

***Unidentified Hallucinogenic Object* by Paulina Bukowska**

The neon light wreathed my face in a pale blue glow. I hunched up even more, and stared down at my feet, as they slowly moved across the tarmac, one after the other. When at last I was standing before the gate on legs of rubber, with a great effort I looked upwards. Slowly I let the bitter saliva roll down my throat. A stab of pain in my stomach almost made me jump with fear, and my clammy hands spontaneously clenched in my pockets.

My legs had carried me there on their own. Since my encounter that morning, thoughts had been floating around me like smoke from the Monster's cigarettes, and all I had done was keep walking ahead of me, with that one single face in my mind. Several times I tripped on the kerb, got tangled in my trailing trouser legs and casually adjusted my belt, but I forgot about blushing with confusion. It was extremely rare for me to do such intense thinking; day after day I laid out advertisements for hand cream in my mind, then moved along the same tracks towards the train departure times featured in the paper two years ago. Now not just the rusty cogs had been set in motion, but something else was happening – it wasn't just my nerve cells that were receiving this impulse, the information wasn't going into just one drawer in my mind, it was dropping each of its elements into a different part of my body. Suddenly my heartbeat was more palpable, my stomach was jumping and swelling; clenching unpleasantly, my hands were spitting out slimy stuff and hungrily grabbing at the ever more soggy material. As if roused from sleep, my system was learning to behave from the ground up, though after so many years of monotonous toil (everyday routine – function properly) it had been thrown straight into deep water.

What was happening to make me blush, what was making my hands shake, and my lips purse and relax by turns? What was making my knees weak and throwing my stomach into a nervous spin, making it bump around and climb up my throat?

“You seem to have lost your way, young sir.”

With no need for me to give it any detailed instructions, the trembling young sir's stomach gave a violent leap into his mouth.

“Sorry?” I croaked.

The puffed-up chest in a black suit deflated.

“I cannot let you in, young sir, I probably don’t have to explain why.” He straightened his tall hat and outlined my figure with a silver cane. With a smart flourish he curled his already curly moustache.

Now I didn’t dare move from the spot; I flared my nostrils to draw in as much air as possible.

The man coughed and set his glasses straight.

I opened my mouth, and my fingers snapped in my pockets.

“Do you really understand what is said to you, young sir, or are you exceptionally low ranking, capable only of exhaling and releasing your bourgeois-contaminated breath into our society?” He let all this out in one breath, afraid he might accidentally ingest with the oxygen some elements of the conduct of a person of lower rank.

His pointed black shoes tapped three times against the tarmac, he puffed out his cheeks and raised and lowered his eyebrows by turns.

I did not even shudder – I was completely confused and surprised by this unusual situation.

“Get lost, if you don’t understand what’s said to you! Get out of here – do you get that at least?” He stretched out his arms and began to wave them as if deflecting a ball that kept returning.

“Leave him alone, Edward.”

He emerged from behind the gate.

“What reference do you have for yourself and for this place?”

He inhaled, then blew a stream of smoke into the sweaty man’s face. His carelessly knotted tie, stained with red wine, was stuffed into his trousers, which were tightened with a belt, whereas his shirt was sticking out of his jacket sleeves. On his head, instead of the statutory tall headgear he had a cowboy hat with a shiny star, on which his status shone in block letters: Sheriff.

“Come on.” He nodded towards an area behind his back and pulled the guard by his tailcoat to get him to make way.

I shifted from foot to foot, and with legs melted into steel I crossed the threshold of the city of dreams, something a normal mortal might only fantasise about during his evening bath as he masturbated, imagining families of delight waiting in warm houses

under warm duvets. It was so unreal that as I passed through the gate I discreetly poked the guard in the hip to make sure he wasn't an illusion.

“First time, eh, my friend?” said the sheriff, clamping another cigarette between his teeth and searching in turn through every pocket in each of his pieces of clothing. “No doubt you want to have fun at your dad's expense. A rebel aristocrat from a noble clan who wants to ruin the family at any price to get his independence and set off in search of a normal life. A fat American wife, kids with game boys on the back seat of a pick-up and a faithful dog with a big tongue to lick you behind the ears while you're driving to the beat of country music.”

He held out his hands, full of empty condom packets.

“Have you got a light?”

I shook my head doubtfully, conscious of every tensed muscle.

“Dammit, in that case at least we have a plan for the next ten minutes. Everyone smokes like a chimney here, but no gentleman will give you his match with his clan name and crest engraved on it. Rich fuckers.”

We were moving forwards at a slow pace, with me setting the slower speed as my eyes drank in every passing image, hoping to put them in my mental album later on.

From every window pink, blue, purple and red lights glowed by turns, laying a rainbow carpet at our feet, stroking them and then moving over our thighs, and upwards, where they shook more colours from our heads. Above us, images of housewives went idly by with their petticoats raised higher and higher, daughters with their chests thrown out, busy sweeping the floor with too short a broom, and sweaty plumbers with grease on their faces in skimpy shorts. Billboards have always aroused my curiosity and increased the range of my imagination, but in this case there was nothing extra for you to say or draw, because every feature fulfilled your expectations.

Gradually I was relaxing my muscles and taking steps like any decent person.

Now and then we came across high-born people, who at the sight of me proudly lowered their heads and glared right through me, looked daggers at me, hung and quartered me with their stares, but they did not dare address a word to me.

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones