

# The Poet

Karel Čapek's short story *Básník*,

which was published in *Povídky z jedné kapsy* in 1929.

Translated by Francis K. Johnson.

It was an entirely routine case: at four in the morning a car had run over a drunk old woman in Žitná Street and had sped off. And now the young Trainee Detective Inspector Mejzlík was tasked with finding out which car it was. A trainee inspector takes something like that seriously.

“Hm,” said Detective Inspector Mejzlík to Police Constable 141, “so you saw, from a distance of three hundred yards, the car speeding away and a body lying in the road. What did you do first of all?”

“First of all, I ran to provide first aid to the lady who’d been run over, sir.”

“First of all, you should have observed the car and only then have taken care of the old granny. But perhaps” – Inspector Mejzlík scratched his head – “perhaps I’d have done the same. So you didn’t get the number of the car. But did you get anything else about it?”

Constable 141 hesitated. “I think it was a sort of dark colour. sir. Maybe blue or red. It wasn’t easy to see, because of the smoke from the exhaust.”

Inspector Mejzlík frowned. “Jesus Christ! How am I supposed to locate the car? Am I meant to run up to every driver and ask, ‘Did you run over an old granny by any chance?’ Well, what would you do?”

Constable 141 shrugged his shoulders in lower-rank helplessness. “Well, one witness appeared, sir, but he doesn’t know anything either. He’s waiting over there, sir.”

Inspector Mejzlík was feeling more and more annoyed. “Well, bring him over.”

When the witness came over, the inspector looked at his crib sheet and, without even looking at him, asked mechanically, “Name and address?”

The answer came loud and clear. “Jan Králík, mechanical engineering student.”

“So you were present at four o’clock this morning when an unidentified car ran over Božena Macháčková.”

“Yes, and I can confirm that the driver was culpable. You see, Inspector, there was no other traffic on the road. If the driver had slowed down at the crossroads...”

How far away were you standing?”

“About ten yards. I was accompanying my friend from... from a café, and when we got to Žitná Street...”

“What’s your friend’s name? I haven’t got a note of that.”

“Jaroslav Nerad, the poet,” the witness replied, with a note of pride. “But he wouldn’t be able to tell you anything.”

Inspector Mejzlík realised he was clutching at straws. “Why not?”

“Because he... he’s a poet. When the accident happened, he burst into tears and ran off home like a little child. The thing is, we were in Žitná Street when, all of a sudden, a car came speeding up behind us...”

“What was its number?”

“Sorry, Inspector. I didn’t notice. I was just watching as it sped towards us, and I was just saying to myself that...”

“What make of car was it?”

“A four-stroke combustion engine, but I don’t know anything about makes of cars.”

“And what colour was it? Who was in it? Was it open-top or not?”

The witness looked confused. "I don't know. I think it was black, but I didn't really notice because, when the accident happened, I was saying to Nerad, 'Look! Those scoundrels have run someone over, and they're not going to stop.'"

Inspector Mejzlík wasn't happy. "Hm... That's certainly an understandable and ethically correct reaction, but I'd have been happier if you'd noticed the car number. It's amazing, sir, how inattentive people are. Of course you know the driver is guilty, and you know those people are scoundrels, but you don't think to look at the number plate. Everyone can judge, but to observe things really closely... Thank you, Mr Králík. I won't detain you any longer."



An hour later, Constable 141 rang the doorbell at the house of Jaroslav Nerad's landlady. Yes, the poet was at home, but he was sleeping.

A few moments later his little, anxious eyes were peeping round the door at the constable. Somehow he couldn't remember exactly what had happened, but he did understand, eventually, why he needed to go to the police station. But he wasn't keen on the idea. "Do I have to? The thing is, I can't remember anything. Last night I was a bit..."

"Pissed?" suggested Constable 141 sympathetically. "I understand, sir. I've known a lot of poets. So, get yourself dressed, please. Shall I wait for you?"

This led to a discussion between the poet and the constable about the best places to go at night, about life in general, about unusual phenomena in the skies, and many things besides. Politics was the only subject neither of them was interested in. So their journey to the police station was accompanied by a friendly and informative conversation.



Inspector Mejzlík was waiting for him. "You are Mr Jaroslav Nerad, poet. And you witnessed an unidentified car running over Božena Macháčková."

The poet took a deep breath. "Yes."

"Could you tell me what the car looked like? Was it open-top or closed? What colour was it? Who was inside it? What was its registration number?"

The poet racked his brains for a few moments. "I don't know. I didn't notice."

But the inspector was insistent. "Don't you remember any details at all?"

"None at all. I never pay any attention to details."

The inspector assumed an ironic tone. "So if you didn't observe the details, would you care to say what you *did* observe?"

"The general mood. You know, the empty street... the beginnings of daybreak... the woman lying there..."

And then it struck him. "I've just remembered I wrote something about it when I got home!" He rummaged in his pockets and pulled out a quantity of envelopes, bills and suchlike. "No, that's not it," he muttered. "Nor this... Hold on, maybe this." He was staring at the back of an envelope.

"Would you be so good as to show me that?" asked Inspector Mejzlík.

"It's nothing," said the poet. "But if you like, I'll read it to you." At which point his eyes bulged and, drawing out the long syllables in a sing-song voice, he recited the following:

*Dark houses march left right halt  
dawn plays its mandolin  
girl why do you blush  
let's go 120 horse-power  
to the end of the world  
or Singapore  
stop stop the car flies  
our great love bites the dust  
trampled girl flower  
swan's neck breasts  
the drum sticks drum  
why do I cry so*

"That's it."

"Would you mind awfully," said the inspector, "to tell me what that's supposed to mean?"

The poet looked surprised. "Well, of course it's that terrible accident. Don't you understand it?"

The inspector frowned. "I think not. Surprisingly enough, I didn't manage to recognise in it that, on Žitná Street at 4 a.m. on the 15<sup>th</sup> of July, a car with registration number such and such ran over a sixty-year-old beggar called Božena Macháčková; and that she was taken to the General Hospital, where she is in a critical condition. As far as I am aware, sir, your poem makes no allusion to those facts. So, no, I didn't understand it."

The poet rubbed his nose. "The details you've just mentioned are just the raw, outward reality, Inspector. But a poem is the inner reality. A poem contains free, surreal ideas that evoke reality in the mind of the poet. Do you see? Visual and aural associations, for instance. If the reader surrenders to them, he'll understand."

A note of admonishment had crept into Jaroslav Nerad's voice.

"What nonsense, Mr Nerad! Let me have your masterpiece for a moment, would you? Thank you. Right, here we have, hm... 'Dark houses, march left right halt.' Kindly tell me what that's meant to mean."

"Well, that's Žitná Street," explained the poet calmly. "Two rows of houses, you know?"

"And why couldn't it be the Národní Avenue just as well? ... Eh?"

The answer was immediate. "Because that's not so straight."

"Well, continuing... 'Dawn plays its mandolin'... That's fair enough. 'Girl, why do you blush'... Where did *she* come from?"

"The blush of dawn," said the poet laconically.

"Ah! Sorry... 'Let's go 120 horse-power to the end of the world'... What about that, eh?"

"The car must have been coming."

"And was it 120 HP?"

"That I can't say, but it means it was going fast. As if the driver wanted to fly to the end of the world."

"Ah, like that. 'Or to Singapore'... Why on earth to Singapore exactly?"

This was met with a shrug. "I don't know. Maybe because Malaysians live there."

"And what did that car have to do with Malaysians? What, I ask you?"

For a while, the poet knitted his brow and shifted about uncomfortably as if that one had really got him cornered. But eventually he said, "Maybe the car was brown. Something was definitely brown. Why would I have said Singapore otherwise?"

"So there you have it," said the inspector. "The car was red, blue or black. What am I meant to make of it all?"

“Choose brown,” said the poet. “It’s a pleasant colour.”

Inspector Mejzlík read on: “Our great love bites the dust. Trampled girl flower.”  
That’s the drunken beggar woman, is it?”

The poet became annoyed. “I’m not going to say ‘drunken beggar woman,’ am I? She was simply a woman. Don’t you understand?”

“Oh! Right! ... And what about ‘swan’s neck breast, the drum sticks drum’? Is that what you call ‘free association’?”

Here the poet felt really confused himself. “Let me see it again.” He gazed at the piece of paper. ‘Swan’s neck breast, the drum sticks drum.’ What’s that meant to mean?”

“That’s exactly what *I’m* asking,” muttered the inspector rather contemptuously.

“Hold on.” The poet frowned again. “There must have been something there that reminded me of... Listen! Doesn’t the number two remind you of a swan’s neck?” He pulled a pencil out of his pocket and wrote a 2.

“Ah!” Now it was Inspector Mejzlík’s turn to frown. “And what about ‘breasts’?”

“That’s easy, isn’t it? Number 3 – two semicircles.”

“And then you’ve got ‘The drum sticks drum’.” A note of excitement was entering the inspector’s voice.

The poet thought again for a moment. “A drum and drum sticks... A drum and drum sticks... That could be number 5, couldn’t it? Look!” and he drew a number 5. “The belly is like a drum, and above it are the drum sticks...”

“Wait!” said Inspector Mejzlík. He wrote down 235. “Are you sure the car’s number was 235?”

“I didn’t notice the number at all,” said Jaroslav Nerad. “But there must be something in it. Where else could it have come from?” He gazed at the poem again. “And, you know what? That’s the best part of the whole poem.”



Two days later, Inspector Mejzlík paid a visit to the poet. The poet wasn’t asleep this time. He had a young woman with him, and his efforts to find a free chair for the inspector proved fruitless.

“Don’t worry!” said the inspector. “I only popped in to say that the car really did have registration number 235.”

The poet looked non-plussed. “Which car?”

“Swan’s neck breasts, the drum sticks drum,” said the inspector, without stopping for breath. “And Singapore as well!”

“Ah! I wondered what you were talking about for a moment,” said the poet. “So you see – inner meaning. Would you like me to read you some other poems, now that you’ll be able to understand them?”

“Not just now,” said Inspector Mejzlík hurriedly. “When I’ve got another knotty case.”



[TRANSLATIONS FROM CZECH](#)