

## HOW TO SURVIVE HITCH-HIKING

‘She wasn’t mad. It was absurd of them to shove her into a madhouse. Her folks. Hey, you know what idiots they were!’

I steer clear of people who believe they’ve been put away in mental hospitals *unjustly*. In films people like that are usually extreme lunatics. (I have a plan: if they ever send me to a *madhouse*, I’ll confess that I AM mad and calmly wait for them to let me out, pretending to take the tablets.) Jelenko didn’t look to me like a person one ought to believe. (Cynics would say *how could you believe someone with a name like that*.) His face was made for wanted posters. He was thin, with long hair. He had the most calloused hands I had ever seen. I was scared witless, but still I was sitting in his car which I had got into of my own accord. ‘It’s lucky I came along,’ he said. I wasn’t entirely convinced, but I nodded affirmatively.

There simply hadn’t been another bus. ‘The miners are blocking the road again.’ ‘The drivers are on strike because their hot meal has been stopped.’ ‘Women are marching on the motorway for their rights.’ In an effort to overcome my boredom and despair, I had tried to explain to myself what I was doing sitting all night outside a closed motel waiting for a bus which wasn’t coming.

They said it would come in an hour or two, maybe three. I could get some refreshment in the motel opposite, they had good brandy — the driver assured me when he made me get off because his *vehicle was really quite unacceptably crowded*. I asked naively how come they hadn’t noticed it was crowded four hundred kilometres earlier, when we set off and when I had bought my ticket. They told me not to worry, that his colleague would be along in an hour or so. Since *the vehicle* was full of smuggled dried meat and cigarettes, the other passengers asked me politely: ‘*Come on, get off, so the customs man doesn’t give us a hard time. It’s no big deal for you if you arrive now or in a couple of hours. But our meat will start stinking.*’

It was six in the morning when an ancient Mercedes stopped at the border. It was painted all over (!). The driver seemed somehow familiar. (Hadn’t he played Jack the Ripper somewhere? I tried to remember.) Since this was also the only car that had appeared in the last three hundred and thirty five minutes, my thumb had leapt into the air, quite *independently* of my frozen brain. I don’t hitchhike. NEVER. Not even at the coast. Not even between Ploce and Makarska. Especially not in the dark!

He stopped. I threw my bags in and got in. Inside (compared to the windswept space between the long shut motel and the border post) it was divinely warm.

Some German punker was screaming from the speaker about how he had accidentally blown up his girlfriend the night before. ‘The bus fucked me up.’ My choice of vocabulary surprised even me. But the usual euphemisms didn’t seem appropriate at that time.

‘It’s lucky I came along,’ he said cheerily.

Only a former drug addict could be as thin as this. His long hair, if he washed it, would probably be blonde. He noticed I was staring at him so I looked away.

At a speed of a hundred and twenty kilometres an hour I was distancing myself from my former life. From the miserable editorial office, the weary photographers, the conceited reporters. And the editor, who had been going to get a divorce for seven years now. Because I was *that other half of his soul which was wandering the world through some game of the gods*. Because his wife *treated him like a child*. Because *our relationship wasn’t mere sex*.

There was a large wooden cross, a picture, hanging from the rear-view mirror, a picture of the Virgin in the form of self-adhesive little pictures from *The World of Animals* and some sort of pseudo-African souvenir which didn’t look like anything in particular. Feathers stuck to the roof made the décor look somewhat eerie.

He didn’t seem to notice my paranoia. Jelenko *chattered on* about the house he was building near Sibenik. He had taken some things down there from Frankfurt, and now he was going back with an empty car. His holiday had flashed by, he had to be at work on Monday. When he was on his way to the coast, near Knin, he had picked up another woman who had missed her bus. He preferred driving like that, he didn’t feel sleepy when he had someone to talk to.

What kind of headline would my colleagues from the death notices give to my end? Inspirational: *Led by her thumb to a place of no return; Raped and/or burned; The police shrug their shoulders.* Or routine: *Deadly hitchhike?*

He was still talking. I knew, he was trying to be nice. He was waiting for my attention to lapse. I must not fall asleep, I repeated my new mantra. I must not fall asleep. I must not shut my eyes, which were stinging. Or perhaps I could, just for a second. I'd listen carefully and open my eyes if I heard him move.

I had just taken my first sip of pinacolada on the beach and begun ogling a tanned Italian when the car stopped. *Routine control.* The Slovene police.

They leaned us with our things against some kind of X-ray machine. While a German Shepherd sniffed me thoroughly in a search of drugs, Jelenko whispered *calmly* to me: 'I'm not carrying anything, how about you?'

Then I caught on: God, what an idiot! Forget murder, forget rape, he'd planted drugs in MY things. I heard my jaws knocking together in dramatic crescendos. Was this the end of my career, my youth, my life? Would my mother read in a day or two that 'under a cheese pie, in her rucksack, they had found a kilogram of heroin!' (Or at least grass)?

The three 12-packs of cigarettes I was smuggling *for my own use and as presents* now seemed utterly innocent and my efforts to repack them in biscuit packets comical. I had an irresistible urge to pee. It seemed we'd been standing there for years.

After seventeen minutes of searching, they gave us back our passports and wished us a safe journey. I tried hard not to cry with relief.

'We did well, they didn't bother us for long.'

I hadn't the strength to answer him even for the sake of conversation.

'They sometimes give me a hard time because of the knife, but this time they didn't even look at it. They're probably only looking for drugs and explosives.'

'The knife?' I ask *inquisitively*.

'Yeah, I've got a hunting knife, nothing special, it just looks evil (*he joked*) so they always ask me about it.'

'Of course, a person has to have a knife in a car for *practical reasons*,' I said. I clasped my little Swiss army knife in my pocket. In the worst case scenario, I could always defend myself with my nail-file, scissors, my 4-centimetre knife, miniature pincers or a tooth-pick...

For a while we drove without speaking. We listened to 'his favourite CD'. I didn't dare object to the psychedelic *paroxysms of passion* into which the vocalisation sometimes fell. Exhausted by getting so cold, by my fear and the music, I *drifted off to sleep* again.

The aroma of coffee (like in some advertisement) woke me many hours later. It was day. We'd stopped in front of one of the cafés one calls into to use the toilet. On top of the glove-box (why ever is the glove-box in a car called that? I don't know a soul who keeps gloves in it. Cassettes, condoms, J-cloth — yes, but not gloves. I don't even know many people who use the word glove-box), there was a plastic cup of coffee for me and beside it, on a paper napkin — a cherry pie. I turned to Jelenko. He had wrapped his arms round the steering wheel, rested his head on his shoulder and he was watching me. He said he'd been sitting there for some time waiting for me to wake up. The woman in me was genuinely touched.

I polished off the coffee and pie in five minutes (very unladylike) and we drove on. I was pretty sure by now that he had no intention of killing me. I relaxed. Conversation with him was surprisingly pleasant.

He told me how he had kicked his habit. He'd never used a needle (he had haemophobia so it was impractical to faint every time he stuck himself), only pills. Then he began working as a blacksmith — he shod horses, and they sense when you're not OK. That helped him. He opted for the horses.

His ex-girl-friend's parents forbade her to see him and 'until the crisis passed', they *put her away* in a psychiatric clinic, which completely did for her. Of course, 'she wasn't mad,' he repeated ...

And he went on telling me about his father's death. His childhood with his 'gastarbeiter parents'. His love of the sea.

I started telling him (surprising myself) about my life. I told a perfect stranger about the relationship that had been devouring me like a tapeworm for years. I told him about escaping from further humiliation. About my decision to stop writing for the paper. And stop reading it. To *start again*.

Towards evening we arrived in Frankfurt. We stopped at my friends' house, he took my things out of the car. He went away before they came down to fetch me. He left me his number, asked me to get in touch and to be sure to come to Sibenik next summer.

I said I would, but I knew I was lying. My middle-class attitude would prevail. As soon as I forgot how sweet and *interesting* he was, I wouldn't want to see *someone like that* again.

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A whole eternity had passed since my first and last hitch-hike. When I got to Frankfurt, I told my friends how 'the bus had let me down' and I had 'got a lift from a really great guy' and ... that was all. I mislaid the number he gave me, and somehow in the summer Sibenik was never on my way anywhere. It had been months since I gave Jelenko a second's thought. Until this morning.

I was sitting at the computer, editing the latest edition of the paper. After a prolonged *creative crisis* (as it said in his letter of resignation), the former editor had left his job and joined the diplomatic service. He regularly sent us postcards from his summer holidays, signed by him and his wife, with drawings by their daughter. As I was endeavouring to keep cool with a combined method of iced lemonade — fan — draught, my attention was caught by an apparently impersonal little piece from some freelance journalist. *Thirty-nine year-old J.K., it said, was found murdered yesterday near Karlovac. The police suspect that the motive was theft, and that the murderer was an unknown hitchhiker whom the unfortunate J.K. picked up in his Mercedes, registration number F-BR-107.*

I leant back in my armchair, disagreeably moist with sweat, and closed my eyes for a moment, thinking up a headline.