

So Far So Good by Jan Novák

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This novel is true, it reels off a factual spool, and it's a matter of fact that on Wenceslas Square in Prague, Radek Mašín and Milan Paumer flagged down a cab, it was the height of the Cold War when every day brought new casualties, they were killing in faraway Korea and right around the corner too, on the gallows and in the interrogation rooms of the secret police. It's also a fact that the cab was a green Škoda Tudor driven by one Eduard Šulc and that it was late in the evening and the street lights were lit, but the hum of perceptions, feelings, and thoughts in which one experiences the present moment has evaporated from this minor event, and now only a novel can supply the texture of that place at that point in time, only a novel can flesh out the factual skeleton, so that the story might still retain, in some odd and mediated way, the throbbing flow of lived experience. So let's say it's cold and damp and a yellow haze dims the light of the street lamps, the green Škoda Tudor pulls up to the sidewalk and stops, Radek and Paumer are in no hurry to climb inside, they open the passenger door, Radek eyes the grey haired driver across the empty seat and asks him if he could take them all the way to Hradec Králové. This city lies a hundred kilometers east of Prague, taking a cab there costs more than a pair of leather shoes, so Eduard Šulc looks the two youths over carefully. Radek meets Šulc's stare calmly, he is tall, blond, blue-eyed, and athletic, first impressions are his strong suit, but he's only twenty one years old, he knows he has to come up with some sort of an explanation, he figures the less he says the better, "We don't have a choice. If we're not there in three hours, all hell is going to break loose."

The cabby glances over at Paumer, this is shaping up to be a nice little fare, these boys seem clean-cut and polite, they're wearing pressed shirts and ties, but how come they have so much money to burn? Or do they? Might they try to stiff him later?

It isn't hard to guess the cabby's train of thought, Radek pulls out his wallet and runs his fingers across a stack of bills. "Well, all right, you guys," Eduard Šulc shrugs, "If that money's burning such a hole in your pocket, then you might as well fork it over to me."

The cab zigzags around the factories on the desolate periphery of Prague and roars past the last street light, it's dark now, the young men in the back seat don't have a lot to say, not even to each other, but Šulc figures that's as it should be, these boys are throwing away a bundle of money, they must be between a rock and a hard place, so he relaxes and concentrates on the road.

An hour later, when Radek asks him to make a pit stop, Šulc cheerfully stomps on the brake. They have just entered the Kersko Woods and passed a spot in the leafy forest, where Radek's younger brother Pepa has been waiting. The nineteen-year-old Pepa Mašín clutches a bulky briefcase containing the tools for tonight's operation, he's packing an old Wehrmacht pistol, a heavy iron club, a silk parachute cord, and a small bottle of chloroform.

Radek too has brought along an old German gun, he shoves its barrel into Šulc's back as the taxi rocks to a halt, "All right, step out, sir! You'll be fine as long as you do what I say!"

The Mašíns have a detailed plan, they'll put the cabby to sleep with a whiff of chloroform, then tie him up with the parachute chord. Chloroform works like a charm, the Mašíns have rehearsed the operation on each other, one good snort of the stuff and you're out like a light, but you have to inhale it. so their plan goes out the window the moment Eduard Šulc sets his eyes on the tiny bottle. He becomes frantic, he begs the Mašíns not to give him anything, he is scared of all drugs, he has a weak heart, and this will surely do him in. The Mašíns are new to this business, they feel sorry for the old man and Radek attempts to reason with him, "But it will be better for you if they find you tied up. Otherwise they might suspect you of being in on this."

"What do you mean, *better*? How could it possibly be *better* for me, if it's going to *kill me*?" the cabby pleads with them, "Do anything you want with me, just don't put me under, please!" Šulc is suddenly breathing heavily, his left arm is going numb, he has chest pains too, but is all this necessary, don't they simply want him to stay put all night? No problem, he'll sit right here in the bushes till the sun comes up, he swears on the eyes of his children that he'll never say a word about this to anybody, why should he, he'll owe the rest of his life to them.

Šulc is an innocent bystander, he's just another bourgeois loser in the Leninist class struggle, he's in the same boat as the Mašíns and they'd hate to do him any harm. The brothers stow the chloroform away and tie the cabby to a tree instead. They are very careful not to cut off his circulation, they even mutter "goodbye" as they hurry back to the road.

Paumer has already climbed into the driver's seat of the cab, he's the only one in their group with a driver's license, so he's the getaway driver. He quickly masters the gears of the Škoda Tudor and guns it toward the small town down the road.

Chlumec nad Cidlinou is a town of single story houses with the police station on a side street, Radek cased the place earlier, it's just another big house with an ornamental fence and a garden, there's only one man on night duty there, Chlumec is perfect for this operation. Their objective is to get weapons. All Czech police stations have recently been issued brand new submachine guns, there should be at least six of them in the Chlumec gun locker, the plan is

for the Mašíns to talk their way into the station, knock the cop unconscious, quickly search the place, grab the weapons, and be gone. Radek hides in his sleeve a cudgel he fashioned from an iron rod of a Soviet T-34 tank track, he has practiced letting it slide down his forearm and catching it in his palm a hundred times, he'll whack the cop over the head with it. Pepa's job is to back up Radek with a pistol. The brothers stole the German Walther 7.65 mm from a Wehrmacht supply train during the war, that was a long time ago, that was back when they were just kids, but they'd held on to it ever since, and now it will come in handy.

In a dimly lit street in Chlumec, Radek points to a spot beneath a sprawling walnut tree, Paumer cuts the Škoda's lights, and it's as if they'd parked in a tunnel. Radek and Pepa softly close the doors behind them and look around, Chlumec rolled up its sidewalks hours ago, even the dogs are asleep now, good, everything is just as it should be. The police station is only a few steps away, they push open the spiked gate, they climb the concrete stairs, and stop before the main door on the open landing just long enough to take a deep breath. The doorbell is a round plastic button, once they ring it there's no turning back, right now they could still call the whole thing off. The Mašíns are trying to fill the cavernous shoes of their old man, Josef Mašín senior was the biggest hero of the Czech underground during the Second World War, he was in charge of sabotages and assassinations of the Nazis and his sons have decided to fight the Communists the way their father had fought the Germans. They exchange one last glance, they could still scratch everything and go home, in Czechoslovakia people live beneath the sign of the sheep, are the Mašíns really all that different from everybody else? The next few moments will change their lives forever, okay, this is it, ready?

All right.

Let's do it.

The middle-aged man behind the door is wearing a crumpled uniform, his name is Oldřich Kašík, he hasn't been with the department long, he was working as a tanner until recently, and he should be home in bed tonight, but somebody got sick, so he changed shifts and now he's here, peering at the two young men through the narrow crack in the door, he's looking at their neckties, but he's keeping the security chain on the door. This must be the regulation procedure at night. Radek launches into the story they'd prepared, he manages to sound indignant, he says that they had chained up their motorcycle to a pole by the train station, but now it's gone.

"Goddamn thieves," Pepa mutters.

"Well, come on in," Kašík finally removes the chain.

The hallway is tight, they all barely fit inside, there are three closed doors and a staircase going up, "Wait here, I have to get something upstairs," says Kašík as he turns and heads for the stairs, all right, now! Radek catches the rod in his palm and whips it back as far

as he can in the cramped space, he doesn't need a big swing, he puts everything he has into the short stroke, WHAM, it's a staggering blow, but shit! The guy is turning around! He took that blow, but he's still groping for his gun, doesn't even look dazed, this is like a bad dream, "Watch out!" Pepa whips out the pistol he's been fingering in his pocket, Kašík keeps fumbling with the holster on his hip, now what, now it's simple, now Pepa squeezes the trigger, POW, he presses it again, POOOW, in the tiny hallway the shots rip into the ears, everybody in Chlumec must have heard the racket, but that's not all, a light! Shit, there's a light! Upstairs in the office! "Somebody's in there!" Did you hear that, what, that right there, WHAT, that soft the rustle of clothes, that ripple of movement, "What the hell was that?" There must be more cops up there, what else, "Did you hear that? Didn't you hear something?"

"Yeah, I think somebody's up there!"

"What about the damn submachine guns?"

"Better get outta here!"

"Okay, let's go!"

Thank God, Paumer can finally floor it, he has been sweating it out, he heard that artillery firing away in there and he's sure the rest of the world did too, he's been counting the seconds and battling a powerful urge to stomp on the gas pedal and take off alone, and now finally, after an eternity, the Mašíns dash out of the station and Paumer can finally peel away from the sidewalk, he finally guns the cab down the tree-lined street, and they're finally back in the open country again, finally, finally, finally.

In the early fifties, in Czechoslovakia, there are very few privately owned cars, this is why the Mašíns had to hijack the taxi in the first place, but now the empty road works to their advantage, yet Paumer still skids across the entire width of the asphalt at every curve, "Goddamn it, slow down! There's no fire!" They're hurtling back through the Kersko Woods, beneath the trees night is pitch black, suddenly the headlights pick out some movement, it's an old man hopping up and down on the shoulder of the road, frantically trying to flag them down. "Damn it! That's our cabby! He got free!" The bad dream doesn't let up, the cabby freezes as he recognizes his own Škoda and dives headlong into the bushes, his heart is passing another test, he's gone.

"Shit, all they gotta do is pick him up and they know we're headed back to Prague!"

"Step on it, will you!"

Paumer gladly obliges, they shoot out of the woods, but before they can even catch their breaths, Paumer has to stomp on the brakes again, there's a railroad crossing up ahead, and the red-and-white crossing gates are down, Paumer skids all the way up to the

barrier, and they sit and wait, where is the goddamn train, you can see for miles out here in the open fields, but there's no light coming from either direction, "What's going on?!"

"Just wait a second!"

They wait, staring at the red and white striped barrier and losing precious minutes, their head start is slowly dwindling away, why, what the hell are they waiting for? The Mašíns finally leap from the car, Radek lifts one of the gates, Pepa lifts the other, the Škoda rolls across the tracks, some old duffer pops out of the little guardhouse to holler at them, What the hell do they think they're doing? They pile back into the car, Paumer lead-foots it again, they swear up a storm, this too might have been a mistake, they probably should have just sat tight at that crossing, a train would have shown up sooner or later, they shouldn't have drawn any more attention to themselves, now another witness can give their pursuers another coordinate.

The Mašíns change their plan and make a little detour, all roads lead to Prague anyway, their alternate route is longer, but it feels a whole lot safer until some thirty kilometers down the road, a car gloms on to their back bumper. The Mašíns make Paumer slow down, the tailgater rides their exhaust pipe for a few minutes, why would anybody stay right on their ass along this empty stretch of road, what is this, who knows, the Mašíns just make sure Paumer never goes over the speed limit, he creeps through every hamlet at sixty kilometers an hour and suddenly the bad dream is over, something about the headlights shining on the back of their necks calms them down, so what, the die has been cast. Pepa reloads his gun, the sharp stink of gunpowder wafts through the cab, Radek's pistol is loaded too, now they just have to do what they have to do. "He's turning off, you guys!" The car behind them has suddenly swung to the right, the scattered light of the headlights disappears at some deserted intersection in the fields and suddenly it's hard to imagine that it was ever there in the first place.

The bottom line is that no sirens go off in the night, no lights start flashing, no one tries to stop them, they don't have to shoot anybody else, they reach Prague okay, they ditch the green Škoda okay, they disperse okay, they have killed a cop and they're okay.

AGAINST THE CURRENT

These two rounds fired in Chlumec are nothing short of a declaration of war, Radek and Pepa are making their stand against the dictatorship of the proletariat. The government coup of 1948 was overseen by Joseph Dzhugashvili Stalin, his men have followed the standard Soviet model, so the Communists declared “a merciless class struggle, a matter of life and death” in Czechoslovakia. They expropriate, collectivize, nationalize, expel, expunge, and rewrite. They investigate, interrogate, arrest, and reform through hard labor or repress on the gallows. They have informers, honor courts, street committees and revolutionary guards. Their student vanguard wear blue shirts, their border guards wear khaki, the factory militias wear bibs with red arm bands, the avant-garde wears berets and the plainclothesmen wear long coats.

Státní bezpečnost.

StB.

State Security.

The Mašíns are not taking this lying down, they have set up their own resistance group in the spa town of Poděbrady on the Elbe River and their decision is so matter-of-fact, so devoid of pathos that they don't even bother providing their outfit with a name. The idea is simple. The Communists have declared a “class war,” so that's what the Mašíns are going to give them, they're through being class war punching bags, they're going to strike back and fight the Commies under the same rules of engagement that their old man followed when he fought against the Germans. This means that anyone who dons a uniform, anyone who straps on a pistol, anyone who represents the brutal Communist power is fair game.

What are the Mašíns thinking? They're barely out of high school, what do they think they're going to accomplish? Do they really think they're going to set off an explosion that will blow away Communism?

Radek has no illusions, he carefully monitored the fall of another totalitarian regime, he realizes the Gestapo would have ruled a long time if not for the Red Army, hate is not enough, passion won't cut it. On the other hand, he sees a lot of parallels and he figures it's going to take the Americans to sweep away the Communists, he thinks that the Cold War will have to heat up first, but that shouldn't take very long, in Korea the war on Communism is already in full swing. Ultimately, the Mašíns plan to hook up with the US Army in West Germany, but in the meantime the brothers are happy to prove that armed resistance to Communism is possible and that the class struggle cuts both ways.

The biggest battle of this war will be fought in October of 1953 in East Germany, when some 27,000 *Volkspolizisten* and Red Army regulars take to the field to take on the Mašín group. The Germans quickly label this operation the *Tschechenkrieg* and in this “Czech war” entire platoons comb the rainy swamps south of Berlin, hunting down an “armed gang of murderous terrorists.” This gang is in fact armed with three old handguns and consists of five Czechs, only two of whom shave regularly, but they’re all under a virtual death sentence in Prague and they’re headed for West Berlin. They’re starving, they’re freezing, they’re desperate, but under the leadership of the Mašíns they’re fearless.

In their thinking, the Mašíns are firmly contrarian: they always strive to do the opposite of what is expected. When forced to hide, they choose to hide in plain sight. When cornered, they attack the strongest point of the opposing force. These tactics repeatedly pay off, they kill at least three *Volkspolizisten* and wound several more, other Germans and Russians are cut down by bullets from their own ranks, in the inky dark and icy rain, in fear of an enemy who fires without hesitation and hits the targets, the troops trip over each other and blast away at twitchy shadows with live rounds.

The hunt lasts for thirty-one days.

For the next forty years, at the KGB academy in Moscow, they will dissect these thirty-one days as a case study. They don’t have all the information, but they have enough to learn from their mistakes. The KGB tacticians conclude that this is a textbook case of how a dragnet should not be run, this is an example of how massive force becomes counterproductive, this is how the psychology of overkill, the psychology of war, botches a peacetime operation. This demonstrates that at times less really is more.

Then they flip the whole thing around and consider it from the point of view of the hunted. This is how you elude thousands of people in an unfamiliar terrain, this is how you harness the power of surprise, this is why you reach for the unexpected whenever you can, this is where having your back against the wall can help you, this is why, with massive luck, some contrarians survive.

The KGB psychologists have a field day with the Mašíns’ father, for what else if not the demeanor and principles of the old man could have shaped the lives of the brothers? Imagine being raised by a man whom even the Gestapo couldn’t break, imagine trying to emulate a soldier’s soldier who had no patience for anyone less fearless than himself, isn’t heroism in their blood?

Pepa Mašín doesn’t believe his father had much of an influence on his life. For one thing, Pepa was seven years old when he saw Dad for the last time. In Pepa’s memories, Dad

wears a spiffy uniform as a soldier rides up to their house on horseback, leading another horse behind him. Dad buttons up the shiny brass buttons on his uniform, slips on his riding gloves, and mounts the riderless horse. He leans forward in the saddle to kiss Mom goodbye and gallops off to the office. It's 1939 and Lieutenant Colonel Mašín senior is the deputy commander of an artillery regiment in Prague's Ruzyně district, he safeguards the city's airport, and the pride of his regiment is a stable of equestrian horses.

The Mašín family ethos is military service, a man fights for his country and, if necessary, dies for his country. There is no other satisfactory option. Why undertake a business career, how can you take money from the very people for whom you have sworn to lay down your life?