopping her potato peeling and chicken plucking to race to the post office in record speed. Or else the chicken is still alive and there's no one left to race to the post office.

A squeaking door. Footsteps. Banging. Crackling.

'Lidia, is that you?'

'Mama, is that you?'

Two voices embrace. They do that somewhere in the cosmos, where satellites distribute telephone conversations around the world. A moving thought. But too bad for the chicken.

'Where are you now, girl? Did the trip go well?'

Mother needn't worry, the trip couldn't have been better. The smugglers had organised everything perfectly, the forged documents were very professional, the borders a mere formality. Once they'd got past the first danger zone, they were able to swap the trucks for an air-conditioned coach that had been placed at their disposal. They stopped regularly, more or less every three hours, at service areas where they were able to drink coffee and stretch their legs. And at night they were put to bed in hotels ranging in quality from three to five stars. There were bars, swimming pools, saunas and breakfast with croissants and freshly squeezed orange juice. After five days, they reached the coast, where the ferry brought them to the promised land in just a couple of hours. She felt a little bit seasick, but other than that there weren't any discomforts worth mentioning on the whole trip.

'Your cousin will be glad to hear that. Ruslan. They're looking for him. They think he killed a Muslim and he wants to get away before they get their hands on him. I'll tell him you had a good trip, he'll be glad to hear it. And where are you calling from now, girl?'

She's standing in a telephone box in the middle of London. The Thames is flowing by on her left, and she can see Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament. It's a beautiful city, London. The people are all friendly, and fortunately most of them speak English. She's got a bar job. ('No, Mother, it's not what you think, it's a respectable bar with respectable customers who talk about Shakespeare and the stock market.') She's making good money and can afford to eat a hamburger at McDonald's every day. The Marlboros here taste better than at home. She's living in a flat, she's got a cleaning lady who doesn't nose through her cupboards, and she's already enrolled at a school to complete her studies.

'Ruslan will be glad to hear it. Ruslan, your cousin, they're looking for him. They think he murdered a Muslim, but I know he didn't do it. Ruslan doesn't do things like that, but what difference does that make, those Muslims will never believe it anyway, they just want to take revenge on the first innocent sheep to come their way, that's what they're like. But I'll tell him, that

you're in London, that everything's fine there, that you got there without any trouble and that he should look you up there. Have you got an address?

Number 10 Downing Street, can she write that down?

Mother can't write English, but thinks she'll be able to remember it.

'Ruslan will be glad to hear it. He'll be leaving soon to get away from the Muslims who unjustly accuse him of murdering their brothers. I'll tell him that you're living in London, number 10 Towny Street, and that he can stay with you until he's got a job and a flat of his own. Ruslan is a good with wood, maybe he can find a job there in a furniture factory. Can I tell him that, girl, that he can stay with you?'

Sure.

'Can you sleep at night, now there's no bombs falling next to your bed?'

'Is everything all right with you, Mother?'

'Your father and I used to live next to a busy railway. People used to wonder how we could sleep through all that rattling and clanging. When we finally moved to the cottage you were born in, we lay awake night after night. We missed the noise of the trains, we'd lost something familiar... Is everything going well with you?'

Sure. Very well. Things could be better, of course, but sayings like that seem to be reserved for people who couldn't be worse off.

'And the weather? What's the weather like in London? What clothes should Ruslan take with him? He wants to flee. The Muslims have already beaten the stuffing out of him and they told him it's not going to stop there. They've shown him the knife they're going to cut his throat with. Gangsters, that's what they are.'

Shut up, you senile old bag.

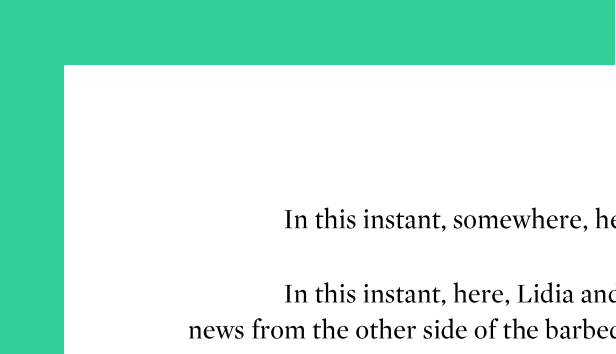
'Mother, listen, I'm standing here in a telephone box, there's people waiting and I just ordered a taxi to take me to work. It could arrive any minute now, I have to hang up...'

'... Ah, girl, if only you knew how often and how hard I've prayed for this, that you'd land on your feet and have a good life. You still pray, don't you? You remember to thank God every day? You haven't forgotten that you should use prayer like antibiotics, before and after dinner? I'm so happy to hear your voice again. If they start shooting again tonight, I'll know that they can't get you anymore, that you're safe and sound.'

Lidia hangs up. In the cosmos two voices withdraw from their embrace.

'That woman has never seen a taxi close-up in her life. She probably thinks the driver will wait for me for hours,' she tells me. 'At least Mother will sleep well tonight.'

If we didn't have mothers, we wouldn't need to tell lies.



In this instant, somewhere, her mother is singing while plucking a chicken.

In this instant, here, Lidia and I sit on the edge of my bed waiting for the postman to bring news from the other side of the barbed wire. We count the minutes until it's time for dinner to take our minds off things, and Lidia hopes that it will be chicken, or something that tastes like it.