

# Until You Get Dizzy by Ondřej Štindl

*Translated by Mike Baugh*

## Chapter 1

In the darkness before him there was a door somewhere. He could easily reach it, but Johan saw no reason to – he sat still, as if he were encased in black pitch. A king in a stall on a porcelain throne buried deep within the bowels of the news building. Silent and forgotten, only the building itself knew he was there. And it made it clear that he was spending far more time there than he'd need just to take a shit: it had counted down the seconds and... lights off. There was no reason for Johan to be there anymore. He was just sitting on the toilet, clearing his mind instead of his guts. We can't support this. We won't tolerate it. So... click. Darkness. Get a grip, get out.

Johan refuses. He sits stubbornly. What a rebel. The embodiment of defiance – toilet paper clutched between his fingers in case he needed it. A time-out. He's not budging from his spot between the pipes and the tiles that the cleaners attend to so hygienically, charting, recording their work. Oh, what a good job you've done, Irina – I could have a picnic on this floor, complete with red wine and curvy girls with their clothes off. You could join in, Irina. Johan chuckles. Then the silence returns. The darkness too. A far-off yellow flicker, the smell of bleach, the squelch of pipes. In the end no one needs all those sensations. In a moment or two his legs will go numb and Johan will start to levitate. Advanced zen. Out of sight and out of mind, he will see nothing, think of nothing; none of the problems beyond this door will penetrate his asylum. Let go. What else? Johan isn't the sort to tackle problems head on and fuck things up worse. He'll wait it out. Evade the enemy like General Kutuzov. Retreat from those bastards, harass them until they lose the energy to keep up, until they give up and disappear, swallowed by the Russian winter. Until the whole world disappears, and all that remains is Johan's stall. His escape pod, floating silently through space with him inside. In suspended animation his ass might cramp but his head drifts weightlessly.

A pleasant moment. But just a moment, as always. Something changes and the zen becomes deadly angst. Quick as a meteor shooting off course because of some raw alien gravity, Johan returns to his body on the toilet bowl. A smoldering meteor rocketing through

the atmosphere. And it crashes right into the hide-out that felt so safe moments ago. Now it's a trap. Or a cell. He's in solitary. The gas chamber. Fuck. And there's only one way out. The sounds around him grow more intense – everything grows more intense. The A/C roars, the floor solidifies beneath his feet. His eyes stare into the black. His ears prick up. He hears droplets falling. And something else. Something familiar yet alien, something terrible is drawing closer. You can't picture it and you sure don't want to see it. But that doesn't matter. You don't matter. Your muscles tense, but you have no control over them, you're frozen to this porcelain bowl. Inert. Powerless, as usual. Worse than usual. You're a loser, the most pathetic there is. And here, in the least dignified spot, something is coming to get you.

It's been circling you for a while. An idea entered your mind. You knew you had to keep it out or it would burn through your eyes and infest your brain. You can't even admit to knowing about it. You tried, you really did, but apparently it wasn't enough. Because something sprang from that thought and grew. And now here it is. Something monstrous. Not a concept running through your mind, but some monster you can reach out and touch, that can touch you if it wants – it has terrible wants and desires. It's attached itself to you. It has time, and so will you. This creature assembled from all the worst bits, as real as your stiff bones and aching joints, as real as the wheezing weakness of the middle-aged man with his pants down. It's here – and you're a blind man in a blind alley.

He tries to laugh. Consumed by absurd terror in an absurd situation, you laugh – right? Ha ha... but it sounds like a frightened sob. Bouncing off the walls of the stall, it leaves behind an oddly long echo, which is interrupted by another sound. It's barely audible, but it penetrates the room and fills it. The rasp of a dying evil, an exhausted and starving beast. Lolling tongue and snagged teeth. It needs nourishment. It thirsts. It will latch onto you and drink from you in the dark. The dark is its element – it relies on scent and it will smell your fear. So come on, Johan, bare your throat. Let yourself be ripped apart in pain, unwilling to scream – just languish in its slow chops.

The sound of impact, then a couple seconds of silence. Johan holds his breath and an ounce of hope grows inside him. Come on, that fucker isn't backing off – running off for a pat on the head and some fucking treat. But listen. Silence. It's gone, Johan. It was never really here. You're going nuts again. But Johan isn't going to let himself get fooled again. He knows what's what. Certainty runs through his veins, and he knows... It's here. And it knows about him. He hears heavy steps, the awful scrape of claws on the tiles. Panting. He can almost make out words, a curse in some ancient tongue, chanted mechanically, the meaning forgotten. He recognizes the voice. It's the beast's and it's his own.

The beast speaks to him in the voice of some future Johan. Similarly lost and tired from being on the move with no destination, ragged from the emptiness inside, as if it had forgotten all else and all that remains is the compulsion go on, to slake its hunger, to fill what cannot be filled. More silence. It sniffs. It smells him because he smells it. The faint and intoxicating reek of the smoldering ages, the stink of a future that will not end. Alone and in the dark, Johan tries to move his stiff lips, to show he has something to say in his final moments. More absurdity, but what else is there to do?

In a split second everything returned to normal. A slam of the door, human voices, a sliver of light beneath the stall-door. Johan shivered in shame on the toilet. The fear was driving him crazy again. He let it take over, take control and go through the motions, play all the greatest hits. The terror – it was persistent and intrusive, always there and always ready. The terror of what was to come and what might be asked of him. That he have a plan and be working towards it. Working on it. If only I hadn't acted cool at the doctor's office and taken that anti-depressant prescription. He gave another chuckle, trying to show that he's above it. Weird – this time it worked. The moment of terror in the stall began to quickly fade from Johan's mind, drifting off to be filed away among images from his nightmares. Oppressive, but without meaning or consequence.

He stood up and clumsily buttoned his trousers, his fingers stiff, the pins and needles in his legs so bad he could barely stand. He opened the door and squinted in the light. Příklad and Lackovič were standing at the urinals. Although he'd never admit it out loud, Johan was happy to see those two idiots. He shuffled past them, limping a little, but he looked normal. Příklad turned to him, an eager smile appearing automatically. He can't help it, he always has to try so hard, you can smell it on him a hundred yards away – he could bathe in cologne and it still wouldn't help.

"This is fucked up, right?"

Johan replied with a vague sound. He wanted to disappear as quick as possible.

"You all right, Honza?"

Johan hated that nickname. He watched in disgust as Příklad's ears turned red, probably embarrassed at his gaffe. Everyone knows Johan isn't all right. He can't be. It's all over for him here. It can't be fun at his age. The young bucks, those of us lucky enough to stay on, we can't imagine what it must be like. Příklad gave Johan a look of both pity and relief – the relief of someone whom disaster had passed by. The powers that be have found him

necessary, at least more than Johan, so even during these hard times he's managed to hang on. Příklad is made for hard times, he won't even notice that things are bad. It makes things easier for him. Johan shuddered with rage – he was back in his element. What if he grabbed Příklad by his ear and, you know, just slammed his head into the sink a little? Maybe the moron would have an epiphany. Yeah, no.

“Yeah, it's fucked up.”

He stepped forward, more confidently now, and slammed the door behind him. When he caught sight of his co-workers in the newsroom, he remembered what else was fucked up today. Right. We elected a President.

They were all lined up around the television, looking serious. Under the fluorescent light, their faces had an unhealthy glow. Young faces mostly, but none of them struck Johan as particularly attractive. He snorted. Pretty soon he wouldn't be seeing them anymore, and a little after that he probably wouldn't be able to put a name to any of their faces. Well, maybe Marty – the star, the man of the future. That motherfucker Johan'll remember. He had the confidence and the ignorance to spit out opinion pieces with the rate and grace of an AK-47. Each one stupider than the last, but all were incendiary, sure they often contradicted each other, but it's not like anyone would ask him what had set him off yesterday. And his audience was pleased to be constantly supplied with reasons to be furious. So everyone was happy. Except Johan, and sometimes he showed it, saying it was a matter of professional pride – pausing significantly before saying it. All his co-workers heard was the bitterness of an obsolete pain in the ass who just wanted to pontificate his way to retirement.

Yeah, well, Johan wasn't exactly popular among his colleagues. Oddly enough, they weren't dying to listen to him explain that they write like swine. Which just made him enjoy it more. Maybe he let himself get carried away sometimes – that was a mistake. Maybe a fatal one. Because Johan's boss started to see him as a martyr and said things to that effect. What did Johan do? Nothing. He didn't pay it any mind, he didn't try to fix it, he didn't fight it, and now he's surprised. His cup did runneth over, and when time ran out, the empire struck back. It just came down to all the platitudes the boss loved so much. He invited Johan into his office and tried to be respectful. Still, it was perfectly clear what he was saying. You survived, sir. You thought your spot here was guaranteed, but you're going to have to pack your ass up and go. Because you didn't appreciate what you had. You thought that well-known name of yours would keep you safe. But was your name ever that big of a deal? I mean, you think so, but does anyone else? Look, we don't need to get into all this, it doesn't matter now. You should have been a little more grateful. You got to edit articles by your more adaptable

colleagues, you got to write something occasionally. Sure the readership is nothing to brag about – don't talk to me about the readership. Times are tough, I keep saying that. And it's especially complicated for us when the owner of the paper has a seat in the government. The knives are really out for us now. But we also have it pretty good. Since the owner is a politician, he's not going to let us go under, I mean, his money will keep us afloat. But he's not just giving it away – he isn't stupid. The world is changing and you're not changing with it. Complex times call for a new approach. One you don't have. Just look at Marty – you could learn a lot from him, but you just don't want to. You don't want to learn anything new.

This was gospel. Johan did not, in fact, want to learn. He was white with rage. He hated himself. That he'd let it come to this. That he'd been called into the office instead of storming in there himself. He hadn't sworn, hadn't slammed the door behind him, hadn't walked out laughing past the puzzled faces of his young co-workers, winning their admiration as they mourn the loss of someone so valuable. No one'll forget this anytime soon... See, that's how you do it... They don't make them like that anymore, do they? Fuck! No, he clung on to the very last moment, right until he got sacked. He signed all the paperwork, meek as a lamb. On the official forms, he wasn't even Johan. Just plain old Jan. Jan Souček. Mr. Souček will have to figure out something new for himself. Think up a new future. Naturally, he didn't think anything up, he just came in and got in the way. It was obvious that Johan's boss was counting down the days until he wouldn't bump into him at work anymore. Don't forget, you have vacation days... Yeah, he'll take one tomorrow, but he'll stick around today pretending he has a reason to be there. How pathetic.

The President's team was all lined up on TV. All these ghastly figures, grinning from ear to ear. A masquerade of political bottom-feeders, shady businessmen, and a pop-star whose job was to provide entertainment and ceremonially butcher the national anthem. They were getting wet from the proximity to power. And here comes that power, shuffling before them, wheezing triumphantly. The President had arrived. A murmur went through the newsroom. They didn't like him; he repulsed them. Marty cracked a snide joke. The women laughed. He had a way with them. The President gave the First Lady a big wet kiss, and Marty exaggeratedly covered his eyes to show his indignation – and to show off the new bar-code tattoo on his forearm: the *pièce de résistance* of his carefully cultivated image. Yeah, well, that's what happens when an idiotic conformist gets the bright idea to reinvent himself. Then he stopped showing off, and the girls got quiet, their attention drawn back to the star of election day, the darling of this country for years to come.

Johan watched the President too, breathing in his colleagues' disapproval – it made him feel closer to the man on the screen. Johan hated him, but in that moment he hated them more.

He took pleasure in their impotent anger. The fear in their bitter remarks. They really were afraid of the old man on the screen. Johan perceived it with clinical interest, yet he shared their fear. He felt that something serious was happening at that moment, something was changing, shifting. The city beyond the glass walls of the newsroom still looked the same, yet it seemed smaller, slumped, the air heavier. The atmosphere itself smothering everyone and everything. Tough times his boss had said. Absolutely. Tough to breathe even.

Even the President seemed affected by it. It looked like something was pulling him to the ground, bowing his bones. The drunk crone went and slapped herself, Rosanov wrote in his diary after the Russian Revolution. Apocalyptic images flashed before his eyes, cannon blasts rang out in his ears, along with words on the New Creation, on fulfilling the laws of history, on the ultimate liberation of humanity. But history breathed right into his face, and all he could smell was rotten food and liters of moonshine, a poisonous stench that would someday kill him. History they call it. Yeah, right. The drunk crone dragged herself along the outskirts and kept smacking herself – that's inevitable too. And now she's headed this way, just quivering to set us free. And Johan is bogged down in the muck, and everyone else is too, terrified, outraged, incessantly whining like it might make a difference. And in the distance that hag is drawing closer. She hasn't stumbled, hasn't fallen, she's using her last bit of strength. Her hobnailed boots are starting to slide in the mud, she's gasping, her head is spinning, and the metal in that internal gyroscope that keeps a person upright, that keeps someone from vomiting from nausea, is cold and shrinking. Her steps are getting shorter, her stride more irregular, the rumble in her guts more pronounced, she tastes acid in her mouth, and she's seeing stars. She will not hold. [MB1] Soon the crone will stumble, the crone will drop. The awful hag will fall on top of them all. In the puddle, bubbles will rise from her mouth; struggling with her arms and legs, she'll make mud-angels, like a happy little kid in fresh snow. And she'll push every single one of them down to the bottom.

The victor swayed behind the podium and slurred his words. Johan felt like the President was changing forms, shapeshifting. Like something were bursting out from within him – some other being, ancient and barely alive, bulging his cheeks out and emitting crude sounds from his mouth, cutting off his sight. Something about the scene seemed familiar to Johan, he recognized the voice punctuated by rasping gasps, the shuffling unsteadiness. This was what moments ago he had heard and felt in the darkness. The winner must have had the same encounter. But the beast must have found him, must have devoured him, and the President was using his last bit of strength to peek out of the beast's gaping maw, if only for a second. Clutch onto the only rope in reach and claw his way out, find a reference point, and hold onto it to keep from sliding deep down the monster's throat. Seize the hate – the

only thing that leads back into this world. Make the victory joyless. Feed on the losers' disappointment, spite them with tired laughter and draw some strength from it. Don't let yourself get smothered by that hag, become her, splash down with her, finish the job yourself.

The hurt people in the newsroom stared daggers at the screen. The longer the jokes went on, the flatter they landed. Johan didn't make any jokes; Johan didn't laugh.[MB2] He envied the President his victory, his freedom to insult everyone, the way he forced everyone to just take it, his triumphal disgust, to let themselves to be governed by it. Getting in their heads, imprinting himself in their minds, leaving behind the indelible mark of his power. He may act desperate and ridiculous, but the desperation and frothing ridiculousness of everyone else, everyone down below, more than compensates.

There wouldn't be any triumph like that for Johan. No second coming, no fanfare, no satisfaction for Johan. Just pack up and go – rent some tiny office, write something there, just as a formality, so he can tell people he's writing. What people? Come on, Johan, think it through a little. Who cares that you're contributing, doing your part and making verbal mud pies to pass around, that you still see some sense in it. As if there were ever a point. Do you even want that? Johan didn't know. He just knew something was at hand. A new life was waiting for him, starting tomorrow, the beginning of his vacation. A new life... more like no life, and just as eternal. That black water sloshes up towards Johan's feet. He'll dip his toes in soon enough.

The President's press conference ends, someone mutes the TV. On the screen, the victor is quietly ensconced in his chair, nodding regally to his filthy court. He is back to himself again, an old man held together with twine and daily infusions of power. The people in the newsroom go off to their desks. They have their work to do, and suddenly they look competent and important. Johan tries his best to do the same thing, but nothing much comes of it. He stands in the middle of the newsroom, like an idiot – then hangs his head and goes to sit down. He tries to look like he's studying the news. It just tells everyone everything they already know. Lenka brings around a coffee cake she had baked at home, offering it to everyone, including Johan. He took a piece.

“Wouldn't want to be rude.”

Could he have said anything more retarded[RMB3]? He can still fix it with a genteel joke, but he's already taken a bite and his mouth is and full of cinnamon crumble. So he just gawks at her sweet face in silence. He attempts to swallow, still staring dumbly. His

shoulders hunch and shake as he tries to suppress a coughing fit. He is choking – and still he keeps staring. He is overcome with a surge of emotion. She remembered him. Lenka! Mousy little Lenka who is too polite to leave and too polite to give him the Heimlich. Please don't go. He wants to throw his arms around her, burrow into her, go beddy-bye until it's all over. He pulls himself together; Lenka gives a nervous smile and takes a few steps back. Around Johan things are buzzing. His colleagues are working the phones, getting comments from politicians, functionaries, and other talking heads. Jotting them down word-for-word and checking for accuracy, figuring out their leads. This is the world he knows. Senator Son of a Bitch says... Madam Motherfucker warns... Dickhead on the Street disagrees... General Cunt has issued a press release... The editorial hive. Insects working on insect problems. Coffee might help.

In the breakroom, a few guys were trying to drink the shock of the election away. They poured him a shot. Johan was happy about that.

"Well, best of luck, Johan."

He clinked glasses with everyone and felt a bit warmer. He was glowing like a stove when he sat back down at his desk. He wasn't going to put in much work today – I mean, nobody wants any from him. So, let's go for a dip. Dive right into the swamp, that delightful distraction, his addiction. Go to the paper's webpage, scroll down past the articles, and stare at the comment section – just step directly into the stream of idiocy. Let it splash all over him. He reads the sentences in a whiny voice, imagining the dumb faces behind the thoughts. Soon he'll be one of them, vapid and frothing, thinking only in exclamation marks.

A swarm of cartoon crickets chirped in Johan's head; it gave him a moment joy. They really are as dumb as I always suspected. He consumed their lines as greedily as any junkie. Each voice chiming in was accompanied by a little face, but with their uniformly gaping mouths – oval windows into empty darkness – they all began to merge into each other. Johan sparred with them, shadow-boxed a little – he was the referee too, so he always won. One K.O. after another. "Thanks for another article by another journalist who doesn't know what he's talking about." You're welcome, asshole! "Could you please lay off the *ad hominem* attacks?" Somebody with a blowtorch should teach you what *ad hominem* really means, but by then it'll be too late, asshole. "Is it just me, or is this article a little shallow? I couldn't have gotten away with this in high school." You wouldn't know shallow if it bit you in the ass – but this makes you feel important, doesn't it? The little faces responded with nothing but silence. Faced with the champ's brilliance, what could they do? They slunk back to their corner, to

their holes, humiliated and acknowledging their obvious loss. Johan's mind was racing, mechanically, joylessly. There was no way to stop it, so he may as well kill some time.

Johan felt obligated to check the comments under his last article. It wasn't worth the effort – Johan didn't have much energy left. As usual, there wasn't much of a response. He took it as proof of their quality that they didn't get that kind of attention. They were too sophisticated. Those little avatars need to be emboldened by the mob, to bump up against each other and shout one after the other. They need a magnet, and Johan just didn't have that type of pull. He just doesn't have the energy to get in pointless arguments that lead nowhere. To labor away, constructing solid arguments, just to toss them before the juggernaut of manufactured response. Just smile and swear inside. Just that, nothing more. He isn't Marty who was perfectly at home among all the little thumbnail faces. He could argue with them for hours, practically rewriting the internet, or at least a series of virtual billboards telling everyone coasting down the information superhighway that Marty was always right. Yes indeed. Johan gave a cursory glance at the few invectives under his article. Nothing since the day it was published. Now what? Actually, this might be a fitting end. The right closer. He could disappear practically unnoticed. And that's how it should be – he didn't really belong in this place, he was a square peg in this round hole... Shoot, even Johan knew these were just excuses. Maybe he should stop flattering himself that he was too deep for these primitive times. Maybe he was just too boring.

Then he noticed that there actually was a new comment. It had been posted by Leo Bohemicus 22 – a screenname that popped up pretty often on their server. Leo Bohemicus 22. The pretentious names these morons come up with to let everyone know they put some thought into it. According to the timestamp, the comment was uploaded a few minutes earlier. Probably while everyone was still watching the President. Leo Bohemicus 22 should have been having his own victory party, he'd been spilling enough vitriol over the President's opposition during the last few weeks. It had worked out beautifully for him. So time to crack open the Stolichnaya and do a little dance in front of the TV? Nope, there was no stopping him – Leo Bohemicus 22 had to hunt and peck and fire off his short and to-the-point missive:

“Drain the swamp! Time to flush yourself down the shitter!”

“Go to hell!” Johan said out loud.

His colleague at the next desk over, gave him a startled glance before concluding that he must have misunderstood, then kept on working. Johan kept on too. He kept on staring into space and his lips kept quivering in anger. Could this anonymous idiot, squandering his life

behind a filthy computer screen, really affect him this much with just one phrase? Time to flush yourself down the shitter. With the studied sneer of a cynic. Time to flush yourself down the shitter. You in those 5,000-crown shoes that you agonized over – flush yourself down the shitter. You with that intellectual book lying on your coffee table, you know, in case you need to impress a visitor – flush yourself. She ain't coming. You with the funny anecdotes for every occasion – flush. Yeah, you, the sad man who knows he'll always be alone. You who won't make it to retirement. You who's so good at formulating ideas that nobody cares about, that not even you care about. You with the graying hair, or at least what's left of it, what you used to take pride in, and thought, well, maybe I'll dye it. You should have. I bet it would have been dashing. Like a cliff diver against the rocks. FLUSH. YOURSELF. DOWN. THE. SHITTER.

He got up quickly and went over to the window, his ears ringing from the triumphant roar of Leo Bohemicus 22 reveling in revealing what a nobody Johan is. It had gotten dark outside. Now, in addition to the heavy air was the biting cold of a winter evening. Lights shone in the windows. Below a couple people hurried along the sidewalk, a line of cars crept past them towards the stoplight. Red, yellow, green. Green, yellow, red. Left. Right. Johan lost himself in it all. How could he have fooled himself into thinking that he could make some lasting impression among all the endless inertia. With what? It hadn't all gone to hell just now, he'd been a lamb to the slaughter from the start. The world wasn't going to let him leave his mark, it was going to keep on going with or without Johan. Kibitz over there, play on the sidelines with the other invalids, act like what you do matters. Or you could just, you know, flush yourself down the shitter.

From behind he heard a purr... the beast. It soothed him now; in it he recognized some venomous kindness. Perhaps he'd been wrong about it, maybe this creature isn't out to get him. The only one who isn't. Maybe it has something to offer him, the same thing it gave the winner on TV. Satisfaction. Power. Well, a bit of it anyway. He felt its breath on the back of his neck, the hairs on the back of his neck stood straight up. Johan once again felt certitude coursing through his veins; this time it strengthened him and allowed him to focus. You can't redirect the highway everyone flies down any more than you can conduct the constant refrain of idiots into a symphony. But you can sing your song to one of them. Show that fucker that words have consequences. Yeah, I might have to flush myself down the shitter someday – but you, Leo, you don't even realize you're already there. And you should know it, boyo. Someone should help you, force you to stare into the abyss until it makes your head spin. Until you beg. Until you realize that without the shield of anonymity you aren't so tough anymore. You just chased the wrong fucking car, wiener dog. You just pissed on the wrong

fucking tree. Yeah, you're just one piece of garbage floating along the stream of insults, injustice, and idiocy. Just a plastic straw in an ocean garbage patch. But for me, you're the last straw, and now you're shit out of luck.

The hatred invigorated Johan. In it he had found his rope. This would give him a reason to live. One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind. Ok, maybe not quite that big, but for Johan it was something. He's got the time. With the amount of time he has in front of him, he's going to drown in it sooner or later. May as well have some fun. At least for a bit. Johan was shocked to realize this was really going to happen, that for once in his life he was going to do something for real.