

On Flying Objects by Emil Hakl

"I was sorting things out at the cottage the other day and I found a pack of *ligeros* tucked behind books and I thought of you," said Vojta passing a warped pack over his shoulder. "They are a bit dry by now, they must have sat there for fifteen years if not more, but it's still good old *liggies*!"

Feeling more than a little moved, I inspected the intimately familiar little golden sailboat on dark bluish purple background.

"Dude, I really appreciate this," I said. "You mind if I light one up right now?"

"Go right ahead," said Vojta. "Monička hates it but I bet for you she'll make an exception ..."

"That's crap, ever since you quit smoking it's been you who's been fucking nervous, it doesn't bother me," responded Monička. "I don't miss it!"

"Well, I don't need to, really," I said.

"Go ahead and light up, Vojta will tough it out, right, he's got incredible willpower."

"Shit, just light up, OK," said Vojta. "And why not get one to Monička, so that she's quiet."

I stretched my arm out.

"No, thanks," squeaked Monička.

"It's all right, then, I can wait," I said.

"Common, man, it's cool," said Vojta.

"It's cool," repeated Monička.

Then screw you, I thought to myself, flicked the lighter and inhaled the smoke. It tasted like I was smoking a ten-year-old magazine. But it was *ligeros*, a *liggie*, the cigarette of my youth. I was squatting at the back seat of Vojta's old Escort, the front seat being reserved for Monička so that they could fight. They were always fighting. Quite often physically. When it came over them, they didn't care if there was a third person around, to the contrary, they were glad in a way. They actually rarely ever hurt each other since they each weighed fifty five kilos. They were like two struggling moths. Like two plush toys pushing each other around. It's true that I once witnessed Vojta throwing Monička through a glass door between a room and a hall after he'd been dragging her around the apartment by her hair for a few minutes before she retaliated by smashing a Chinese porcelain vase against his head, but that was more of an exception. They both then spent the rest of the day gluing the vase back together, working in unison like Poo and Eeyore because it had been a gift and I was helping them out.

We were on our way to a village near Kladno to visit their friends who were making goulash from a fallow deer that somebody's step father had shot in the Šumava mountains. The sun was setting above the Ruzyně part of Prague. The sky resembled a continuous slowly moving plexiglas on top of which someone had puked. Vojta and Monička were barking at each other. I was looking ahead over their heads. We were descending upon a valley full of sheet metal halls, bushes, piles of rotting wooden planks and empty cable reels.

"Stop swerving, you know I hate that," said Monička.

"I'm not swerving, I'm zigzagging."

"So stop your zigzagging for god's sake!" Monička raised her voice.

"But you were praising me the other day in front of Pavlucha, saying how safe a driver I was."

"I must've been pretty stupid!"

"You must've been," added Vojta and steered the wheel back and forth.

"Stop swerving, you asshole!"

"If you go on like this much longer Monička, I swear to god I'm gonna drop you off right here," said Vojta softly. "And you can hitchhike back home for all I care."

"Fine, stop the car, at least I won't be there when you two flip over some place! Stop the car!"

It's true that Vojta and I together had about a liter of vodka in us.

I was looking around the landscape. Suddenly I noticed a peculiar thing. On the overcast sky to the right of the windshield there were glowing five purply lines. Three were long, lined up side by side, and above those were two short ones. The strange thing about them was that they wouldn't stay in one place and kept quivering and flickering, so it was hard to focus on them to be able to say with certainty that they were there. If they were navigation lights of a commercial plane or the reflectors of a helicopter, I thought, they would be moving in one direction and not jump around like that.

Strange. Strange.

"Did you hear me, stop the car, I'm out of here!" reached my ears.

"Look Monička, stop making trouble and sit down or else I'm really gonna drop you off I swear to god!"

"Well, get to it!"

"It wouldn't bother me, you're always at my heels anyways!"

"You're at mine, OK?!"

The lines loomed up below the smoky ceiling of the landscape, shimmering lightly. I was inhaling smoke trying not to lose sight of them, which wasn't that simple since they periodically jumped behind a tree or a warehouse building. I took another *ligeros*.

"I have to listen to this prattle all the time," said Vojta. "From dusk to dawn you burden my brain."

"I burden your brain?!"

"Yeah, you burden my brain with totally useless information!"

"I'm surprised you can actually take it in through all that booze!"

"The thing is that I can only take it in! But I can't think! My brain is mucked up with bullshit!"

"Hm ... I really wonder why you need to think," rumbled Monička.

"You would be surprised, but there's quite a lot to think about in the world!" stated Vojta.

The lines were at that moment hovering between two silver chimneys. Suddenly they began to move and flew over to the right, so I could now see them through the side window. I rolled down the window and stared at them. The colour of the lights could best be described as purple with an occasional hint of red. At least that's how it appeared to me. To be honest, I didn't experience any extraordinary feelings. It all somehow fit together. The mess around, the sunset, the fight in front, the ancient *ligeros*, and those flickering lines above.

The lights were slowly moving above the landscape, dancing among the clouds, keeping their original formation: three down, two up. One moment they disappeared behind a cloud and the next moment showed up further away. It was as if their colour paled and broke into a shade of pink from time to time, but then returned back to the original purple. By now I had to turn to see them through the back window. Then they vanished behind the crown of a walnut tree.

I was seized by the memory of a day long ago, when I was sitting just like this in the back seat of an old black Tatra driven by a certain Mr. Kabrna in a leather jacket with the collar turned up, an aging dandy with a protruding lower lip and slicked back grey hair, a former RAF pilot, with my grandpa Zdeněk sitting beside him. They had met in jail while pouring concrete for a railway underpass. We were going back through the night, gramps and Kabrna debating something and me sitting and looking around, I must have been about four. Empty landscape slowly passed by, yellowy-lit clusters of settlements changed their configurations in the distance, a mysterious city

light loomed just above the horizon and stars were being cooked in the oily sky. The Tatra was bobbing up and down in a black pit surrounded by phosphorescent ant-hills. I saw that I landed in a world which was not only incomprehensible, but which defied any description, since its very essence kept changing every minute. I was in a wondrous cave. "Make it no less than six cubic metres, Mr. Motejl," said my gramps, still in the daylight, to a white-haired rustic in overalls in the courtyard of some warehouse, where bags and bricks and sacks were being piled up, and those cubic metres must have been the reason for our trip, since this was the time when my gramps was building a house. "Make it no less than six cubic metres, Mr. Motejl ..." And driving around our lot was Emil Šmíd, a forever smiling, and perhaps slightly retarded, working man; Emil Šmíd on a Lanz tractor, a rusty blue stegosaurus with a bulbous funnel belching out sweet gas fumes; driving bricks and pulling beams around our lot was a scary Emil Šmíd with black teeth with holes in them, famed for always having for lunch nothing but emmenthal with butter, a thick slice of emmenthal with a thick layer of butter and no bread.

Nothing much has changed in my life since then. There are still the same electric lights floating in the distance. The same lives are lived there. It's no more understandable than back then. Only perhaps slightly less surprising.

"Fuck it, I can just turn the car around right now!" said Vojta in a voice by now quite loud.

"Well, you can't 'cuz what would the guys think if this Vojta dude didn't turn up, what would they do there without you...", a venomous low little voice was scratching my anvil. I actually liked Monička, but only when Vojta was not around. And I liked Vojta even better, but without Monička.

Alas! What happened to those lines, I thought to myself. I turned my head from side to side, but couldn't find them. They were gone. The moon was floating among the clouds.

That reminded me of the one-eyed cat Lojza that I used to have at the Lhotka waterworks. When he was a kitten, his own mother scratched out one of his eyes, and I would then put some *framykoin* ointment on its hollow socket and, thanks to that, without really wanting to, I managed to bring myself up a hairy little son, who was constantly milling about my feet or sitting behind my neck and staring into a book with me, or slowly suffocating me anxiously wrapped around my head when I was trying to fall asleep at three in the morning. So this Lojza would, at full moon, manage to sit all night and watch the moon. Any other time he would spring up and get to me in no time, so that he would stay with me for the rest of my shift, not leaving me for a minute, not even when I was on the can and he would paw at the door and meow until I opened it. But at full moon he would turn his back on me, take a seat on the window sill and with his one eye watch the pale plate sliding among the stars for hours and hours, sighing, raising his eyebrows and sadly, mysteriously jolting. How we can be so arrogant as to think that we are different from other beings by having a soul is what Jakub Deml might have asked half a century ago. But all I could do sitting at the back of Vojta's old Escort that night from the 14th to the 15th of September, 2000, was but to take another mummified *ligeros*. And I did just that.

"We bid you sweetest farewell, we're leaving for afar, parting from our home, friends and land, across mountains and woods to where the ports are grey, where a white ship awaits us in a long bay ...," crowed Vojta out of the blue and hit the wheel and honked boisterously.

"The dark blue sea swallowed the shade of the white ship, everything but vanished in the mighty ocean's grip..." I joined in.

"Everything must one day end, but life goes on, in the spirals of birth we return..." we sang.

Vojta kept honking, turning the wheel zigzagging with us from shoulder to shoulder.

"Everything must one day end, but life goes on (beep!), in the spirals of birth we return (beep!) where in time long past we used to live as someone else (beep!) in a different time and different story (beep!) we no longer need to worry ..."

The Escort was rocking along the roadway like a barge on the sea.

"Focus on the road, please," begged Monička.

"That's exactly what we're doing, that's a part of focusing," said Vojta.

"So don't kill us doing that!"

"I need a way to relax so I wouldn't kill you."

"You're a real retard!"

"Yeah, that must be about right, otherwise I wouldn't 'ave ..."

"What wouldn't you have? Well, what wouldn't you have?!"

"Can't you just shut up for a minute, Monička! Do you have to keep yakking!"

"Me, that's good!"

"Yeah, you! You sow the seeds of discord in the soul! You're impossible! It's in your genes!"

"Well, fuck you ...!" said Monička in astonishment.

"See, that's it, that's what I mean, you can't keep your mouth shut for a moment!"

"I am impossible, well fuck you ten times over!"

"You are impossible. And on top of that you're ..."

"What am I? What am I on top of that?! What am I, you little shit?!"

"You're incredibly boring, if you wanna hear it!"

"What!"

"Yeah, you heard right! Same thing every day! All the time! 'You never do this ... you never do that ...!' "

"So why are you with me? Why the fuck are you with me?"

"Don't know!" said Vojta and shifted to third gear.

We drove in silence for about ten minutes. The body of the car swallowed lit-up dust from the road. On the left appeared a bushy low black forest. All of a sudden, a roe deer leapt out of the forest onto the road. The animal's eyes shone like light bulbs in the headlights. It froze in fright. The car missed it by a few inches.

"Aach!" screamed out Monička.

"Dude," grumbled Vojta. "That was close ..."

Then there was silence. Little drops of rain started to land on the windshield. The headlights were licking a line of poplars.

"Well, everybody gets by in their own way," said Vojta abruptly.

Then there was silence again. Only the squeaking of the wipers could be heard.

"I saw a UFO a while ago," I said to break the silence.

"That's what I see every day," responded Monička. "I actually married one!"

"Where are we, for that matter?" pondered Vojta.

Monička peered at a map, "I think we need to hang a right now, then there should be a railway-crossing gate and a connection to a major road, and then straight."

We turned right. Soon fenced off lots, concrete panels, houses with fallen off facades turned up everywhere. A few jolly dudes in overalls almost jumped right in front of our car in a curve. I spotted teeth kicked in, tattooed necks, gin-soaked mouths, drunk eyes. Gypsy children sat on a railing, fiercely chewing and shouting something, in the next curve. Further on a horribly fat woman in an apron was pushing herself through the darkness while threatening someone out of sight.

"Clearly, we're in Kladno," remarked Vojta.

"Clearly, we're in deep shit," responded Monička.

"But whose fault is that, I ask?"

"Mine, of course!"

"Well, that's likely so ... If you had looked at the map earlier on, we wouldn't be in deep shit now," recited Vojta with a peculiar half-smile, as if trying to suppress some secret, uneasy pleasure. "You'd better give it to Honza!"

Monička thrust the map into my hands. Vojta passed me a flashlight. Alas, relationships. I was glad that this time it didn't concern me. I straightened out the map and darted about the paper with my light.

Meanwhile we drove into an odd, wide street lined on both sides by large windowless buildings. There were street lights, a road, even if bumpy, and all around huge brick windowless houses. It was like going down a street with nothing but mausoleums on either side. Then the buildings ended and all we could do was drive through a wrecked iron gate on to a deserted area where the road ended. Further on was just black gravel and some tracks. Outlines of metal constructions upon which lay dark pipes that led far away rose out of the darkness. It was as if we found ourselves in the kingdom of an extremely large being turned into stone. Rusty guts twirled high above us. Further on gigantic concrete vertebrae lay about. Smoke was rolling above greasy puddles.

"Gee man, this looks like a different planet," breathed Vojta and turned off the engine.

That same moment a shot rang out somewhere close. And another one. I could clearly hear the whizz of the bullet. A moment later a guy emerged from the darkness holding a gun in both hands.

"Freeze!" he roared and pointed at Vojta's head. "Freeze!" he bellowed again.

"I am," said Vojta quietly.

"What are you doing here! Quick!"

We looked for a suitable answer.

"What are you doing here! Pronto!" repeated the guy.

"Well, what are we doing here ...?" said Vojta.

The man walked around the car while aiming at us.

"Please," piped up Monička in a shaky voice.

"No please! I'm asking what you're doing here!"

"Please ... can I light up?"

The man stooped and looked at Monička.

"You're a woman?" he said.

"Yeah, and please can I light up?"

"Light up what!?"

"What do you mean, light up what?"

"What do you want to light up?" barked the man and perhaps without realizing it pointed the shooter at her. He simply pointed at whomever he happened to be speaking to.

"Like what do you mean, what do I want to light up ...," Monička started to sob. "A cigarette, damn it!"

"Agreed, smoke!" ordered the man.

The lighter only worked by the fifth try. I watched her trembling hand with fascination.

"So what are you doing here! Fast!" he turned to Vojta again.

"We're looking for the road to Ledce," I added to the debate.

"Here, right!" he aimed at me, white spit spraying from his mouth. "So you're looking for a road here, right!" I was inspecting the shiny muzzle and felt a small cold hand grab my stomach. It felt like I had a raw pig's leg in my belly. That, strangely, somehow comforted me.

"Yeah, here," I said.

"Phony-baloney!"

"Look," Vojta pulled himself together. "Are you some sort of a watchman here or something?"

"Security guard," barked the man and aimed at him again.

"Well, this must be a mistake ..."

"What, mistake!" the moron got angry and it was obvious that psychological balance was not one of his virtues as he spluttered all over himself. "There's an operation in progress here?! And what are you doing here?! And make it quick!"

"We're looking for the road," I said again.

For a moment it looked like he didn't know what now.

"Driver out!" he finally worked it out and took a few steps back. "Open the trunk!"

Vojta got out and opened the trunk. The sniper shone his flashlight in for a long time. At the same time he held his shooter up in our general direction.

"Holy f-f-fuck...", Monička started to cry.

"Stop bawling," I said quietly. "Or he'll really lose it!"

I was far from calm myself. But it was true that within such an unbelievable setting everything seemed so distant from anything one normally expects, that I actually followed it with a certain detached curiosity.

Vojta closed the trunk shut and the jerk ordered him to "Get back!"

"So what to do with you!" he continued. "You have no business being here!"

"Why don't we go then," suggested Vojta.

"How do you mean go! Where?"

"Away," whispered Monička.

"Make it snappy then!" barked the security guard.

Vojta started the engine, put it in reverse and started backing up. The man followed us still aiming at the windshield. Only now did we have a chance to take a good look at him. He was a suburban type with his ears sticking out and a simple mug, a bandy-legged dipshit with a shaved head. He was wearing something that looked like black overalls with many bulging pockets. Perhaps he had grenades there. Who knows. He followed us all the way to the wrecked gate, stopped there and stared at us. We continued to back up about twenty more meters. Then Vojta slowly turned around and we were back on that strange street with no windows.

"Screw you, stupid fuckhead!" Vojta became bold when we were far enough. "Monička, would you give me a cigarette?"

"I only had one, Vojta, my dear, if you had said anything I would have been happy to give it to you ..."

"Have a *liggy*," I offered.

"No way, those are for you."

"Don't be silly and grab one".

"Thanks then," said Vojta and Monička lit his cigarette with a shaking hand.

"Would you mind if I had one, too?" she turned back. I gave her a cigarette and looked inside the pack. Only one left. I pulled it out and lit up. The three of us all blew out smoke.

"Now I'm completely sober for sure," brought up Vojta in a unsteady voice.

"Me, too, no doubt," I said.

Monička was silent for a while, the end of her *ligeros* red-hot.

We drove in silence again. Dry pleasant-smelling smoke was filling up the car. After a while I turned the flashlight on again and started to study the map. I saw trembling dark red snaking roads, I saw green hatches and blue veins and numerous signs and letters and lines and spots. Names of villages began to willfully break apart and mix up in front of my eyes: Jedozda, Čelesuty, Hulora Srzdeň ...

"Vojta, would you be a doll and stop for me for a moment?" squealed Monička.

"Absolutely, my Monička, would you like that right now?"

"Yeah," sobbed out Monička, grabbed her stomach and as soon as she was two steps away from the car, the retching sound began.

"Can I help you in any way?" worried Vojta.

"Sallrigh ...blua ... thanks, Vojta ... blua, bluea ... blua ..." her beautiful white hand with black painted nails sticking out of the rolled-up sleeve of a black shirt waved in the dark. Black and red checkered pants fitted tightly around her goat pelvis. This type of subdued elegance has always been Monička's thing. She was leaning against a sign that limited the speed to eighty kilometers per hour while a gurgling came from inside her. The bare trunks of a sparse forest stuck out of the horizon as monotonously blinking fluorescent lights running alongside some kind of warehouse or factory shone through them.

"Now we're really fucked," noted Vojta.

"No we're not, I got it," I said. "Here, Ledce! Straight to Smečno and first intersection left, it's close, not even five kilometers..."

Finally we got to a low large farm house with all lights on. Small groups of people walked about the garden. There was a bonfire. Music playing. Dancing couples were rocking in the shimmering light. Someone threw a log onto the fire. A sheaf of sparks exploded between the trees. Fiery threads shot to the sky.

A dazzled redhead in shorts stepped into the beam of light and gave us a big smile. When we stopped, he shouted, "Hi! Vojta! Vojta's here! You're really coming in good time! Everything's gobbled up! There's just some salami and plum brandy left ... Would you like some?"

"Yeah!" we all said in unison.