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The Party

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I was admitted into the Party after an acquaintance talked me into joining, saying that they took care of their members, that they'd probably find me a job if I worked hard enough, if I made an effort and found new members, who would then look for more members, in turn. If my new members did well in finding new recruits, I'd progress quickly, and maybe one day, I would even reach the top.

- Well, OK, maybe not the top - the acquaintance said - but one never knows.

He could not have guessed what kind of a future awaited me in the Party, he who had never participated in party elections, did not have a voice, but was always out, working the constituencies, a runner boy that no one took seriously. That was because he had no strategy, he just ran around madly looking for new members, not understanding how the pyramid worked - you'd find new members who'd then find more members, so that eventually you had to do nothing, but just wait around until someone noticed you, saw that you existed and were one of them, trusted you, and then gave you an office, after which the ascent began, a consistent and eternal journey up the hierarchical party ladder. This was why it was important to be in their field of vision at all times.

I went to the Party headquarters every day and sat in the long corridor, which was only lit by ceiling lights, so that I could never see my elongated shadow. In that corridor my shadow was always short, stocky, too small. I had seen those kinds of interiors in magazines. The image usually depicted similar chairs, whose iron construction was covered in black plastic, and upon whose comfortable spongy insets and green fabric sat smiling patients, one of them shaking hands with the doctor, as a nurse bent over to a child, offering it a lollypop, her stockings visible. I kept one such magazine with one such photograph in the bathroom, under the clean towels, and looked at it when I masturbated. I liked to look at the nurse, but also at those smiling faces, and I felt an indescribable satisfaction.

The Party heads often walked down the corridor. I had started to recognise them by their gait. I could tell who was about to emerge from behind the low bannister wall even as they just entered the headquarters of the Party and climbed the stairs, although I could not see them yet because the corridor was on the first floor, and the ground area was nothing but a smoking space, although its original use was different, but it had turned into a smoking room over time. A short and nervous step - one of the Vice Presidents was approaching, the short guy who always waved his bag all the way up above his head so that it looked as if he was doing exercises that might lengthen him. At first I thought that the Head Secretary was a woman after hearing the clack of his soles against the smooth stone stairs, it seemed as if someone wearing high heels was coming, someone who showed no mercy to what they were walking over. The sound of his step was feminine, but seemed decisive, firm, I don't really know how to describe it, perhaps androgynous. All of the heads had a

unique step. I wanted to walk like the President. His step was soft, as if he were levitating, almost soundless, you knew someone important was approaching, someone everyone would make way for, someone before they would bow. I practised this step for days, but it was nowhere near his. I even bought similar shoes, moccasins, wore silk socks, but nothing helped, I couldn't copy it entirely. My step was quiet, like his, but did not levitate, did not have that something that would make everyone rush from one office to the next, carry bunches of papers, copy, collect them off the floor.

That, for me crucial, morning, I sat at my work spot, in the corridor. No one noticed me, as usual. The undersecretaries slid coins into the coffee machine and talked about the fact that it had been raining for days, they felt it had been weeks. The secretaries were already in their offices, typing and looking out of the windows, as if they knew by heart what they would type that day. I heard the sound of their heels. The Head Secretary appeared from behind the wall, always leaning forward, lightly slouching, he looked like a former footballer because his legs were like a tunnel, narrowing on the top and bottom, and wide in the knees. His semi-long black hair shone with hair gel. He rushed into the office where his secretary and two undersecretaries sat. He left the door open, took two steps towards his office and paused. He suddenly took two steps back, as if a film projector got stuck and instead of forwards, started winding the tape back. His body faced his office, and only his head was turned towards the depths of the corridor. I thought that he was going to call one of the undersecretaries, that he had noticed her while he was entering his office, but that he had now remembered he had to tell her something.

- Sorry... er... young man, you, yes, you - he pointed at me.

My legs turned to jelly. I didn't know what to say, or if I should say anything, if I should stand up, bow down, offer my hand. I stood up. I was convinced that I would be, when the time came and someone noticed me, decisive, that I'd leave a deep impression, an indelible mark on the person looking at me. At that moment it seemed that I had betrayed myself, that I got frightened and had ruined this opportunity that did not come every day, or rather never for most people.

- Me? - I pointed my index finger to my chest.

- Yes, you. I have noticed that you're... you're here every day.

- I am.

- Why... who do you work for?

- No one, I am a Party member.

- And that's why you're here... you sit here in the corridor every day?

- Yes.

He turned his head towards his office. I thought that this was the end of the conversation, that I had not taken advantage of my opportunity, that I would always remain sitting in the magazine corridor. The Head Secretary started walking towards his office again, stopped and took a few steps back.

- Come with me... into the office... my office.

There were no walls in the office. Or rather, they were hidden behind wardrobes which had entirely covered them, except the one that had the only window which let in an enormous amount of natural light, strengthened by ceiling lights. He asked me what sort of music I liked, what my favourite film was, if I read, and what I read, if I was married... It was as if he had a set of questions ready for such occasions. He recited them quickly, one after another and it seemed that he didn't listen to my answers. Then there was a set of questions about the Party - when I had joined, who had brought me in, if I brought in new members, if those I had brought in had recruited new people, how many... The crescendo came in the form of questions that were meant to determine if I was ready for the battlefield, the real struggle within the Party trenches. If I had failed that exam, I would have probably always remained only a man with the Party membership card, but not the one who would take their orders and execute them without a word, whom they could trust to fulfil every task that the Party would put before him. For starters he asked me if I was loyal to the Party, if I had ever been a member of another political organisation, how far I was prepared to go for the Party. He asked me also if I would come out against a Party member in public regardless of the weight of his sins.

- All of us... are sinners... we make mistakes - he said before I had said anything.

He took out several neck ties from a drawer in his desk, looked at them and at me. He chose a gray one and laid it out before me. He phoned one of his undersecretaries to come to the office. I knew her from the corridor, she was always getting a coffee with a bit of sugar and two white coffees with no sugar from the machine. I had watched her legs, they were perfect, the calves were not too strong, the thighs curvy, but not fat. She always wore short skirts and black tights. I imagined her in the place of that nurse on the photograph of a private clinic for the treatment of colds and masturbated in my bathroom. He ordered her to knot the tie around my neck. I felt her fingers only millimetres from my skin, I had goosebumps, I wanted to be touched by the undersecretary of the Head Secretary. This one moment had made all that sitting in the corridor worth it.

The Head Secretary was telling me about some unwritten Party rules. I wasn't listening carefully. My ears were ringing with excitement, because of the undersecretary, and because I was inside the Head Secretary's office. I heard that he said that the Party has to stay in power at all costs. He talked about the external enemy, which was everyone who was not a member of the Party; one must therefore threat the enemy with special care; in case he turned aggressive, one must order his boss to fire him, rid him of any kind of financial public support, must push him into poverty; if that was not enough, call the police and the law to help, put him in prison because some unresolved murder case, a big robbery, drug dealing or similar crimes that burdened the statistics. He talked for a long time about external enemies, but I don't remember the rest.

Then there were the internal enemies that he said could appear in the shape of secretaries and undersecretaries, so they must be kept an eye on, never allowing them to move up in the Party hierarchy.

- With other types... unpredictable types of the internal... the internal enemy, must be dealt with like the external... what I said about the external enemies. Basically, in case...

She touched my chin with one finger, then leaned her whole palm on my neck. Her perfume had the sweet fragrance of apricots. It was gentle and melted in my nostrils, like sugar at the bottom of a heated pot, as if it was turning from a solid to a liquid and running down my throat. I felt I was getting an erection, I felt uncomfortable, I tried to imagine that there was a frowning policeman standing before me, demanding my father's name, wanting to know my height, eye colour, what my job was... It didn't help. I wondered if she could notice the rising change in my trousers.

The Head Secretary was in his Party world, unwritten rules were before his eyes, rules that were his divinity, which had to be built into the new members, young and carefree soldiers who would pass on the words to the person next to them, until the whole trench could recite each word from that holy scripture.

- We don't discuss party interests... they are decided... that's the president.

I was interested in the part about jobs. He said that almost every Party member had a job guaranteed. The more work you put in for the Party, the better the job would be, although there were exceptions. He said that he could make an exception for me.

- I don't know why... it seems... I see you... you've been sitting in that corridor for days... you have that special something...

Those who are given a job by the Party must remain faithful to it and stay in the job that they had been awarded, which included, for example, fixing jobs for other Party members.

The last part of the unwritten rules referred to private issues that were to be solved exclusively within the Party; no visits to a psychiatrist were allowed, or complaining to your nearest and dearest, unless they too were Party members.

The undersecretary had long finished with the tie and now stood behind me. Her perfume was still running down my throat. The Head Secretary had been looking out of the window the whole time, as if expecting an applause from a crowd in the street after finishing his monologue. When he realised that no applause was coming, he straightened up in the armchair, threw his head back a little as if wanting to flick his hair, even though his hair would not have budged even in a hurricane there was so much gel in it. He asked me where I'd like to work.

- In the City Hall. I would like to be mayor one day.
- We like that... ambition.

He stood up and went to the window.

- You know how long... how long I had to wait... how long it took me to be what I am?

He was my age so I guessed it had not taken long. It was definitely not decades, perhaps a few years. But he had wanted to emphasise his dedication and sacrifice with that question, so there was no answer. As far as he was concerned I was a young man, an inexperienced young Party man.

- You young people... you're impatient. You'd like everything in an instant... for it to happen over night... to be someone right away... That's not how it works... one must make an effort. But, in your... now I'll... in your case.... don't ask me why, I'll make... we will make an exception.

He got up from the armchair and opened the wardrobe that was behind me. I turned to see what he was doing. There were bottles of spirits inside. He took out two glasses and a bottle of Jameson. I liked that whiskey and drank it when I was out clubbing with my friends. They drank beer, but I knew that fate had meant for me to be different, better, more expensive than the rest. That's why I drank Jameson.

He put the glasses on the table, and the bottle in the undersecretary's hands. She poured the whiskey and asked if she should go and get ice. He said nothing and sat back in the armchair, so far back that he then couldn't reach the glass, so the undersecretary passed it to him. He held the glass under his nose and closed his eyes. I did the same. All whiskeys smelled the same to me. As did all alcoholic drinks. I didn't understand why some moved a glass of wine through the air, making the liquid dance, and then shoved their noses in the glass, pushing it too far, so much so that I felt disgusted by the sight. But I would clearly have to learn this or, as I was doing in front of the Head Secretary, pretend that I understood it all.

- Move him to the City Hall.. that department. Tell them to give him the job of the under assistant to the Chief... of, say, sports - he told the undersecretary, who had leaned her thighs against the desk.

I coughed. The under assistant to the Chief? Never mind what department. Under Assistant to the Chief - it sounded like a dream. I wasn't sure that he was referring to me, I couldn't believe it. I felt heat rushing from my gut to my head. I saw before me the plaque on the frosted glass of my office door - the Under Assistant to the Chief. I had to buy a suit. A silk one. No, it can't be too expensive, it can't be more expensive than the Chief's. I would have to meet him first, see what he wore. I'd wear my old suit on the first day. I'd give the impression of a modest and diligent Party member. That's what I'd do.

The undersecretary sat on the desk and leaned over to the phone, moving her straight brown hair off her shoulder. Her skirt had moved enough for me to see her stockings, and she increasingly resembled the nurse from the photograph.

- I'm calling from the Head Secretary's office. He has ordered that you take in a member of ours to the position of the Under Assistant to the Chief.

She covered the phone with her hand and whispered to the Head Secretary.

- They say they already have eight under assistants, that they have no room for any new ones, there are no free desks, they've started to put desks out onto the corridor.

I don't care about their desks, I'll sit on the floor. Just as long as I can be the Under Assistant to the Chief. I wanted to grab the phone from her and tell them I didn't need anything, just a plaque with my title on it.

- I'm not interested, tell them to find... they must have more... there is a place.
- The Head Secretary says he's not interested, that you should find another place.

Then she was telling the Head what they had said on the other side.

- They are asking if this under assistant might be able to sit on the toilet, apparently it's the only free spot they have.

Of course I could. As long as they put a plaque with my job title on the door.

- They can put him where... as long as they... make them put him somewhere - he ordered the undersecretary.

I would be the Under Assistant to the Chief of Sport. It was done. I wasn't interested in sports but I was sure I'd find my way around easily. You just need to do as little work as possible, so that I would not annoy those ambitious types who expect to get ahead with their effort. Those people can be a danger to themselves, but what's worse, a danger to the environment. One should get out of their way and find new channels for getting ahead. What I have learned so far is that it is best to be on good terms with those who were above you in any way inside the hierarchy, pay them compliments, try to get close to them just enough so that they don't feel threatened by your closeness, try to keep them thinking you are no threat at all and that they can happily employ you as their assistant. But one must be careful not to be just another person trying to ingratiate themselves to the bosses. If there was one thing I could do well, this was it - I knew how to ingratiate myself.

The Head circled around me eyeing me up if I were a girl he wanted to conquer.

- You'll be my man... my protege. Inform me of everything: from how they are with you... how work is going, your personal doubts... if you are suspicious of your colleagues, if they are loyal to us... and that. This also applies to your boss... the Chief. He... I don't trust him. You understand?

I nodded. Even if there is nothing suspicious, if no one even mentions the Party, I'd tell him that the department was a snake pit of gossip about Party bosses. This would make them all salivate in the Party headquarters, they'd praise the loyalty and courage I showed in telling them all the gossip.

- Go to this... job... tomorrow. Now I have to talk to a journalist. He's been there enough... waiting for me. Some journalists are ours... but this one... - The Head was already giving me important information.

He walked me to the door, opened it and pushed me out with his body into the office of the secretary and undersecretaries. There was a young skinny man of my age sitting on a chair that had been wedged in between two cabinets. He was clutching a notebook in his hands nervously. A dirty, once upon a time green,

bag sat next to his feet. He eyed me up thoroughly. He didn't know who I was so he soon lost interest. The Head Secretary invited him in.

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At one point in my life I decided to die. I came to a town that the local people have a local name for. I had got the impression that it was the best place for dying. I went inside a house. People were already dying there. They lay in beds and breathed heavily. I lay down too. And breathed heavily, but it wasn't working. I couldn't die. Although I was trying. The narrow streets of the town, winter, the industrial landscape... An ideal setting for death. I lay down for a long time. Until the person dying in the bed next to me asked me for a light. He set himself on fire. The house burned down too.

I was evicted from the place. The townspeople told me to go and die elsewhere. But I didn't have anywhere else to go. The world had become a desert. There were no more towns, everything had become one town. Between the buildings, fields were shielded by glass. One had to enter in a protective suit. This town was an oasis. The only one left. I tied myself to a park bench, but the town people carried me out together with the bench. The bus arrived, but I couldn't get on because of the bench. The driver told me to untie myself. I didn't want to. He left. Another came. And another. I sat there for days. A gray haired man gave me a lift. He needed a rope to hang himself from a nearby lamp post. He did not know how to tie a knot. I helped him. But the rope was too high up so he craned his neck in order to reach it. He asked me to lift him up. It didn't help. I told him he'd find it easier to hang himself off a tree. But there were no trees around.

- What can I hang myself on? - he cried.

I suggested he threw himself under a bus. He said it was out of the question. He had dreamed of hanging himself ever since he had been a child. The rope had not been long enough to go over the lamp post so I lifted him up off the ground. I suggested that we threw the rope over the bus side mirror. That I should talk to the bus driver while he hangs himself. He was delighted with this plan. The bus arrived. The door opened. I asked the driver where he was going.

- Into town.

Then I didn't know what else to ask him. The gray haired man had already hung himself, but his feet were touching the floor. He was choking. He couldn't die. The driver started the bus and the body of the gray haired man hit the lamp post with a force. He was dead on the spot. The bus carried on.

I waited for the next bus. I boarded it with the bench. The bus didn't make any stops. It rushed towards somewhere. The passengers were pressing the stop button frantically. The driver didn't react. He was not conscious. Dribble poured down his chin. Sunlight pierced the dribble. He had a rainbow on his chin. The

bench banged around the bus. I sat on it. It knocked down everything in its way. Some passengers bled. But the atmosphere was joyful. It got dark. The bus hit a wall. I got off with the bench under my arm and went towards the coast.

In the morning I realised that a part of land had fragmented and that I had floated off with it. Nothing was secure these days. There were many of us on the cut off land. Entire skyscrapers with several law offices, a fire station, a big souvenir market, a small butcher shop, families with children and without, several fishermen mending their nets and me on the bench. Some stray dogs too.

Sea life changed us. The firemen started fearing water, the lawyers turned off the lights in their offices and put carpets around their shoulders, and fishermen tried to hit them with harpoons. The sea was mainly quiet. The ground did not sway. The fishermen felt sick. They vomited.

I founded the Party. I made myself the Mayor. I took responsibility for this part of fragmented soil. They applauded. I told them to please talk to me if they had a problem of any kind. I would help them inflate it, so that the problem became so big it eventually simply burst. I'd receive them on Fridays. The lawyers gathered around me. They felt my power.

The butcher cried. He had nothing left to kill. Someone had a pet pig. I gave it to him and said it was the last thing he was going to kill. He put his arm around it and went to watch the wild sunset.

I picked up the bench and took it inside one of the empty flats. I asked the lawyers if this was allowed. They considered it a strictly legal enquiry. I smashed the windows and the sea air flooded in, full of humidity and wandering southern winds. Nothing changed for days. The sea was the same colour, soil-gray. The firemen had mounted a blue siren from one of the fire engines onto the roof of the highest skyscraper. They found a lighthouse keeper. I explained that we had no money to pay for his services. He was a volunteer. He isolated himself completely. Locked the roof door. No one could reach him. We were surrounded by fog. We didn't know where we were headed. The fog fell into a woman's lap, where she cradled her child. The child disappeared. Evaporated. We searched for the child. For years. We found it when it was already grown, inside a wardrobe in a flat inhabited by around 80 people. The child had married, had children of his own. The mother didn't recognise him. I handed him over to her, with a celebratory ritual.

The lawyers wanted us to get beached, to once again be on land, but in a different spot. The fishermen supported the idea of our becoming an island. Not a floating one, but a fixed island. We tied up some sheets together, forming an enormous piece of fabric, which we suspended between two skyscrapers. We floated faster. We hit something but carried on. They asked me to take a stand, to state whether we should go back to connect with our original piece of land, or if we should carry on floating and see where we get to. My opinion was that everyone needed to join the Party, and then multiply. Many complained that we did not have a hospital, that we should have a maternity ward. I promised that we'd build one. All together. When he have building materials. I pointed at the shore.

- Does anyone see any building materials?

They joined the Party. And multiplied. There were children everywhere. The land started to get too small. We had to push some people into the sea. There were rumours that not everyone had ended up in the sea, that the butcher had taken some to his butcher shop instead of pushing them into the water. That they worked as his assistants. The butcher's had nothing to sell but was still open. And had tons of customers. People came, talked to the butcher or his numerous assistants and left.

There were those who did not like my concept of governing. I pushed them into the sea myself. One of them held onto a tree branch for quite a while, even though the top of the tree was already in the sea. They said that I was an authoritarian, that there was no freedom of speech or thought. I didn't even respond to such accusations. That's what people say when they're envious. We were all the Party and everyone was entitled to say whatever they wanted, but only in meetings held by their Party branch. Those Party branches would then report their conclusions to other Party branches, and they would, then, pass them on to the following Party branches, but the following branches always forgot the details. How was it then my fault? I could have removed those forgetful Party branches, but then they would have called me a tyrant. I tried to tell them not to forget all of the details, but they wouldn't hear of it. They said it was their duty to forget.

I got married. So I went to sleep at my second wife's house. She had a husband, and the husband went off to sleep at my third wife's house. And my third wife had a husband, but he wasn't home. I don't know what had happened to the second wife, I don't remember, I only know that I suddenly found myself at the third wife's house. My second wife's husband just lifted the sheet and I lay down between them. He moved out soon after. It wouldn't have made any sense for me to have competition. I am the Mayor after all. I went back to my first wife. I asked for her mother to sleep with us. She had to say yes. There were no discussions on topics like those in the Party branches, so the issue would never find its way onto the discussion list.

I thought about what else I could achieve. The Party had given everyone a job. Some mended fishing nets, some managed the mending of nets, there were those who managed the managers, and most of the people got jobs at the City Hall. One whole skyscraper had turned into a city palace. The employees sat next to the windows and gazed towards the shore. Someone would say: 'There's a storm coming. We should drop the anchors.' After that we had to make a report and send it to the bad weather department, and they would then return the file to the department that had originally sent it, and that department would look at the file and conclude that it was out of its jurisdiction. Everything ended up in the archive or was thrown into the wind.

The lawyers constantly sent charges to the continent. They'd put a charge together, stuff it inside a bottle, close it and let it out in the sea. The fishermen found the bottles in their nets. The lawyers were not happy. They suggested that the fishermen should be banned from fishing the bottles. The Party accepted this. The fishermen said that it wasn't them who fished the bottles, their nets were doing it. The Party accepted their explanation. The lawyers responded that the fishermen should put the bottles back into the sea after catching them. The Party agreed. The fishermen said they always caught broken bottles, which is why they didn't throw them back into the sea. The Party looked at the evidence - the broken bottles - and agreed with

the fishermen that the bottles could not be thrown back. The lawyers demanded that the fishermen be given new bottles into which they could deposit the charges after they caught them. The fishermen demanded that the Party employed new people who would deposit the charges into the new bottles. The Party went on holiday. The lawyers then came to me and explained that they would put together a whole new system of governing on our part of the land, which would be advantageous to me, and that I'd become even more powerful. My mouth watered. I dribbled all over an old report about an approaching storm, which had served as a napkin for my tasting of the skin of the first tangerine tree we planted. I crumpled the report and threw it out of the window. I employed children to put charges into the new bottles. They thought it was fun. Many cut themselves on the glass. The blood attracted sharks, which circled around our piece of land for years.

The lawyers were pleased. The charges floated around in the sea. They had great expectations from them. I suggested that we should introduce our own currency and get loans from banks. That's how the entire world would know we existed. We'd be in debt. It was about time we did something. We couldn't agree on what we would do with the money, though it was worth having, filling our pockets, opening secret accounts, accumulating, thinking of our children's future. We put requests for bank loans inside bottles. We mortgaged our part of the land. We drew a map of the world. A child with its eyes closed had to mark our location. He stabbed the pencil into a piece of land and we moved his hand towards the sea. The pencil placed us somewhere in the middle of the ocean. I didn't think it was right.