

The Shutter by Miloš Urban

Translated by Dominik Jun

CLICK

Eyes adrift in the early evening and around them a face. Two murky beads illuminated by white light. A rushing figure, weaving between the coats and jackets of a bustling Náměstí Republiky, filled with people flowing in all directions and then back again.

Matěj stopped and studied her. Someone bumped into him, but Matěj was the one who offered an apologetic “excuse me”. She disappeared behind a man’s shoulder before reappearing again, now in profile, as if showing off her nose. Did she notice him? Perhaps she saw how he couldn’t help but gaze in her direction. But he could only see a single eye – the left one. It had long black eyelashes, and twinkled with the reflection of Christmas tree that the girl was mysteriously studying. She threw a brief quizzical look directly at Matěj before hastily turning away and heading towards the shopping centre. A passing tram hooted in her direction, forcing her to abruptly stop mid-step while broadcasting a guilty grin. Sitting inside a glass cabin, the infuriated female tram driver slapped her hand on her head for all to see. The girl’s eyes once again found him amidst the mass of people, and when they spotted Matěj’s evident relief that nothing had happened to her – that she had not become a fatality, that her legs and toes weren’t laying dismembered on the tracks, sliced off by the passing tram – then both threw each other a smile. Their mouths widened, teeth exposed.

She knew she shouldn’t have done that. If a chance had existed that he might let her go on her way, now that was impossible. Matěj called out her name in his mind as if tasked at work with providing a detailed description of something or someone. But all that cogitation just made things worse. A maiden, a woman-child, one or the other, or both... An English rose... A silly cliché – but then again if a girl ever looked like an English rose than it was this one. Only when he noticed her startled expression did Matěj realise that he had been drifting towards her, oblivious to an oncoming bus. Now it was his turn to snap out of it and hastily avoid an oncoming vehicle. More hooting, the slamming of brakes, jolted passengers, and undoubtedly more cursing – though that was beyond earshot. Meanwhile, the crowds around the square continued to chatter in a variety of tongues, and to exude the aroma of perfume and mulled wine.

He looked around for her, but in vain. She’d been heading towards the Palladium mall, and so that was where he went. There she was, amidst an entranceway so crammed with people she was struggling to make her way inside. As he approached, Matěj pondered how to avoid

acting like the archetypal guy trying to pull a girl in front of a shopping centre. What to say to avoid sounding like some vapid or trite come-on artist.

The crowd in the door was evidently trying her patience. But under his breath Matěj thanked those people – had she been able to get inside the Palladium more easily, he would have struggled to find her amidst the thousands of shoppers.

But, at least here and now, she really had decided to give up on her Christmas shopping expedition.

He caught up with her. Opened his mouth. He knew he had to make an approach different than anyone else who had preceded him. He had to discover what lay behind those eyes. Just to get to know her and to have something of worth to take away from the experience. A memory of that mascara on her eyes – though she'd overdone it a little, for sure; and that trace of eyeshadow. At that moment, Matěj swore to himself that he would never want anything more from her. No hassling for any kind of bodily intimacy. He would just want a picture. Or pictures. Many pictures. The more, the better. For young Matěj had evidently decided that it wasn't life itself that he craved. A mere image of life would have to suffice.

"Hold on," he blurted out. A far from successful move...

She looked up a little startled, as if already forgetting that they had exchanged a glance, and that she had smiled back, not to mention their mutual near-death tram and bus experiences. The girl did a full-bodied turn and reached deep into a pocket as if grasping for some improvised weapon – or maybe she was just looking for her keys, or a hairclip, or a pen. Matěj noticed how the girl's silhouette was nicely framed by the Municipal House palace opposite the mall and instantly regretted not having his camera with him.

That was the thing that would both unite and separate them, decided Matěj. The security of a glass lens and electronic apparatus. Clear as day.

"What do you want?" she asked defensively. The girl was about half a head shorter than Matěj. Both her pockets bulged with the evident clenching of fists.

"I'll tell you what I don't want – to bother you..."

"Then don't!"

"A minute ago I could have been dead because of you."

"You should watch where you are going. It certainly wasn't my fault." The girl began turning away to leave.

"But you weren't paying attention either," retorted Matěj. "That tram could easily have hit you. And, for a change, that would have been *my* fault."

Even amidst the multi-coloured Christmas lights he could see the girl turning bright red.

"Awfully sure of yourself... Maybe I'm just a klutz who doesn't pay attention to where she is going!"

"Could I walk with you for a bit?"

"That has to be the worst come-on line I've ever heard."

It's not a come-on," said Matěj defensively, managing to pull a stern face.

"Well, that's a relief," the girl snapped back. "Alright, join me for a bit then."

The pair proceeded, both keeping their hands in their pockets. Matěj took a quick look at the girl's profile, left eye cast downwards towards the pavement; lips tightly clenched. "Could I take a photo of you?" he asked just as her other eye came into view. Both eyes revealed a tinge of impatience, followed by surprise and even amusement. She raised her eyebrows and her brow furrowed into three small wrinkles.

"Right now?"

After managing to take just a few steps away from the mall along nearby Na příkopě street the couple came to a halt.

"No, not now. Not here. I don't have my gear with me, and I don't take pictures with my mobile phone."

"What *gear*?"

"My camera – a photographic *camera*!"

"Oh, is that what they call it?"

"Well..."

"I mean why use that expression when you mean a camera?"

"It's just slang. I meant a camera, OK?"

"Your *gear*..."

"Precisely."

"So you're a photographer."

"No. I'm actually *not* a photographer." It was a far from auspicious start. He knew it, and he could read the same response in her reaction. All those doubts and all that bemused confusion. All of which were evolving into indignation at the thought of her being asked to strip down for this guy. "The idea is for fully-clothed photographs. For me to mainly focus on your face. A kind of emotional portrait, if that is the right way to put it. Photography is my hobby, if you know what I mean."

"Emotional portrait? Your hobby?" The baffled young woman shook her head.

"Serves me right," he thought. "I'm talking to her like a buffoon." Matěj tried again: "You see, there's photography, and this is just part of a wider effort...an attempt to..." Once again his words became a tangled mess. He knew he was coming across like some hustler trying it on with girls passing by in the street.

And now, for what seemed like the umpteenth time, the girl was back on the move again.

"Sorry, I can't help you."

"Why not?"

"Why should I? What reason do I have? I don't see one."

Now he would either get her or lose her. “I apologise for troubling you like this, but I really would like to just photograph you. Would that be possible? You don’t have to give an answer here and now. After all, we are strangers and I understand your apprehension. I would be just as cautious. So here is my card, and I will leave it up to you whether you call or write me an email.” He glanced into his wallet and breathed a sigh of relief. One card remained, the others were stashed in a drawer at work – he’d never needed them before now. “You can use my card to confirm that I really work at the listed company. And if you respond, then I will send you a link to the Blickperson website. Have you heard of it?”

“No.”

“Photographers from across the world, both professionals and amateurs, work in various categories. I’m one of those with a profile and my pictures posted at the site. When you see them, you can decide for yourself if you want to let me photograph you, or whether to just throw my card in the trash.”

She took the card, moved in front of a well-lit store display window filled with shoes, and began to read out loud. “Matěj Rund. Stel-lar... How is that pronounced?” The card had “Stellar Brusque” printed on it. And an address, e-mail address, and a telephone number...

“Stellar *brask*,” explained Matěj. “It is a PR firm, and also an ad agency. I work there unfortunately. It’s a cliché, I know.”

“What do you do there? Make clichés?”

At least that brought a laugh.

“Basically, yes. Sort of a girl for every occasion. I pretend that I’m not part of the corporate world, but there I am. And they pretend not to mind that I clearly don’t really want to be there very much.”

“So why are you there?”

“Good money.”

“You photograph for them?” The girl tucked the card into a trouser pocket and shivered just a little. He’d kept her standing on the spot too long.

“Sometimes I take pictures as well. But those photos aren’t printed or displayed anywhere. It is just for internal company use. For example if I like or don’t like a billboard I come across – the graphic design, or a slogan, or the overall tone of it and how it is trying to sell you something or someone. So I take pictures of that and then back at work I suggest how we could do it better. But my main thing is other stuff: mainly the ideas, copy and scripts for various advertising spots.”

“Alright, so I’ll look up Stellar online, and also that Blickperson site.”

“I’m there under my own name, so you can easily find me. But, you know, don’t expect the world. It’s just amateurish attempts. I don’t even think I’m a very good photographer.”

That made her laugh even louder. “Not a very alluring pitch, is it?”

Matěj shrugged his shoulders. “I do what I can.”

“Yeah, exactly,” answered the girl, perhaps a little too curtly.

Matěj stepped back. “Forgive me then for bothering you. Just throw the card in the bin and be on your way.”

He moved to walk off, but this time the girl stopped him. “Hold on. I wasn’t trying to upset you. I will look at your pictures, and if I like them, then at least I’ll give them a thumbs-up.”

“I’ll appreciate that. You see, there’s a circle under the photos – the background is always black. And if you like a picture, if for some reason it does something for you, then click on that circle and it should turn white. That means you ‘liked’ it. It is the symbol of a camera lens, even though I probably would have designed it differently. But that’s irrelevant. Although I won’t be able to tell that the ‘like’ came from you anyway – you’d have to register with Blickperson.”

“I’ll see, OK?”

“Cool. Well thanks for giving me some of your time.”

“It’s alright,” she replied flashing an encouraging smile. He seemed to need it.

“One other thing – you see even if you don’t get in touch, and don’t register on Blick, and still one of my pictures gets one of those white circle ‘likes’, then I will notice that and think it is from you no matter what.”

“If it is so important to you, then you can think whatever you want.”

“Of course. But if I do make that conclusion, then it would be good to have some kind of name in mind.”

“You mean *my* name?”

“You don’t have to give me your real name,” Matěj quickly added, spotting the girl’s astonishment. “Give me a made-up name if you like. Anything.”

Her expression became more serious. For a moment, she threw him a serious, perhaps even wistful look, which Matěj struggled to interpret. The girl swallowed and cast caution to the wind. “Věra. That’s my name. Ciao!”

Honesty in return for honesty, he wondered? After all, Matěj had confessed that he wasn’t a very good photographer. “See ya!” he replied.

He longed to look on as Věra slowly disappeared into the mass of people along Na příkopě street. Perhaps she might turn back and offer a final uplifting glance. But Matěj had no wish to play out such a futile fantasy. And so he simply turned in the opposite direction, never once looking back.

Had he done so, their eyes would certainly have met one more time on that particular evening...

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“I bow before Your Highness,” said Matěj, sitting down next to his boss at the bar. At this point in the afternoon they were the only customers in the place.

Pátý, nose adorned with a pair of frameless half-moon glasses, looked up from his tablet. “What’ll it be, son?”

“If you’re buying, then the same as you...”

“Good choice.” Pátý nodded to the barman, pointed to his round cognac glass, and then at Matěj. The barman reached for a half-empty bottle of Martell Cordon Bleu.

“Mmm,” exclaimed Matěj, rubbing his hands. “So what’s up? Have you figured out who is impersonating you yet?”

“No. But it hasn’t happened again since the last time. So we’ve agreed to hold back on filing a criminal complaint.”

“Why stir the pot with the police at this point, right?”

The pair clinked glasses and downed their drinks. Pátý then handed Matěj his tablet. “Have a look – we’ve made the news again.”

“Not Médiář again...”

“Nope. Digiport. This time it’s not advertising or PR bullshit that they’re raking us over the coals for – rather our photographs.”

“Well, at least that’s a change,” sighed Matěj before reading the derisive article in detail. It described how Stellar Brusque, market leader in advertising, PR services, and innovative marketing, seemed unable to find itself a decent photographer. Just like everywhere else: you took some lanky dame, with legs stretching from her ankles up to her neck; you plastered her in make-up to the point of making her unrecognisable; you over-lit her so she was almost glowing; and then you generated your RAW image file. The result was damn near awful – the model looked like a cigarette in the snow. So you enhanced and processed the image – with the aid of RAW software and Photoshop – so at least now you could detect the contours of a real person. But the downside was that you revealed every freckle and pimple, especially that big one under her nose. Not to mention the fact that her hair could be a little thicker (and her head seemed too small for those bony shoulders). So then you had to

undertake some retouching, doing away with some fat around the waist and hips, and adding some virtual hair extensions atop her head. Which all led to the end result being what it was. The author ended by reminiscing about the golden era of celluloid photography – proper developing, quality paper, and the overall craft of old-fashioned picture-taking. The author of the article signed off with the initials ZR.

“ZR is right,” said Pátý as he shrugged his shoulders.

“Says the creative director, before going on to hire some creative photographers...” replied Matěj.

“You have no idea just how near the mark you are.”

“But the way ZR puts it in his diatribe – that’s, in fact, how they do it everywhere. Clients want that, because that’s how it’s done all over the world. We don’t do anything different to what they are doing across the pond. And Stellar is the same everywhere. So the only difference is the spending power of clients, and the purchasing habits of customers in particular countries or regions.”

“But what if we tried to change that? At least here in this country. Then, who knows...?”

“Well, that’s not exactly my place to say. But if you have some great idea, then why not present it to management. Maybe they won’t fire you on the spot – but a week later!”

“Well, I’m not afraid for my job just this minute. But maybe I’ll change my opinion in time. Those phone calls in my name are a bad omen. Which is why I’d rather try this out sooner rather than later. Remember that McDonald’s campaign sending customers to the competition for roast sirloin or goulash?”

“Because they knew that those customers would come back to them in the end. But we’re not exactly about to tell our customers: ‘Look, you’ve commissioned enough stuff from us, so why not try out Barston Mullyntyre or Double Solutions this time instead? Just to show how good we really are, and to let those poor sods have a bite of the apple.’”

“Yeah, I know it’s a giant power play. But that was just meant as an example. Maybe Benetton did it better. I don’t mean those albino blacks, or five-second-old newborns, or even those huge brown human hearts – which may, or may not, actually have been pig hearts. What I mean are the ads and posters showing fired managers that they did when the financial crisis erupted.”

“I remember that. Women dressed formally; men wearing smart suits. There were five of them in total, and in front of them was a sign that read: UNEMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR.”

“That’s it. While at the same time they were pointing to some global problems – inequality and injustice among people. Sure, you can debate whether it actually increased, or perhaps even decreased, their clothes sales, but I still like the idea of a magnanimous and well-planned approach to self-publicity. To present yourself as a company that isn’t indifferent to issues more serious than what clothing people choose to wear.”

“And so..?”

Pátý ordered two fresh cognacs before continuing: “I’m waiting on every new photo that you post to Blickperson.”

“Well, thanks. But you already said something along those lines last time. So if you don’t want my head to get too big, or for me to start censoring myself, then maybe it’s best to avoid this subject. You see, I don’t want to start thinking about those people who are looking at my pictures, and to wonder whether they might prefer they looked this way or that instead. Firstly, I have to like the photograph. And if someone grabs onto my coattails, then all the better. But they have to follow me and not the other way round. But with you being my boss, that presents something of a problem in that regard.”

Pátý shook his head and tapped his index finger on the table. “Forget about that. I’m not going to interfere with your work. But nor will I stop keeping an eye on it. You said it yourself: you want people onboard following your vision, and for your take on how a photograph of a pretty young lady should look. Your works aren’t necessarily flawless, but they are impressive and even compulsive. And I want to make use of that for Stellar. But I don’t yet know how. What I do need, though, is for you to tell me if you’d be willing to go along with such an idea.”

Matěj felt his head spinning, unsure of whether it was a result of drinking so much cognac on an empty stomach, or whether it was the apparent import of what his boss had just said.

“Permit me, My Leader, to think it over in the toilet.”

Pátý nodded his benevolent assent, giving his employee permission to leave.

Upon Matěj’s return to his bar stool he was greeted by the sight of a third glass of drink, as well as a fresh bowl of peanuts.

“So what’s it to be?” asked Pátý. “You know you don’t have to give your answer today. But so as to be fair to you, let me make it clear to you here and now that Stellar does not intend to pay you for it. You’re an employee, who occasionally takes informative or subject-related photographs for us. And this would fall under the same category. You need to understand

that should I want to push this, the penny pinchers upstairs will approve it far more easily if it doesn't cost anything. Of course, there's no reason why you can't get special bonuses if everything works out well."

"What do you want me to photograph?" It was a redundant question, but Matěj asked it anyway so as to draw out the sight of his grovelling boss a little longer.

"The only thing you know how to photograph. Of course we would pay her for her services."

"You want Věra for Stellar..."

"*That's* her name? So old-world. I guess I'm gonna be even more dependant on her than I have been – and then I'll take her from you. That yellow raincoat of hers aroused in me my inner latex man! And those purple clothes she wore – I'd tear them off her in a second. The best thing about her is that she doesn't even have to take her clothes off to come across as ravenous. Her bare face is enough to do the trick."

"Since you're following me online, you may have noticed that Ivan Kubricht was the one who photographed her."

"And he knew very well why he posted only one picture of her. The Věra that everyone – including me – wanted to see was someone else. She wasn't your one."

"But she isn't mine. She said I was a stupid chauvinist or something like that. By all accounts she actually despises me."

"Is she a feminist?"

"Like everyone with an IQ above 100..."

"But the distance between love and hate is actually a small one, you know..."

"The reverse is true, too."

"At least I'll know the right approach to take with her," laughed Pátý. "I'm making a note: *conceal my stupid chauvinism as best as possible, and read-up on Germaine Greer and Simone de Beauvoir. Help her in bed to prove that she ain't no eunuch.* Give me her number. I want to call her right away."

"Nope. I'm going to have to think about taking pictures for Stellar. Plus, I have to somehow persuade Věra to return in front of my camera again. She's not answering her phone or responding to my emails, even though I've already sent two messages of apology. I'm not sure I know how to deal with her. After all, I'm not a chauvinist – am I? Am I really such a

monster? There's no-one on this earth I like more." He knew the alcohol was loosening his tongue. But he didn't give a damn.

"You see," said Pátý, a sceptical expression on his face. "I always thought that there was no-one on this earth that you actually liked. Not even yourself."

"That's not true. I'm just a bit reserved, and I don't really know what to do about it – how to climb out from inside myself."

"Don't the photographs help?"

"Yeah. They're a lifesaver. Věra...and lust..."

"So don't be an idiot and go after her. I would have a long time ago. She's a normal girl. Worst case, she'll turn you down."

"She's not a normal girl. And I don't want her to turn me down."

"You afraid that might happen?"

"Perhaps I'm also afraid of her not turning me down."

"Man, you need professional help. I'd say it's depression – the long-term variety." Pátý reached for his wallet.

"Well, Mirek, my own diagnosis would be simple longing – the long-term variety. My photos and longing are basically one and the same, and I don't want to lose that."

Pátý handed the barman a two-thousand and then a five-hundred note. "Two more for the road, please. My colleague here is lovelorn. He just isn't sure whether it's with the girl or with himself."

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It wasn't anyone or anything specific, but he was filled with jealousy all the same. And he hated himself for it. He couldn't stand the thought of Věra starting something with Pátý.

Matěj tried soothing himself with thoughts that it was really none of his business. After all, he had even made peace with Bob – the man who was leaving her bruised – even though he also knew that this was something with which he should not be making peace. He was

supposed to make her his, not keep hiding behind his camera lens. It was an untenable state of affairs.

But he would have to keep hiding a little longer. At least through the summer.

He hoped that it wasn't anger at Věra that led him to post pictures of Bára at Blickperson. And he didn't hold back, either, posting thirty right from the start, creating a whole new gallery in the process. In some photos, she was only dressed in her underwear (he held back on posting the nude ones), which led to a swarm of enthused online comments and approving "white circles" from users. But not one of them was even half as good as those in which Věra posed. There was no singular or unquantifiable magic on display here, just plain and simple eroticism. And that made Matěj no different from thousands of other photographers. But because he had a public to satiate – one longing for new material – he was willing to seek attention even for average output such as this. The photographer wasn't even sure if he should be pleased with the response. All it seemed to underscore was that Věra was one of a kind. Which only increased Matěj's sense of inadequacy that they were so different as to forever be separated by the glass lens of a camera. Not to mention the likes of Bob or Pátý, or women like Bára, and presumably the others that would follow.

There was no doubt that such people would come. People wrote to him from Europe, America, and even Russia. They continued to ask whether he had abandoned his unique "one photographer, one model" system – which others had already begun to imitate, proudly posting the results on blogs and picture sharing sites. Some were disappointed, others enthused. Some even wanted to borrow Věra from him. Many were even interested in Bára, willing to pay for an air ticket to Prague in order to arrange a photo shoot. Matěj found all of this tragically amusing. The world really had shrunk and flattened down to the size of a 9x13 photograph, he thought. One "Sophie19ans" left a message under a photograph of Bára's rear-end. It was a selfie, taken while lying down in a bed, featuring the girl's belly and blue knickers, the latter featuring a yellow smiley. He didn't understand the text comment she made, so he pasted it into an online translator. Sophie was inviting him to Saint-Étienne, where he could photograph everything to be found *under* that yellow smiley.

Bára also got in touch. In typically immodest style she even marked all of her own photos with a "white circle". To that she wrote: "I'll never be your star, but at least now I am a star. Hah!"

So Matěj seized the opportunity and wrote back that he wanted to photograph her outside somewhere – nude and away from the noisy masses. Weather permitting, as soon as possible.

The response was immediate: “Bára agrees. Can I join in? How about Saturday. Will we take your car or hers? Kahlo.”

The recipient was perplexed. Apparently, his now quickly expanding army of “followers” included a woman with the nickname “Kahlo”. But she looked more like a boy in her profile picture – narrow neck, short hair, sharp smile, and irony-laced oblong eyes.

“I don’t have a car, but I do have a driver’s licence,” he wrote back to both women. “Two models are always better than one, so long as it isn’t THAT ONE. I’ll need the afternoon sun and some kind of rocky plateau. Pick me up at 4 p.m. on Saturday and we’ll head out to Bohemian Paradise.”

He lacked the strength to read through all the comments, never mind actually responding to them. But one, written in English, courtesy of user “Chillibean”, did catch his eye: “The greater the nudity, the lesser the quality. I fully expected that you’d go in that direction. Some of your photographs of Věra were beautiful because of their very lack of perfection. I imagined the two of you as maladroit lovers. And that is precisely why I take exception to the way you have begun to objectify her, and subordinate her, and reducing her to a mere photograph. None of these new pictures are any more than images of a young body, which will one day grow old – if she even lives that long. It’s hardly even worth commenting on it at all.”

Well then, he frowned. *That sow from Canada, who did nothing but lambaste me, liked my work.* He wrote back: “Seen through your viewfinder, you are absolutely right...”

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They paid the entrance fee for the Adršpach-Teplice Rocks nature reserve and drove inside. A couple of Polish tourists were engaged in a heated discussion by Pískovna, the flooded sandstone quarry lake. An older man wrapped up in a transparent raincoat sat smoking by one of two benches, an orange thermos by his side. Three boats were laid out, capsized fashion, by the banks of the lake. Two children climbed along a wooden handrail on the other side of the quarry. The light conditions were barely adequate. A spattering of rain fell from the sky. If the skies really opened, then Matěj would have to abandon the shoot.

Věra changed in the car. She put a yellow rainproof jacket over her shoulders. Once outside, this was placed down on an empty bench. Then she kicked off her moccasins before stepping into the water dressed in a green-white summer dress. Matěj also took off his shoes and socks and rolled up his trousers as high as he could. Out came an umbrella, which was conveniently lodged into his backpack. Now protected from the elements, out came the camera. Finally, Matěj followed the model's example and trudged into the water.

"It isn't cold at all," she exclaimed.

The old man looked on surprised. Maybe he was glad for a little excitement, thought Matěj. If he came to remind them that bathing was not permitted here, they would respond that they weren't bathing, but photographing. Such an argument would be a little harder to make if a police officer or park attendant came along, but in this weather, and at this time, fortunately no such persons were anywhere to be seen.

"Lie down. Slowly, so you don't disturb the water. Don't be stiff, but be pliable. You have to merge with the lake."

She did as she was told and lay down. Věra's hair splayed out along the surface while her wet clothes began to pull her downwards. She steadied herself by resting a couple of fingers on the sandy lake bed.

The camera clicked away. "We have to go further out." He gently towed the model into deeper water. It was too deep now for the model to use her fingers as a counterweight, so instead she began to paddle with her hands to prevent her head from going under.

Matěj was almost waist-deep in water. He was still glad he rolled up his trousers, though, as it made walking along the lake bed easier. But he was not prepared to go any further, lest he risk splashing water on his precious camera lens.

"Slowly exhale all the air out of your lungs, and don't fight the water – let it take you. Just don't breath in. Stay calm and keep looking in my direction."

Bubbles began streaming out of the model's nose, decreasing in intensity the deeper she sank. Vera's hair snaked around her body, while her clothes billowed and swelled. The currents revealed her lap and silver-grey knickers. Matěj snapped away furiously.

She managed to maintain the pose for twelve seconds. After that, her head shot upwards above the surface, lungs gasping for air. Matěj handed Věra a handkerchief so she could clear her nose. The sight of this model in sodden clothes with strands of disjointed hair

covering up her entire face – asides from her nose and the inside edges of her eyes – proved irresistible to the photographer, who snapped yet more pictures.

“Caught your breath? Let’s go again. As slowly as you can, almost without moving, so that the water remains still.”

Eighteen seconds. The quality of the pictures wasn’t immediately evident from the camera display – Matěj would have to use his laptop for a closer examination. Nonetheless, he felt good about what he had taken.

“So, one last time. Ready? Try to turn round and lie down in the water on your stomach.”

Věra knelt down, spread out her arms, and again gradually exhaled through her nose. At first she touched the base of the lake with her toes, but then her footing gave way. The last air in her lungs bubbled around her head.

Matěj took his pictures through the water, and then, with his right hand, grabbed the model around her waist and yanked her up. In his left hand, the camera was manoeuvred in such a way as to keep it dry from both the lake and the splattering rain. “Bit over-enthusiastic, aren’t we? You know, sooner or later you would have ended up inhaling water, you silly girl.”

“Why are you photographing me in the process of drowning?”

“I don’t know. The surface is like its own lens. It deforms you just a little – but not too much. Enough to change you ever so slightly. Věra floating in the streams of time...”

“I think you’re trying to get rid of me.”

“Don’t say that. It’s the opposite. Look at this...” Matěj took Věra under his umbrella and showed her three of what he considered the best photos of the day.

“Nice. But when I was looking up at you through the water, you looked to me like some ugly silhouette with a big black head. She pointed to the shape of the umbrella. “Someone very distant. A green-eyed Martian.”

The pair made their way to the shore.

“I only have a couple of ones that worked. It isn’t easy to take pictures like that. So thank you for going through such hardship for me.”

The man sitting on the nearby bench threw in his lot: “I was starting to think I’d have to call an ambulance.”

“Well, thanks for holding off!” responded Matěj.

“Have some hot tea,” said the man turning to his thermos.

“Thanks,” said the soaked model, gratefully accepting a freshly poured cup.

The man turned to the photographer: “You certainly put her through her paces...”

“Part of the job, I’m afraid,” Matěj laughed.

Věra returned the thermos lid. “Really! He was just trying to get the best possible picture.”

“Just so you don’t regret such silly stunts – both of you.”

“Thanks, all the same,” replied Matěj impatiently. The dripping pair, shoes in hands, and with the precious camera safely in Matěj’s rucksack, headed back to the parking lot.

[...]

CLICK

He knocked on the bathroom door. “Can I come in?”

“OK...”

The bathroom felt like a sauna, the mirror opaquely fogged over. Věra lay in the bath under a blanket of foam. Eyes closed. Her head, neck, shoulders and breasts were visible above the water. Matěj had a laptop in his hands. But upon sighting her in this pose, he instead asked permission to take some fresh photographs. Věra opened her eyes and shook her head.

He sat down at the edge of the bath, and proceeded to show Věra the pictures he’d posted, along with the feedback from readers.

“You’re over the moon like some schoolboy,” Věra exclaimed, giving in to the urge to laugh along at some of the comments.

For example reader “Figueras” implored Matěj “on my knees” to please let him come and photograph the young lady. Apparently in Portugal, from where he came, the women were nowhere near as beautiful. He even offered 400 euros for a three hour modelling shoot.

“I’ll loan you to him, and we can split the money!” joked Matěj. “We can set up a business. Customers can pay cash in hand, no receipts – after all, it’s hardly worth taxing such an enterprise.”

Věra responded by asking to be left alone, as it was time for her to emerge from the bath.

Matěj replied that he would leave, but only if she permitted him to take her photograph.

She told him to stop trying it on.

He placed the laptop on the washbasin, then knelt down and clasped his hands together as if in prayer. “I beseech you, Věra, the same way that poor Figueras commentator did! I have to photograph you. Surely you can’t refuse me now that I am on my knees...”

“You’re trying to blackmail me again. Give me one good reason why I should.”

“Because we are friends. A band of brothers. A team! The members of a startup which has only now become clear to me.”

“But you never wanted to photograph me nude before.”

“But you’re not nude – you’re covered in about a million bubbles.”

“Oh, go on then,” she finally acquiesced.

Matěj grabbed the laptop and came running back with his camera. He clasped a handful of foam and carefully placed it over Věra’s breasts so as to conceal her nipples. The photographer was careful to avoid any kind of physical contact. Snap went the camera, before he finally left the bathroom.

By the time Věra emerged, a photo from this makeshift shoot had already been posted on Blickperson. Matěj named it: “Věra Tries on Something New”. The picture was dedicated to Figueras, along with a message that there’s no reason why they can’t come to some kind of an arrangement.

Then he began to wait as the photo attracted the vaunted “white circles”. Matěj felt a surge of excitement. There was no way he could sell off his prize model now.

[...]

“What is that?”

“*The Photographer.*”

“Is it about you?”

“It’s a minimalist opera from the minimalist composer Philip Glass.”

“It seems to just go round and round.”

“So do I – in my photographs, I mean.”

“The same kind of minimalism. It doesn’t sound much like an opera.”

“Well, it isn’t Verdi or Puccini. Don’t you like it?”

“No, I do. It’s kind of delicate, but I don’t understand what they’re singing about.”

“Something about horses in the air, an artificial sky, and that this reality isn’t really real...”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s about Eadweard Muybridge. He was a photographer who invented the ultra-short exposure and phased motion photography. He came from the mid-19th century. His sequenced pictures of a running horse was a boon for artists – at last they could see precisely what a galloping horse looked like when frozen in time. I don’t know precisely how Muybridge did it. I imagine that he stood in front of the camera box and used a pair of scissors to snip daylight. Like magician. Because of him, people began to correctly draw animals in motion. Based on photographs. And when the photos were quickly played one after another, then the horses leapt back into action and it looked like they were running before your eyes.”

“Like the frames of a film played back...”

“Precisely. Muybridge was something of a shaggy oddball, and he studied all these things; he travelled around the US taking pictures. And because he wasn’t home much, his wife found herself another man. She and he exchanged letters. But one of them ended up in the hands of her husband. And he went right out and banged on the door of the interloper. The guy opened, and Muybridge showed him the letter. ‘You write that you’re longing for a reply – well, here it is!’ He shot the man in the doorway there and then before turning himself in.”

“You’re joking.”

“Nope. That really happened, pretty much. The funniest thing was that he was then acquitted.”

“What do you mean? I don’t believe it.”

“They really did. The jury found that it was justifiable homicide, and that he was also not of a sound mind.”

“That’s horrible. Thank God he didn’t kill her, too.”

“No, he just divorced her – being a gentleman. After that, he steered clear of women, focusing on research in the field of photography. Had they executed him, then he wouldn’t have been able to do this research and we might all be taking pictures differently.”

They finished listening to the opera. Twice throughout Matěj’s head slumped, but the final act and frenetic ending jolted him back from his snooze.

“The ending was pretty enthralling,” whispered Věra.

“You don’t hear such insane music every day of the week, for sure.”

“What was going through your mind as you listened?”

“The horse and rider. And how those shots perfectly linked into each other. And you?”

“That’s my secret. But I did think that it was kind of about you.”

“Oh, I’m nowhere near as hot-headed as Muybridge.”

“Because you’ve never been in love to that degree.”

“Coming from you...? I’d expect you to dismiss jealousy as an illogical mental manifestation of possessiveness stemming from uncertain males with low levels of self-confidence.”

“Good night, you silly boy...”

“I’m drawing you with the light, can you tell? *Fos grafis*. That means –”

“Enough of the lessons – just turn out the light instead.”

Matěj complied. But his sleepiness had evaporated. The glowing hands of his watch seemed to slow to a crawl.

After a while, he muttered: “Look at us. We’re lying here like some old married couple.”

But by then she was fast asleep.

[...]

CLICK

Two billboards loomed large by the shopping centre. When he stepped out of the bus, Matěj immediately spotted the one hanging on the side wall of a nearby apartment bloc. He turned and spotted a woman with a plastered-on smile and arm raised in the thumbs-up position eagerly promoting “JaS bathrooms – a bathroom for everyone...” Another billboard – standard size and unlit – stood across the shopping centre parking lot. Matěj could only see it from an extreme angle, not to mention the fact that a car partially blocked his view – but even so, he was sure that was the one. He darted off towards it. Just metres away, Matěj sensed the gaze of a familiar pair of eyes. Almost as if they were beckoning him to come in closer.

A streetlight shone nearby. But the billboard was cloaked in semi-darkness. Yet the identity of the person on the poster was perfectly clear.

It was Věra, pictured from her knees up, against a white background or wall, in a golden ratio position. Her thighs were bare and slightly spread apart. She was clothed in a pair of silver-grey knickers, her hips rounded, a pear-shaped waist, and a perfect bellybutton. Just above her waist she wore a yellow jumper, slightly folded up. Věra’s arms were crossed, hands over her elbows. He remembered taking the picture. The contours of her breasts, including her nipples, were just visible under the jumper, supported and lifted just a little by the model’s forearms. Subtle lipstick and a clear pearl white complexion; eyeliner and mascara traced the contours of her eyes, making them appear huge. Her hair was swept back behind her left ear. On her right ear was an earring shaped like a thurible.

The model looked smaller than the billboards ordered by Stellar. Her vertical pose was somewhat lost in the large horizontal image. But all that only helped to accentuate Věra’s almost homely appearance and compact shape, contrasting with the standard look of models selling clothing or cosmetics. Add to that a certain provocativeness, eroticism, and corporeality, which blended with the subtlety of the image. The girl next door, showed-off to the world.

Matěj didn’t know whether to be enamoured or enraged by the work of this unknown plagiariser. He couldn’t see Stellar’s logo anywhere, but it was surely clear that this poster formed part of a ubiquitous campaign – albeit a more risqué, and unabashedly and inappropriately erotic version. Stellar Brusque would certainly not want to be connected with this.

He wondered whether the poster merited legal action. A clear affront, which had turned the entire meaning of the campaign on its head. He could already imagine the angry reaction of left-wing progressives: *a return to the smutty nineties... number one ad firm sinks to*

striptease... so what will the model reveal next?... once she's naked, then the "dinosaur king" Miroslav will be too... or not – after all, he's already shown his true colours...

He called up Věra. As soon as she answered, Matěj exploded in anger. Later, he'd regret shouting at her. But in the heat of the moment, he could not control his rage, unloading a barrage of accusations, questions, fury, and pointedly conveying his overall sense of betrayal. At least his wrath had limited itself to bovine terminology, mental illnesses and low intelligence. Genital phraseology remained limited to his mind rather than tongue.

Věra responded to none of this – she just patiently listened.

He heard her crying, and then fell silent, waiting...

She blew her nose. "Is that all?"

"Is that not enough?" he snapped back.

"You're right," she said with a tone of finality. "An awful lot has happened." With that, she hung up.

Matěj leaned on one of the metal posts under the billboard and then stepped up onto the fender of a car in front. The base of the frame was about two-and-a-half a metres from the ground. Thankfully, no alarm was triggered by the car on which Matěj perched himself. He tapped the light icon on his cell phone and a white beam came on from just under its camera eye. It was the first time he'd ever flicked it on. He'd never used the phone's camera before either.

The light illuminated the background in front of which the model stood. It was too dim to gain a decent look at the foreground. He snapped away, doing the best he could, before jumping back down.

On his way home, Matěj studied the pictures he had taken. They seemed grainy and unpolished – but maybe, he thought, that was just because he was so used to taking more professional photographs with his beloved reflex camera.

[...]

CLICK

Matěj was on the case. He drove to Klimentská, determined to press the doorbell, and to keep pressing, until they finally let him in.

But Mrs. Barvířová just pressed the intercom and buzzed him in, like she knew who was coming. Upstairs, she stood waiting by her open front door. Before he even managed to open his mouth, Mrs. Barvířová told him that her daughter had received a call from her friend (audibly dropping her voice for effect) – apparently he'd been there and would likely now head here. She – Mrs. Barvířová --had offered to go out when Matěj arrived so that he and Věra could duke it out. But her daughter refused and went to him. She would be there in front of the house.

"I know that you won't harm her."

"How can you know that?"

"Because you already have that on your conscience. Even if you didn't do it deliberately. But I can tell that you're not a bad person."

"That's right – I'm not. I'd never lay a finger on her."

"That's not what I meant. It isn't good enough to just not be bad – you have to also be nice to her. And I want you to promise me you will be..."

He promised nothing, eventually darting off down the stairs and heading back home.

CLICK

Narrative, the antithesis of the tripod. A beginning and an end.

An end and a beginning...

She waited in front of the house, wearing a short, light dress. Even from a distance he could tell that there was some guy with her. It wasn't Bob. And probably not her father, either. She said something to him, and the guy wandered off before returning moments later, hands in pockets, a fevered expression on his face. Thereafter, the man never took his eyes off her. She answered before opening up her handbag and showing him something inside. The man laughed, shook his head, and took a backwards step.

And that's the way it was. Anyone afraid of a gun is hardly going to get a girl who's out of her mind.

Věra turned her excessively made-up eyes towards Matěj... then towards the doorbells, and back to Matěj again. She studied him as he approached. Not a word of greeting was exchanged.

He unlocked the door and held it open for Věra, beckoning her inside. She went on ahead up the stairs. He studied her figure, bemoaning that this was surely to be the last time.

“Why are you lugging that gun with you?” he said after glancing at Věra’s heavy handbag.

“Why do you think?”

“We never went out with each other, so you have no reason to kill me!”

“Well, I did go out with you, as far as I’m concerned,” replied Věra.

“I must have missed that...”

“Oh, you noticed. You just acted like you didn’t. You had a plan, and it worked out pretty well. You turned yourself into a camera. But even though you always plan two steps ahead, Matěj, the funny thing is that the only thing you find at the end of all that is yourself.”

“I found you, didn’t I?”

“No. I was just an image. You looked through the real me. And I’m not going to allow anyone to look through me anymore. Not even you.”

Matěj invited her into his flat. “You want something to drink?”

“No, thanks.” She sat down on a chair in the kitchen. “Don’t be mad at me. I’m sorry for what I did to you. I didn’t know how else to shake you out of it.”

“Well, you could have just told me.”

“Then you would have rejected me.”

“You’re probably right.”

“For the first time in my life, I really fell in love. I started to finally think that things are actually going to turn out alright with a guy for once. Or with a *human being*. If you were a girl, I’d feel the same way. You’d still be you. Just a she instead of a he...”

“But we never had anything actually going on between us.”

“Because you were taking your pictures, and they are just a snapshot of reality. But you and I did have something together. And now it has to end. Because it’s all too much for me.”

“When you’re sad, boy are you photogenic! I have to get my camera.”

“See? You’re not even listening!”

By the time he returned, she’d placed her handbag on the table, and was clutching a revolver tightly in her hands.

“Can’t we at least try to see if we are compatible?” said Věra quietly.

“That is something that scares me,” he replied while adjusting the exposure. “We could do it, but then all this longing will be gone. And so will I. I already feel like that anyway.”

“But I’m not prepared to be your model any longer. And either you’re going to have Věra, or no-one. And I’ve had enough of it.”

“You’re making a mistake even bigger than the one you made with that damned photograph.”

“So it’s exactly what I thought – the only thing that bothers you is that you are losing a model.”

“I’m losing myself. A photographer and a model are one way of creating a photograph, and even in this digital era they need to have some chemistry between them – and the two of us had that. A unique chemical magic.”

“Not magic. Something else, but something entirely futile.” She stood up and pointed the revolver directly at Matěj. For the first time it dawned on him that this might well be a life-threatening situation.

“Put that thing down. You look silly...”

“Like you with the camera.”

“I actually prefer you even more when you’re mad like this, Věra.” Matěj knew that the comment was just adding fuel to the fire, but that’s exactly what he wanted. He put the viewfinder to his eye. “Can I take some pictures of you?”

“You’ve done that a thousand times already, so why ask?”

“Only ever with your permission, my love.”

“Well, the shutter can have me...”

They both pressed the button almost simultaneously.