

Mariam Petrosyan

The House That . . .

Book One

The House stood on the edge of town. In a place called the Comb. Long apartment buildings had been built here in toothy rows with intervals of square concrete courtyards, intended as play spaces for the young Combers. White teeth, full of eyes, and all resembling one another. Where they hadn't popped up yet was all fenced-in wasteland. The dust of razed houses, a great nest for rats and stray dogs, much more interesting to the young Combers than their own yards—the spaces between the notches.

On the no-man's land between the two worlds—the notches and the wasteland—is the House. The Gray House, they call it. It's old and closer in age to the wasteland—the burial grounds of its contemporaries. It's lonely. Other buildings give it a wide berth. And it doesn't look like a tooth because it doesn't stretch upward. It has three floors, the front faces the highway, and it has a courtyard, too, a long rectangle surrounded by a net. Once upon a time it was white. Now it's gray from the front and yellow from the inside, the courtyard side. It bristles with antennae and cables. Its whitewash sprinkles down and its cracks weep. Garages and annexes hug it close, garbage barrels and dog houses. That's all from the courtyard. The façade is bare and gloomy, just as it should be.

No one likes the Gray House. No one would say so out loud, but the inhabitants of the Comb would have preferred not having it next door. They would have preferred it didn't exist at all.

The Smoking Room

Certain Advantages to Athletic Footwear

It all started with my red sneakers. I found them at the bottom of my bag. My bag for holding my personal belongings. That's what it's called. Only it never has any personal belongings in it. A couple of waffle-cloth towels, a stack of handkerchiefs, and my dirty linen. Just like everyone else. All the bags, towels, socks, and underpants are identical, so no one's feelings get hurt.

I just happened to find the sneakers. I'd forgotten about them long ago. An old present, I can't remember whose, from my old life. Bright red, wrapped in a shiny package, with a striped sole, like a lollipop. I tore open the packaging, stroked the fiery laces, and quickly changed shoes. My feet looked strange. Uncustomarily walkable. I even forgot they couldn't be.

That same day after classes Gene called me aside and said he didn't like the way I was acting. He pointed at the sneakers and told me to take them off. There was no point asking why I needed to, but I did.

"They attract attention," he said.

For Gene that's normal, that kind of explanation.

"So what?" I objected. "Let them."

He didn't say anything. He straightened the cord on his glasses, smiled, and rode away. That evening I received a note. Just two words: "Footwear discussion." And I realized I was trapped.

I cut myself shaving the fuzz from my cheeks and I broke the toothbrush glass. The reflection looking at me from the mirror looked scared to death, but in fact I wasn't afraid. I didn't care. I didn't even take off the sneakers.

The meeting was held in the classroom. They'd written on the board: "Footwear discussion." An idiotic farce. Only I didn't feel like laughing because I was sick and tired of these games, these oh-so-clever players, and the whole place. I was so tired of it I'd almost forgotten how to laugh.

They sat me down by the board so that everyone could see the subject of discussion. To my left at the table sat Gene, sucking on his pen. To my right Long Whale was sending a little ball clattering through a plastic maze until he got a censorious look.

"Who wants to say something?" Gene asked.

Lots did. Nearly everyone. They gave Vulture the floor first. To get it over with probably.

It turned out that anyone who tried to attract attention was a conceited and bad person capable of anything at all and imagining God knows what about himself, while in fact he was a zero plain and simple. A crow in peacock's feathers. Or something like that. Vulture told a tale about a crow. Then recited a poem about a donkey who fell into a lake and died out of his own foolishness. Then he got ready to sing something on the same subject, but no one was listening to him anymore. Vulture puffed out his cheeks, burst into tears, and fell silent. They thanked him, handed him a handkerchief, screened him off with a textbook, and gave the floor to Ghoul.

Ghoul spoke barely audible, without raising his head, as if he were reading off the table top, though there was nothing there but scratched plastic. His white forelock fell into his eye and he straightened it with a licked fingertip. His finger stuck the colorless lock to his forehead, but as soon as he let go it fell back into his eye immediately.

You had to have nerves of steel to look at Ghoul. That's why I didn't. All that was left of my nerves was in shreds anyway, so why rip at them one more time?

"What is the defendant trying to attract attention to? His footwear, you'd think. In fact, that's not true. He's using his footwear to attract attention to his legs. That is, he's publicizing his disability and making the people around him look at them. By doing that it's like he's emphasizing our common misfortune without taking us or our opinion into account. In a sense, he's making fun of us in his own way."

Ghoul kept worrying that mess. His finger kept running up and down the bridge of his nose and the whites of his eyes filled with blood. I knew everything he might say by heart—everything people usually said in these instances. The words that crept out of Ghoul were just as colorless and dried out as him, his finger, and the nail on his finger.

Then Top spoke. More or less the same thing and just as tediously. Then Snout, Snort, and Snuff. The triplets with the piglet nicknames. They all spoke at once, interrupting each other, and I looked at them with great interest because I hadn't expected them to participate in the discussion. They must not have liked the way I looked at them, or they were embarrassed, but that only made it worse. They laid into to me more than anyone else. They brought up my habit of dog-earing the pages of books (I'm not the only one who reads the books, after all), the fact that I didn't turn in my handkerchiefs to the common fund (though I'm not the only one with a nose), that I sit in the tub longer than I'm supposed to (twenty-eight minutes instead of twenty), I bump my wheels when I ride around (and you have to protect your wheels!), and finally, they got to the main point, to the fact that I smoke. If you could call someone who smokes one cigarette over the course of three days a smoker.

They asked me whether I knew how nicotine harms the health of the people around me. Of course I did. I could easily lecture on the subject because for six months they had been feeding me enough brochures, articles, and statements about the harm of smoking to last someone twenty years and still have some left. They talked about lung cancer.

Then separately about cancer. Then about cardiovascular diseases. Then about some other hellish diseases, but I wasn't listening anymore. They could have gone on for hours. In fear and trembling. Like demented old gossipers who condemn murders and accidents while drooling

with ecstasy. Neat little boys in clean shirts, grave and positive. Their faces hid the faces of old men eaten away by poison. This wasn't the first time I'd had their number and I wasn't surprised anymore. I was so sick of them that I felt like poisoning them all with nicotine at once and each individually. Unfortunately, that was impossible. I smoked my sad three-day cigarette in secret in the teacher's bathroom. Not even ours, for heaven's sake! If I did poison anyone, then it was just the cockroaches, because no one but cockroaches ever went there.

They stoned me for half an hour, then Gene rapped on the table with his pen and declared the discussion of my footwear over. By that time I'd forgotten what they were discussing, so the reminder was very much to the point. The group stared at my unfortunate sneakers. They condemned them silently, despising with dignity my infantileness and bad taste. Fifteen pairs of soft brown moccasins versus one of bright red sneakers. The longer they looked at them, the more brightly they burned. By the end, everything in the classroom had turned gray except for them. I on the other hand admired them when they gave me the floor.

And . . . even I don't know how it happened, but for the first time in my life I told the Pheasants everything I thought of them. I said that this whole classroom and everyone in it wasn't worth one pair of such fabulous sneakers. That's what I told them all. Even poor frightened Top, even the piglet brothers. In fact, at that moment that was how I felt because I can't stand traitors and cowards, and that's exactly what they were, traitors and cowards. They probably thought I'd lost my mind from fright. Only Gene wasn't surprised.

"Now you've told us what you thought." He wiped his glasses and pointed at my sneakers. "They weren't the problem. You were."

Whale was waiting by the board, chalk in hand. But the discussion was over. I sat there with my eyes closed until they dispersed. And I sat there like that for a long time, alone. The weariness quietly drained out of me. I had done something out of the ordinary. I had behaved like a normal person. I had finally stopped trying to adapt to others. And no matter how this all ended, I knew I would never regret it.

I raised my head and looked at the board. "Footwear discussion. Point one: conceit. Point two: drawing attention to our common disability. Point three: mocking attitude toward the collective. Point four: smoking."

Whale had managed to make at least two mistakes in every word. He could barely write, on the other hand he was the only one of all of us who could walk, which was why during meetings they always put him at the board.

For the next two days no one talked to me. They pretended I didn't exist. I was like a ghost. On the third day of this life, Homer told me I'd been called in to see the director.

The first group's teacher looked approximately the way the whole group would have looked if they hadn't for some reason been dressed up like little boys. Like the old lady sitting inside each of them waiting for the next funeral. Decay, gold teeth, and weak little eyes. Although with him, at least, it was all in plain view.

"It's got as far as the director," he said, looking like a doctor telling his patient he was incurable. Then he sighed for a while and shook his head, looking at me with pity until I started feeling like a not very fresh corpse. Having achieved the desired effect, Homer moved away, snuffing and sighing. I had been in the director's office twice. When I just arrived, and when I had to hand in a drawing for an exhibit with the idiotic title "My Love for the World." I christened the result of my three-day labor "The Tree of Life." By taking just a couple of steps back from the drawing you could see that the "tree" was strewn with skulls and swarms of worms. Close up they looked like some kind of pears amid twisting branches. As I had expected, no one at the House noticed a thing. They probably only appreciated my dark humor at the exhibit, but what they thought of it I never found out. Basically, it wasn't even a joke. Everything I could say about my love for the world looked approximately the way I had depicted it.

In my first visit to the director the little worms in world love were already crawling about, though matters hadn't reached the point of skulls. The office was clean but untended sort of. You could see this wasn't the House's center, not the place everything flowed to and from, just a guard post. In the corner on the couch sat a rag doll in a striped dress with ruffles. The size of a three-year-old child. Pinned-up notes stuck out everywhere. On the walls, the curtains, the back of the couch. But what shook me most was the enormous fire extinguisher above the director's desk. It held my attention to such an extent that I never did get a good look at the director himself. Sitting under an antique fire dirigible, he must have counted on something like that. All you could think about was that thing not falling and killing him right in front of you. I had no strength left for anything else. Not a bad way of hiding, in plain sight.

The director spoke about school policy. About school ways. "We prefer sculpting from finished

material." Something like that. I wasn't listening too closely. Because of the fire extinguisher. It was making me awfully nervous. And all the rest, too. The doll and the notes. "Does he have amnesia?" I thought. "So he's constantly reminding himself of everything. When I leave he'll write a report about me and pin it in some visible place."

Then I did listen to him a little. He'd gotten as far as the graduates. Those "who had achieved much." These people were in the glassed photographs on either side of the fire extinguisher. Ordinary resentful individuals, despite their awards and certificates, who were sadly putting up a show for the camera. To be honest, photographs of cemeteries would have been more fun to look at. Considering the school's specific nature, they ought to have hung at least one like that next to the others.

This time it was all different. The fire extinguisher was still there, and the white notes on every accessible and inaccessible surface, but something had changed in the office's atmosphere. Something not connected with the furniture and the vanished doll. A Shark was sitting under the fire extinguisher and digging through his papers. Lean, blotchy, and shaggy, like a lichen-covered stump. His eyebrows were blotchy, too, gray, and shaggy, and hung in his eyes like dirty icicles. There was a folder in front of him. Among the pages I saw my photograph and realized the whole folder was stuffed with me. My assessments, records, and photos from various years—the part of a person you can transfer to paper. I lay partially in front of him, between the covers of a manila folder, and sat partially opposite. If there was any difference between the two-dimensional me that lay there and the three-dimensional me that was sitting, it was the red sneakers. These were no longer footwear. These were me. My audacity and my insanity, which had faded a little in the last three days but was still as bright and red as fire.

"Something very serious must have happened if the fellows don't want to put up with you anymore." Shark showed me some piece of paper. "I have a letter here. With fifteen signatures. What am I supposed to think?"

I shrugged. Let him think what he liked. That's all I needed, to have to explain to him about the sneakers. That would have been just ridiculous.

"Your group is a model group."

The blotchy icicles hung down, covering his eyes.

"I like that group very much. And I can't turn down a request from those fellows, especially since this is the first time they've ever asked. What do you say to that?"

I felt like saying I'd be happy to be rid of them, too, but I held my tongue. What did my opinion matter against the fifteen model shark favorites? Instead of protests and explanations, I stealthily examined my surroundings. The photographs of "those who had achieved much" were even more offensive than I'd remembered. I imagined among them my own aged and flabby face, and in the background the pictures, one more nightmarish than the next. "He was called young Giger when he was thirteen." Now I felt like throwing up.

"Well?" Shark waved his five fingers spread wide in front of my eyes. "Have you fallen asleep? I'm asking, do you understand that I have to take certain measures?"

"Yes, of course. I'm very sorry."

That was the only thing that came to mind.

"I'm very sorry, too," Shark grumbled, slapping the folder shut. "Very sorry you're such a blockhead and managed to spoil your relations with the whole group simultaneously. Now you can wheel back and collect your things."

Inside me something was jumping up and down, like a rubber ball.

"Where am I being sent?"

My fright gave him tremendous satisfaction. He savored it a little, moving various objects

around, thoughtfully studying his nails, lighting a cigarette. . . .

"What do you think? To another group, naturally."

I smiled.

"Are you joking? "

It would be easier to put a live horse into any group in the House than it would someone from the first. A horse would have a better chance of fitting in. Despite his size and manure. I should have held my tongue, but I couldn't stop myself.

"No one will take me. I'm a Pheasant."

Shark really got angry. He spit out his cigarette and banged his fist on the desk.

"I've had enough of your games! Enough! What's this Pheasant? Who came up with all this drivel?"

The papers moved aside under his fist and the butt fell next to the ashtray.

I took such fright that I yelled even louder in response.

"I don't know why they call us that! Ask whoever came up with it! Do you think it's easy to say these idiotic nicknames? Do you think anyone explained to me what they mean?"

"Don't you dare raise your voice in my office!" he howled, looming over me across his desk.

I glanced quickly at the fire extinguisher and immediately looked away.

It was holding.

Shark followed my glance and suddenly whispered confidingly,

"It won't fall off. There are studs like this there"—and he showed me his disgusting finger.

This was so unexpected, I was puzzled. I sat there goggling at him like an idiot. And Shark grinned. And all of a sudden I realized he was just making fun of me. I hadn't lived at the House for that long and I still had a hard time calling some people by their nicknames. You have to have no complexes of any kind to call someone Squelch or Weewee to his face without feeling like a total pig. Now they were telling me all this wasn't welcomed by the director's office. But why? Just to shout at me and see how I react? Now I guessed what had changed in the office since my first visit. Shark himself. He had changed from a forgettable old man hiding under a fire extinguisher into Shark. Into exactly what he was called. Which meant the nicknames weren't given out randomly.

While I was thinking, Shark lit up again.

"I don't want to hear this foolishness in my office again," he warned, snagging the previous butt out of my file. "Do you understand? This was all out of a desire to humiliate the best group. To deprive them of their rightful status."

"You mean you consider the word abusive, too?" I asked. "But why? Why is it worse than just 'Bird'? Or 'Rat'? 'Rats.' I think that sounds a lot more offensive than 'Pheasants.'"

Shark blinked.

"You must know the meaning everyone gives it, right?"

"So," he said gloomily. "Enough. Keep quiet. Now I understand why the first can't stand you."

I looked at my sneakers. Shark had too high an opinion of the pheasants' motives, but I wasn't going to say that. I just asked where they were moving me.

"I still don't know," he lied without blinking an eye. "I have to think about it."

There was a good reason they called him Shark. That's what he was. A blotchy, slant-mouthed fish with eyes that looked in different directions. This fish had grown old long since and probably wasn't very good at hunting if such small prey as me were fun. Of course he knew where I was being sent. He'd even planned to tell me. But changed his mind. And decided to torment me. Only he overdid it, because the group made no difference. Everyone hated the Pheasants. I suddenly realized that I wasn't in such bad shape after all.

I had a chance of getting away from the House. The Pheasants had thrown me out, and the others would do the same. Maybe right away, maybe not, but if I tried as hard as I could, the process would speed up. Ultimately, I had wasted so much time trying to be a real Pheasant! Trying to convince any other group that I didn't suit them would be a lot easier. Especially since they were already sure of it. Maybe even Shark himself thought that. They'd just expelled me in a complicated way. Later they could say I hadn't fit in anywhere they put me. Otherwise they might think ill of the Pheasants. . . .

I calmed down. Watching me carefully, Shark sensed my moment of enlightenment, and he did not like that.

"Get going," he said with revulsion. "Collect your things. Tomorrow at eight thirty I'll come by for you personally."

As I closed the door to the director's office behind me, I already knew tomorrow he'd be late. By an hour or even two. Now I saw right through him and all his little sharky joys.

"The students just call it the House, combining in that spacious word everything our school symbolizes for them—family, comfort, mutual understanding, and care." That's what it said in the booklet I planned to hang on my wall framed in crape once I escaped. Maybe even with some gilt. It was unique, that booklet. Not a word of truth and not a word of lie. I don't know who put it together, but that person was some kind of genius. The building really was called the House. Combining in that thrice-cursed word a ton of everything. It may have been comfortable here for a real Pheasant. The other Pheasants may very well have taken the place of a family for him. You don't come across Pheasants on the outside, so it's hard for me to say, but if they were out there, the House would have been where they headed for with every fiber of their being. It's another matter that they weren't there, and it seems to me it's the House that creates them. Which means that for a while before landing here they were all ordinary people. What a nasty thought.

But I got distracted from the booklet. Its "more than century-long history and carefully guarded traditions" mentioned on the third page are also there. All you have to do is see the House to realize that it started falling apart in the last century. Attesting to this are the bricked-up fireplaces and complex system of flues. In windy weather, the walls howl just as badly as in some medieval castle. A total immersion in history. It's completely right about traditions, too.

The idiocy reigning in the House was obviously dreamed up by several generations of not entirely healthy people. All subsequent generations had to do was "carefully guard and multiply" all this.

"A vast library." There is one. A billiards room, pool, movie theater . . . it's all there, but after each one there's a small "except," after which it turns out that these good things can't be used because it's either nasty or dangerous. The Bander-Logs go to the billiards room. That means the Pheasants can't. The girls study in the library. So again, you can't. The card players gather there on weekends. Which is terrible. You can stop by, you can borrow something to read, but you're not likely to feel like returning. The pool? It's been under repair for a couple of years. "And they'll be repairing it for as long again, the roof leaks," the piglet brothers graciously

enlightened me. For a while they were very sweet. They answered my questions, showed me everything, and explained. They were sure they were living an interesting and full life in an amazing and unusual place. This certainty of theirs just killed me. I was probably wrong to try and root it out. Then we would have been friends to this day. As it was, their graciousness came to an end and so did the friendship that hadn't properly begun. And their three nearly identical signatures appeared on the petition to transfer me. Though they did manage to tell me a lot. Nearly everything I knew about the House, I knew from what they'd said. The Pheasant life was not conducive to learning anything new. It wasn't conducive to much of anything. In the first group everything was scheduled down to the minute. In the dining room, thoughts of food; in the classroom, lessons; at medical exams, health. The collective fears were not to catch cold; the collective dreams, lamb patties for breakfast. Everything the same for everyone and nothing extra. Each movement perfected to the point of being automatic. A day divided into four parts. Breakfast, dinner, and supper. Once a week on Saturdays, the movies. On Mondays, meetings.

Isn't it time for us to . . . ?

I just noticed . . .

Yes, undoubtedly, the classroom needs airing out. This affects us.

You know, those strange rustlings . . . I'm afraid it is rats after all.

Protest antisanitary conditions in rooms leading to the spread of rodents. . . .

And the posters. The never-ending postcards.

In the classroom: "In class think about your lessons. Away with extraneous thoughts!" In the bedroom: "Maintain silence, don't disturb your neighbor." "Noise is a breeding ground for nervous diseases."

Straight rows of iron beds. White cloths on the pillows. "Observe cleanliness! If you want to live in cleanliness, start with your pillowcase!" White nightstands, one for every two beds. "Remember where you put your glass. Mark it with a number." Folded towels on headboards. Also with numbers. Radios on from six to eight. "If you have nothing to do, listen to music." Anyone wanting to play bingo or chess relocates to the classroom.

After they put a television in the classroom, the number of people wanting to relax after lessons in the bedroom dropped drastically. Then they moved the television. Now its blue window glows nicely until nightfall, and for the Pheasants night falls at nine. By then everyone is supposed to be in bed clothed in pajamas and ready to go to sleep. "If you suffer from insomnia, go see the doctor."

In the morning it starts all over. Sitting exercises. Bedmaking. "Help your neighbor get dressed and your neighbor will help you." Washing up. Six basins with rusty rims around the drains. "Wait your turn and don't keep others waiting." Distorted faces in the tile cracks and puddles on the floor. The dining room. Lessons. Dinner break. Lessons. Time to relax. And so on ad infinitum.

I went into the bedroom and discovered I had ceased to be a ghost. The first knew about my transfer, it was obvious from the way they were staring at me. Their curiosity had something indecent to it. As if they were getting ready to eat me up. I could barely stop myself from turning back right there, at the door. Instead, I went over to my bed and stared at the television. A woman in a checked apron was explaining how to make honey cakes. "We take three eggs, separate the whites . . ." It's does you good to watch these kinds of shows before supper. They whet your appetite. By the time the bell rang, I knew how to make honey cakes, what to serve them with, and how to smile while I was doing it. I was the only one enriched with this knowledge. The rest were staring at me and getting ready to serve up a very different dish.

We left the bedroom, as always, by threes, so we would fit in front of the basins without jostling and washed our hands before the meal. I didn't line up with anyone. They noticed that and exchanged meaningful glances.

In the dining room it started to get to me. I caught the Pheasants' looks. Where would they turn when they'd had their fill of looking at me? But they just couldn't get their fill. Or they really didn't know where I was being transferred.

Time stretched into an eternity.

Mashed potatoes and carrot patties. A fork with a bent tine. A server in a white apron, the dishes clattering as she pushed the cart. White walls and deep arched windows. I like the dining room. It's the oldest room in the House. Or rather, it's undergone fewer changes than the others. The walls, windows, and cracked floor tiles were probably the same seventy years ago. And the Dutch stove that takes up a whole wall, faced in glazed tile, with a locked iron door. It's pretty here. The only place where no one comes in with orders, where you can tune out looking at the other groups, imagining yourself not a Pheasant. Once this was my favorite game. Just after I came in. Then it got boring.

Now I suddenly realized that for the first time I could play it for real, and that now this was not a game by any means. Mashed potatoes and carrot patties. Tea and buttered bread. Our table all black and white. White shirts, black trousers. White plates on black trays. Black trays on a white tablecloth. Only the face and hair color varied.

Next to us was the second group's table. The noisiest and most colorful. Dyed Mohawks, glasses and beads. Rumbling headphones on their ears. The Rats were a mix of punks and clowns. They don't put out a tablecloth for them or give them knives. Their forks are chained to the tabletop, and if even one of them doesn't go into hysterics during the course of the day trying to tear off his fork and poke it in his neighbor, the Rats feel the day has not been well spent. All this is circus of the first water. In the second everyone carries a knife or razor, so their horseplay with forks is just their tribute to traditions. A little show cooked up special for the dining room. At the head of the table is Red. Big green glasses, shaved head, a rose on his cheek, and an idiotic grin. The rat leader. The second in my memory already. Their leaders don't hang around long.

Translated from the Russian by Marian Schwartz