

THE OUBLIETTE



ARTHUR VON HELSINKI & TEEMU KOIVISTO

Typesetting by Teemu Koivisto with the power of \LaTeX
Front cover by Teijo Virta

Self-published in December 6, 2023. Freely available from:
<https://www.clippings.me/users/artoklemola>
<https://github.com/TeemuKoivisto/the-oubliette-short-story>

Contact:

arthurvonhelsinki@gmail.com
teemu.koivisto@alumni.helsinki.fi

THE OUBLIETTE

A FORGETFUL EXISTENCE

A short story

by

Arthur von Helsinki & Teemu Koivisto

Front cover by Teijo Virta

EPIGRAPH

An **oubliette** (from french *oublier* meaning to *forget*) or **bottle dungeon** is a basement room which is accessible only from a hatch or hole (an angstloch) in a high ceiling. Victims in oubliettes were often left to starve and dehydrate to death, making the practice akin to — and some say an actual variety of — immurement.

Wikipedia¹

¹<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dungeon>

CHAPTER I

SUN kept shining bright into Mikhail's eyes. His morning slumber was constantly harassed by these photons, beamed by a cosmic entity of scale his ape brains could barely comprehend. He didn't care though. He tried to close the blinds but they had been broken since the day he moved in. *Fuck this*, he thought to himself. Another day ruined.

He walked into his small kitchen that was almost adjacent to his untidy bed. Small benefits of living in a studio apartment. The coffee was stale, he hadn't emptied it yesterday. Why bother? Didn't alter the taste.

Scooping up coffee grinds from a cheap, monocolored bag he steadily filled the drip machine to full. For him, the taste was gratuitous. The only thing that mattered was the quantity.

Setting the machine to bubble its procedure, he sat down and stared into the outside from his window. It was quite awkward to do since the glass was smutty from all the dirt which had slowly accrued over the years without maintenance.

There it was, the world. With its tempting bright sunshine and soft clouds, floating above the green shrubbery. His eyes kept their gaze yet not a single inspiring thought came to his mind, to seduce him to venture into it. It was somewhat paradoxical since yesterday he *definitely* felt he could use some outside. But now, given the comfort of his kitchen with its coffee machine dripping, it seemed relatively complicated and difficult. Maybe he would rather just stay in.

As the caffeine shot through his veins the reality finally seemed to come coherent. *Fuck I should clean up these cans and these filthy clothes. Take out the trash before it rots. Fuuuck!*

Having his mind finally evoked, it found a familiar trail instead that seemed more inviting. *Or maybe...*

He quickly rose up, the coffee cup in his hand and almost jumped to his lousy coach. The PlayStation controller was still blinking being charged full from yesterday, and he immediately turned it on.

Fucking noobs I am going to wreck you today. He smiled wryly.

Entering the lobby, there was a tingling sensation over his body. Like it knew a day of epic victory was ahead. Conquest for the ages, saga equal to that of the warriors of the past. He had become so virtuous in the game that many barely could even react before he had smoked them. And we are talking about the best of the best. His skill was just other-worldly.

Mikhail's mind and body worked as one, flawlessly executing maneuvers as if he could almost anticipate the enemy's response.

"Fucking noobs", he thrashed to the headset. "Git gud and learn to play!"

The virtual world kept Mikhail entranced as the game demanded all of his focus, leaving no room for distressing thoughts about his current situation. His immediate chaotic and messy surroundings, lack of human contact — not to even mention intimacy. How he had ended up living in this miserable suburb, locked away from any chance for social interaction.

"Back to the lobby boys!"

The brief hiatuses between games left a narrow opening for boredom and intrusive thoughts which compelled him to make a change.

Maybe I should contact Peter over Discord. Ask how he's doing.

He started sifting through the games.

But why bother, he is probably busy with his wife and the young kid. It's never too late to abort, I always tell him. We'll never again share those weekend-long gaming sessions together.

A new game started. Mikhail's attention was immediately drawn to the game loop as he found innovative ways to humiliate his opponents. He chuckled out loud while performing a degrading team wipe all by himself. And then a classic t-bag in the end.

It never gets old!

A murmuring sensation in his stomach reminded him that he was still a human, and needed to fill those pesky anatomical needs. He got up, begrudgingly, slouched to the fridge, and a bright white light illuminated the room. It was already getting dark outside. The only thing in the fridge was an empty ketchup bottle.

God dammit. No way I'm going to the store and cook today. Waste of time and energy.

He opened up an app from his phone to order the same meal he always did from a Thai place — panang curry. *Why risk getting something bad*, he thought. Mikhail pushed the pile of old takeaway boxes to a corner of his kitchen table. There was no need to clean them up yet.

DING DING

The food had arrived. Mikhail waited for the delivery woman to leave so there would be no social interaction, no exchange of meaningless pleasantries. He put on a stream from Twitch where a renowned legendary player was playing the same game as he did, and munched the sustenance without noticing its taste, his attention fixed to the screen. He picked up a few new tricks from the master, and booted up his PlayStation.

Time for dessert! I'll stomp these scrubs with spicy ways to burn them alive.

Mikhail preferred the night. It was quiet in the building and outside. No children screaming, couples fighting or other sounds of life disturbing his bubble. There was only him and the game.

The night went near perfect. He lost only a couple of games here and there, to elite players like himself. He was nearing the top 10 in the worldwide leaderboard, a long-time goal of his.

People started their cars, and made noise in the hallway as they hurried to work in the morning. Mikhail looked down on the sheep, feeding the corporate machine for crumbs. He had solved the money problem by figuring out what benefits he could get and what papers to send every month. Also he had inherited all his mother's money when she died a year ago.

He suddenly felt tired, his fingers fumbling his character to a lousy death. The exhaustion of the battle had finally settled in and Mikhail collapsed on the bed, feeling quite satisfied with his conquests. He fell into slumber without dreams.

CHAPTER II

DING DING

MIKHAIL stirred. He was lying across his bed in an untidy mess of greasy linen and old crumbles of food. Barely conscious, his brain tried to spark a modicum of connections but in vain.

DING DING

Who the fuck is at the door...

Mikhail quickly put on his filthy pants, stumbling as he walked to the front door. He pushed down the handle.

“Hello”, said a soft feminine voice. “May I interest you in participating in the yearly fundraising for sick children?”

“What”, Mikhail said, still rubbing his eyes.

“Oh, I’m sorry — did I wake you? It wasn’t my intention.” It finally penetrated his dull mind what he was seeing. A young woman, couldn’t be over 30, was standing at his door. Clothed in a smart but casual jacket, wearing no hat to cover her long flowing blonde hair. Her two blue eyes gazed at him, quizzingly.

“Ah yeah, no problem. Just a little sleepy in the mornings.” Mikhail laughed dryly.

She gave a short laugh as well. “Apparently.” She did not seem overly appalled by the obvious decadence and filth standing before her. “I was

just asking if you were interested in participating in a fundraising for sick children.”

“Oh, okay. Yeah, well. I haven’t participated much in those”, Mikhail mumbled.

“It’s fine to start now”, she answered, her pearly white teeth gleaming.

“Uhh, yeah. I mean. Aah.” Mikhail’s brain searched for a snide response. It was on his tongue but he just did not dare to say it. Did not dare to break the mirage.

Fucking bitch, it suddenly hit him. *Trying to fool me into giving my money away.*

“I don’t really care that much.”

There was a moment of pause. Her gaze was steady but a crack had come visible. Whatever illusion she had of him, had disappeared. He was filth, both in body and soul.

“Oh, I see. Well then, have a nice day.”

She waved and turned to leave. Mikhail instinctively went to close the door.

“But if, you know, there were other ways to help than money”, he blurted. “I might...”

The girl turned back.

“They actually do take in volunteers who can spare time to be with the children at New Port. If you are interested, there’s a form on the website you can fill and ask!” She smiled.

“Yeah, okay.” Mikhail answered. “Thanks. Bye.” He shut the door.

“Bye!” she replied in a chirpy tone.

What the fuck was that. That was so fucking pathetic. Fuuuuck!

He smelled his armpits. They smelled appalling. Feeling a surge of energy, he rushed to the bathroom and started showering, vigorously scrubbing his hair. Taking a good look at his unshaven face, he scrounged his

cabinet for a trimmer and started taking big chunks off from his ungodly tangle of a beard.

Mikhail gazed in the mirror. The person who stared back looked like a stranger. Long, partly matted hair was tied in a neat bun. The woodsman beard suited him, stylish yet sufficiently scruffy. Fresh mint odor rose beneath his clean black t-shirt. He stared at the reflection perplexed, thinking about what the hell just happened.

My stupid genetic code, realizing itself via a banal grooming ritual for a slim chance to pass my second-grade genetic material into the future. She was hot though. No, what the fuck am I doing? Am I going outside? For what? For a faint hope to meet her again and to seduce her? How? Like in movies, just walk to her and say I think you're pretty?

A distant memory surged from a dark corner of Mikhail's mind, something he had buried a long time ago, given up on. It was him holding hands with her best friend Alexandra, they were teenagers then. They kissed, and fell asleep in a hammock.

Shortness of breath, and throbbing pain in his chest stopped recalling the memory.

Do I want to take that leap of faith again? To open myself just to have my heart stabbed repeatedly with shards of glass? There are games to be had, and noobs to be dominated. This is the safe way, this is what I can control, what I deserve. Happiness is anyway fleeting as the dopamine and oxytocin evaporates from my system, what remains is only heightened suffering after the high. I prefer my woes constant and ever-flowing.

Mikhail started to clean his apartment, perhaps for the first time in years. He did not know how. It was akin to a trance, his hands did the work but his mind was absent. There was a strange sparkly sensation within him, something he had forgotten was possible. The lights outside were a little brighter, his appearance suitable, even appealing to others. Existence did not seem like such a terrible deal after all.

Was this hope? *I don't want hope, hope is killing me! How can I get rid of this feeling?*

The day was done and he came to a sudden realization he had not booted up his PlayStation today. The studio was neat and clean and he was tired. His soul felt cleansed as did the filthy countertops. Yet still, his mind compelled him to open up his dusty computer, to search “New Port hospital”. He found the sick children section, all of them looking so anemic and disabled. A link titled “Volunteer work” described a recurring call for volunteers every Monday afternoon at the hospital.

Would she be there? But I despise children! When was the last time I had been out? It felt to him like years, besides running the bare minimum errands, to have properly done something out of his own will. Her golden hair and smile were stuck in his mind in a perpetual loop. *Have I finally lost it?* He had feared this day might come.

Mikhail felt exhausted, his body not being used to such physical exercise as cleaning the studio required. His mind was drained as well, the new stimulus and call for an adventure had taken him on a rollercoaster ride to the past, and even worse, to the present. To the realization of what he lacked. What he thought he could live without. Mikhail stared at the roof, and fell asleep quickly, not able to resolve what he would do the next day.

CHAPTER III

THE next day, the Sun did not shine. Mikhail woke up to the quiet tapping of rain on his window. The outside was misty and gloomy. He gathered up the strength to go to his coffee maker.

Sipping his third cup and staring at the cleaned apartment, the mania that had taken hold of him seemed to dissipate. There was no chance he would see that girl at the hospital. Not a chance in a million. And if by chance he *would* see her, what was he going to say? Hi? *Yeah I hate children but I like you so, it balances out ha ha?*

He already felt a wave of humiliation washing over him. That was the last thing he needed. Just being ridiculed once more for being an ugly motherfucker. Better for him to stay in his cave.

Bombarded by these thoughts the fantasy of saving his soul from oblivion seemed to vanish as quickly as it had come. *And why even bother? It's all meaningless anyway. And the hospital is like 30 minutes away. And what the fuck would I even do there, just play games with some retarded child? Fuck that...*

And it's raining, great!

He sat on the couch and booted up the PlayStation. The familiar logos created a sense of security. In the history of mankind there had been moments when against the great unknown, an individual took a great leap with dauntless courage. This was not one of those moments.

The familiar trance of virtual reality engulfed Mikhail and all the worries in the world were washed by its wake. The rejuvenating sensa-

tion of victory — unmatched superiority — gave him his much-needed dopamine.

Hours passed. The rain kept dribbling and Mikhail, while beating yet another unimaginable odds, felt hungry and ordered a pizza. He ate. His body numbly followed its daily routine. Glancing at the couch where the inevitable chaos was already settling in, his mind wandered and the room seemed smaller. Lonelier. Darker.

He stared at his window, imagining prison bars instead of blinds. A wave of melancholy washed over him. From the deep recesses of his mind, a string of tortuous thoughts arrived like hyenas, feeding on his despair. The fog of the trance he had been in was lifted and he saw the desolation of his being in full. Alone in a lousy studio apartment. With no job. Living from government welfare. The cleanliness made the absence of it all even more visible. Just an empty shell of human existence.

How can I live in this rat hole when there's a world full of love and excitement just outside?

The thought pierced his soul. The lashes of self-pity, how hard they fell on his dull mind. He finished his pizza. The mechanics of moving around stirred his body away from the hole it had sunken into.

Why was I even born? To suffer like this. A fucking joke. He asked himself repeatedly. He threw the pizza box into the trash with rage.

He sat on the couch trying to continue playing. He felt nothing. His only joy had been taken away from him. He hesitantly turned off the PlayStation. The room was empty and alone. He reached for his phone. He knew some people although he wouldn't call them friends. Just a bunch of weirdos like him. He checked his messages. Nothing.

He stared at the screen, trying to figure out what to type. "Hey, wanna hang out?" Ugh. *That sounded so fucking lame.* He settled after a good half an hour for a line: "Yo, what's up? Wanna grab a beer?" He pressed send.

Having completed this almost insurmountable task he felt exhausted but also relieved. *Okay, I suck but at least there are others like me. So it's not that bad. I guess.* He felt a small tingle of purpose in his existence. Fiddling around on the couch trying to figure out what else to do, he again turned on the PlayStation. He kept playing until the early morning.

CHAPTER IV

THE studio was hot when Mikhail woke up and the first thing he did was check his phone. A new message in WhatsApp. From an acquaintance, a fellow loser like himself, who had replied at 04:32 AM. He agreed to meet in the evening for a beer in a local dingy bar. *Misery is best shared*, Mikhail thought and agreed to the offer.

Maybe he could bounce ideas with the guy on what to do with his situation, not that the dude had any experience in relationships. He saw he had received an email recently. He opened it. It was a short notice that thanked him for his application and that they were looking forward to seeing him on Monday.

What the fuck?

Mikhail apparently during his mania had, by accident, sent his half-finished application. His breath shortened and stopped for a while. His mind was racing. He saw all the possible ways the social interactions would go wrong.

So first I have to figure out how I talk with the nurses without appearing like a maniac. Then I have to talk with the fucking children. What if I end up shouting at them? Or just hitting one? What if they start laughing at me? For being such a loser.

And if she would be there, seeing all this. Toiling around like an idiot with no idea how to interact with the kids. *Shit.*

Or maybe I just don't go.

He checked the time. *At least I'll meet Joey in a couple of hours. Maybe we'll figure out something.*

Feeling a need to be distracted, Mikhail set up an alarm and booted up the PlayStation. He wanted to wash away all the negative thoughts by falling into the flow of playing.

His alarm blared, bringing him to the present.

He put some clothes on and headed out. Mikhail enjoyed the sensation of the cool night breeze. The soothing absence of crowds, only creatures of the night like himself.

Finding his way to the local hub of pubs, he saw the ugly faces of the regulars. Drunk and talking about bullshit as usual. Some ladies smoking by the corner of the bar, lost in lively banter. A single female exhaling a long billow of smoke while staring silently at him. All fooling themselves by the shared aimlessness.

Mikhail ordered a pint from the counter and saw Joey with a side glance. Sitting in a cozy dim corner, sipping beer. He seemed shocked when he realized that it was Mikhail who was walking towards him.

"Wow dude! What the hell happened to you?" He chuckled. "Are you having a date tonight?"

Mikhail laughed in turn. "What do you think?" He took a heavy gulp from his beer, its stale taste feeling rather homely.

"I don't know really. It's been so long since we last met, you could have hit up some old lady from the laundry."

"Naa. Just felt like cleaning up my apartment."

Joey seemed in disbelief.

"Okay, jeezs."

A grin appeared on Mikhail's face.

"Well there was this girl that knocked on my door."

"Fucking knew it!" Joey shouted.

“She was trying to get me to donate money to the children’s fucking hospital, can you believe it?”

They both laughed.

“What the hell she was thinking? You like, hate children. And every time we meet you end up blabbering about how humans are the worst and there should be an apocalypse to kill everyone. That the whole world is mad and we should finish it sooner than later.”

“Yeah...”

“But seriously — did a body snatcher get you or what? You look like Mikhail’s brother or something.”

Mikhail smirked a little.

“I don’t know man. It’s so hard to explain. She was just too... nice. Like she didn’t seem to care I looked like a homeless guy. And fuck, the worst part of it is — I promised to go the hospital.” Mikhail laughed heartily.

“What?”

“Yeah, so she was asking for money for those sick children or whatever. And I said, the cheap bastard I was, that no way. But because she was just too nice I somehow promised I could help them in person, in the hospital. And that’s when I kinda went crazy because I don’t know what the hell I’m doing right now.”

“Wow, dude. Really?”

“Yeah, it’s weird. The chances of meeting her are probably zero but I don’t know if this is worth a shot. To see those brain-damaged children and play hide and seek or something.”

They both laughed and started an honest discussion about what to do. Mikhail felt somehow connected to the world which was strangely compelling. Jointly their inept social experience almost made up what a normal person would know automatically. The intoxication washed away most of the hindrances of inhibition and as the clock hit last call, Joey pulled him close.

“Dude just fucking do it man. Go there and pretend you are interested in the kids while you see if the hotty is still there. If not — just bail but you never know if she’s crazy...”

“Yeah yeah”, Mikhail nodded. Agreeing in a drunken stupor. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

CHAPTER V

HAVING found an actual goal in his life, Mikhail felt uncomfortable. Uncomfortable by the burden of the task that he had brought upon himself. His interest in playing decreased every day as the moment of truth came closer. The normal dishes he ordered from the Thai place appalled him. He ordered a salad for the first time in his life. It tasted good. New. Weird.

He took upon a new hobby to keep his beard and the house tidy. Every morning he would check whether there was something to do. A stray hair here. A coffee stain on the table there.

Mikhail also felt a sudden interest in learning about children. A subject he thought he'd never dwell into but there he was, finishing Wikipedia page after another about their conditions. The psychological and biological problem. Most fatal diseases. Diseases that most likely disabled them. Stuff like that.

Laying on his bed, Mikhail daydreamed about how the day would go when he finally arrived at the hospital. What he would say to the doctors or nurses. How he would greet the kids. What he would do if he met *her*.

Her. He didn't even know her name. Mary. Rose. Emily. Something sweet like that.

Her face also became mistier in his mind. Were her eyes blue or green? What was her face like? Her voice — how did her voice sound like?

Mikhail conjured up the details as he dreamt and felt somewhat sure that they would eventually meet again. He wasn't spiritual at all but it felt, somehow, ordained to him. A destiny of kinds.

While staring at his sluggish and unmuscular image, he felt a physical need to move. His muscles were as soft as a baby's butt. No woman would be charmed by that.

So Mikhail started to do push-ups in the mornings. Or more like tried to do. The mechanics still eluded his body and his arms quickly came to exhaustion. He needed to be better. Just being funny wouldn't be enough.

But he counted on that though. That it was his brains, if anything, that would eventually convince her to give him a chance. *Everybody loves a guy who makes them laugh*. Or so Mikhail had read. It seemed that they both shared a similar affection for self-deprecation. It would be Mikhail's strongest asset.

Switching between his dreams and reality seemed to get harder and harder when Monday was upon him. Mikhail woke up sharply in the early morning and couldn't get back to sleep. The weight of the moment became heavier and heavier as the clock raced towards 5:30 PM. He felt again disappointed in himself and apathetic. Whatever delusions he had were again washed away by endless self-pity and hatred. *What the fuck am I doing...*

4:30 he got to the door. The handle felt heavy in his hand. He walked to the bus stop and triple-checked the number he should take and whether if that would fail to arrive, what his second option would be.

The bus came. Everything seemed to be in place. It was his destiny.

Walking to the hospital Mikhail checked his phone. It was 5:12. He had arrived plenty early. An unusual feat for him, for certain. Mikhail started to feel again anxious as he stepped on the hospital stairs.

He walked to the counter.

“You take a left turn from there”, the receptionist replied sharply. And you look for room D112 in the corridor — there should be a person to meet with you.”

“Thanks”, Mikhail said and walked. He felt out of place in the sterile environment of the hospital. Where everyone seemed to have a clear purpose.

He slumbered to an open door from where a nurse beckoned him to come in.

Walking in he saw 5 people sitting on chairs, 4 middle-aged ladies and one middle-aged man. Seemingly middle-class with probably golden retrievers and proper jobs.

“Please, take a seat” the nurse said.

“Glad to see young people here as well”, she spoke sweetly as he sat down. Mikhail felt their glances.

Few people came after him. Nurse checked her list and after a while, went to close the door. “So. Now I want to get to know you all a little bit and what are your goals with the volunteer work. Let’s start from the first of the list — Lisa Bigsby.”

One of the middle-aged ladies stirred. “Oh, hello — I am Lisa. My niece recently came to the hospital and I’ve been thinking of surprising her by coming here — Anastacia Rowen.”

“Anastacia! Oh right, you are her aunt. She is such a lovely girl, I am sure she’ll be so happy to meet you.”

Mikhail felt a knot turning in his stomach.

“So about the work, we have play hours during the evenings — depending on your schedules. After dinner, we do things like finger-painting or games with the other tenants. Some like to watch TV or play games on their own but we have plenty of children who enjoy spending time with the volunteers.”

Everyone nodded agreeingly. Except Mikhail.

“Next we have Mikhail Borowitz.” All eyes turned towards Mikhail who felt his throat dry shut.

“Hi”, his voice was oddly shrill. “I uhh, am Mikhail. And I...” his voice trailed off.

“So there was this woman who came to me or I mean, knocked at my door. And asked or said she was, from the hospital. And they were looking for volunteers or something. And I said I would. Be interested in.”

He looked at the nurse’s eyes, still staring at him. His stomach slowly seemed to set.

“And so I came to see if I can help.”

“You have no relatives here?” the nurse asked.

“No, I don’t think so.” *They are all luckily dead.*

“You just came out of the blue here?” She sounded somewhat amazed. “Anybody else here who does not know anyone at the hospital?”

No hands were raised.

“Well then, that’s very brave of you, Mikhail. We don’t often get people who come here just like that. So, as I said, we have after hours from 5 PM forward when the children are available for play — depending on your schedule. Does that sound good?”

“Sure.”

“Any particular time you have in mind, people often come here once a week. Days like Wednesday are quite crowded but I’m sure we can fit you all in.”

“Uhh, any day really is fine”, Mikhail mumbled.

“Maybe Friday?”

“Okay.”

“From 5 or later? We are open till 7 but it’d be best to come early — some kids don’t like late visitors. And we have the medication at 8 so that takes time to prepare.”

“Yeah well, maybe 5:30 would be good.”

“Okay, I set you for 5:30. Now, who is Georgia Richards?”

CHAPTER VI

Mikhail stared at the bus window all the way back home. He didn't know what to think or feel but he felt peaceful. Tranquil. Part of something for a moment.

The week went by in a hazy blur as Mikhail kept to his old, and new, routines. Cleaning and gaming. Silent anxiety grew inside him like a balloon as Friday drew closer. He ruminated on all the possible ways things could go wrong yet there was a tinge of hope, a chance to meet *her*.

It was happening. He took the bus to the hospital. An elderly nurse came to see him. A sudden panic rose in his chest.

What the hell do I have in common with these children? These little amebas, probably all out of their minds from the medication. Hey, what's up? So you have cancer, huh. Wanna play?

"This way Mr. Borowitz" The nurse showed the way to the children's recreational area.

But at least they won't live long enough to suffer the trials of puberty. Can't be bullied if you are dead.

"It's great to see young men such as you willing to help children. Anything you enjoy doing that could be shared with the kids?"

"Ehhh, I do play video games a lot." Mikhail said hesitatingly.

"Oh that's wonderful! You know what, there's an old video game console we have been donated. Timmy loves to play it but sometimes he

doesn't have anyone to play with. He is in the cancer-ward and it would mean the world to him if he could share the games with someone."

"Okay, I think I can do that", Mikhail said as they walked into the recreational area. In the corner, there was a big television screen with a feeble and pale kid crouching in front of it, squeezing a controller in his hands. He was staring at it intently.

"Hello Timmy, how are you!"

"Hi", the child responded.

"We have a visitor here who would want to play with you. Say hi to Mr. Borowitz."

"Hi Mr. Borowitz."

Mikhail was flabbergasted by the child's cool tone. Seemed the child was past beyond the mortal world already.

"Hi Timmy. So... what you are playing?"

"Sonic."

"Sonic the Hedgehog? I know that game." Mikhail recollected the long hours he had spent running through those golden circles.

"I can't get past Robotnik..."

"Oh? Well, maybe I can help." Mikhail walked to the child and gently nudged off the controller from his tiny hands. "I'll set up the two-player mode so I can take Tails."

Goddamn, it's been a while since I saw a Sega Mega Drive. This could be fun.

Mikhail felt the old console stir wisps of nostalgic magic, flying through his barren soul. How it was when he played as a child. Honest fun, without constant competition against others. While it had been a while since he had last played, Mikhail's fingers quickly recollected the long-practiced muscle motions.

Timmy's Sonic ran around like a buffoon while he, as Tails, carried him through the game. Mikhail didn't mind his silly mistakes though. Not even when they lost the level because of it and had to start again.

"Wow, we made it through!" Timmy's eyes gleamed excited. Mikhail let out a hearty laugh.

"Nice job Timmy." He said and held out his hand for a high-five. He could barely feel Timmy's small and frail hand touch his. "We make a good team."

"No one else wants to play with me", Timmy coughed. "I'm glad you did."

"It's okay, that's why I came here." Mikhail cringed internally.

"Timmy", the nurse — who had come again after having let them play — spoke gently. "It's time for your medicine."

"I have to go."

"Sure. Maybe we can play some another time." *If you are not dead.*

"Yeah!" Timmy's eyes glimmered.

Mikhail stared at the TV screen, his mind blank. He realized that he had not seen *her* the whole time. A tinge of sadness washed over him.

What the fuck am I doing here? Fucking idiot. There's no chance she even works here. Just wanted to make sure a dummy like me would be lured into wasting their time, amusing these dying retard children.

Mikhail took a deep breath.

Well, lesson learnt. Probably she won't come but hell, if she did. She should be impressed with me sticking with these children.

"Mr. Borowitz, it's past seven now so there's no need to stay."

"Oh, okay yeah."

CHAPTER VII

Mikhail followed the nurse dreamily. He barely registered where they were going. From the corner of his eye, he felt his neurons fire up. It was *her*. Walking towards him, headed the other way. His mouth worked before his brain did:

“Hey!”

She stopped and looked at Mikhail. Her eyes told she didn’t recognize him.

“Oh yeah — hey”, she said, showing a gratuitous smile.

“I said I didn’t want to give money — don’t have much to give to be honest. But that I’d volunteer instead and ... here I am!”

“Oh yes!” Her eyes picked up a glimmer of recollection. “Now I remember you! That’s so great and lovely to see you’ve come — you were here to see the kids?”

“Yes I just started.” Mikhail laughed a little. “We played Sonic the Hedgehog with Timmy who really was a nice kid. Didn’t mind it at all.”

“That’s so nice! They love to see new faces around — it can be a bit lonely at times here.”

“Yes I bet. Just here waiting for... I don’t know. Must be lonely. Especially for a kid.”

She smiled. Mikhail felt his brain tensed, searching for clues and answers. Something was slipping away from him. He felt the need to grasp

it but at the same time, a part of him felt a satisfying comfort in that happening.

“You are working at the children’s department?”

“No, I am here as part of my studies at the university, I am at the general clinic now, doing my training to become a doctor.”

“Oh wow.” Mikhail’s soul left his body. “That’s. Wow. Great. Not much I can say about that.”

“It’s a lot of work at times and still have a long way to go.” She said smilingly. “But hopefully I’ll get my licentiate degree soon so I can start working on my doctorate. Then I can *finally* start on my specialization. Would love to of course choose pediatrics but there’s only so many places to go around.”

“Uh huh, really cool.”

“It can be pretty tough at times but working with the children helps!”

“Yeah!” He muffled a strong urge to shout.

“But I have to keep going now, you as well seem headed out. It was nice to meet you..?”

“Mikhail”, he said and extended his hand. He felt the soft and delicate touch of her skin.

“Anna. Hope to see you again here.”

She then kept going. Mikhail turned towards the nurse who expectantly stood waiting for them to finish. He followed her along. His body felt ethereal and light as a feather. He was floating in the air, empty of thoughts and ambitions.

He came to the main doors and marched out.

CHAPTER VIII

Mikhail slouched on the sofa, idly staring at the last rays of sunlight beaming between his broken blinds. He felt compelled to do something, to change something. Something at all. He felt a physical compulsion in his body that wanted to get out.

He rose up, and walked to the window. The twilight was just setting. He tried to set the blinds. He forgot they were broken. As they had been since the day he moved in.

Reflections of light bounced off from the bent metal surfaces. Mikhail felt his possessing dreams giving away and fading into nothingness. The universe stood before him, ominous yet ever indifferent. A shadow on the wall of his prison which now appeared in color.

Walking back to the couch, he slouched on it again, unable to come to any conclusion. After a minute of staring, almost unconsciously his hand went to find the PlayStation controller. He held it in his hands and, with some slight reluctance, turned it on.

I'll do it tomorrow.

AFTERWORDS

This short story was written during 2023 as a fun little writing project between the two co-authors, Arthur von Helsinki and Teemu Koivisto. Sharing the same passion for the solitary hobby of writing, we wanted to try something different — what if we wrote a story together?

This was haphazardly decided and put in motion with the goal of writing, in turns, a chapter each week with no collaboration in-between *where* the story should go. It would go where it wanted to go. In the end of course, we did have to together come up with an ending we both thought was the right one.

The idea for the story came perhaps from something the other author had said along the lines of not having the will or inspiration to write a bigger story. And that they rather indulged in the easy hedonistic stimulations instead. So as a kind of a joke, we took this tendency to the extreme — with a humorous tone.

We hope that **you**, dear reader, enjoyed it as much as we did writing it. The introspection of these themes has been fun yet somewhat revealing. Perhaps there is a higher truth to be learnt here. Or not. *It's all meaningless anyway.*