

Infiltration

A mini-drama on the theme of
Ferdinand Vaněk Today

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Dramatis Personae

Ferdinand Vaněk – a young man

Líba – a young woman

Milada – Líba's mother

Vlasta – a woman of roughly Milada's age

The action takes place in two settings: a production hall, and a smoking area.

1. (voices only)

Milada Coming for a cigarette, Líba?

Líba No.

Milada I've got a whole pack of Spartas. Sure you don't want one?

Líba No thanks.

Milada Have I done something wrong?

Líba No.

Milada So are you just going to stay here and stare at the lights?

Líba I'm sort of tired.

Milada You'll get over it.

Líba I'll come later.

Milada Don't you like him?

Líba Mum, please. Just go for a smoke, okay?

2. The smoking area

(Everyone is either smoking or just lighting up.)

- Vlasta We have chicken on the Feast of Stephen. We prepare it like goose.
- Milada I had a little salad left over, so we had salad with meat loaf.
- Vlasta But you probably had goose, didn't you Mr. Vaněk
- Vaněk No, I don't eat meat.
- Vlasta. What do they teach you in Prague? Not even a Christmas carp?
- Vaněk No, I don't eat any kind of meat at all.
- Vlasta I tell you, Christmas wouldn't be Christmas at our place without carp.
- Milada Exactly. Tradition is tradition and it has to be maintained, otherwise it's not tradition any more.
- Vlasta Right. There has to be carp. And how's your dad?
- Vaněk He's having a little more trouble walking, otherwise he's fine.
- Vlasta That's good. I still remember how you'd come here to see him, Mr. Vaněk You know, if it's all the same to you, I'd rather call you Freddy, like I did back then.
- Vaněk Call me Ferda if you'd like.

Vlasta But I can't bring myself to do it. You're no Freddy, Mr. Vaněk, not any more. Back then you were just a little squirt, now you're an educated man. Your dad was great, he really was, a wonderful chap, always very fair. But the times were different then. So he's doing better, then?

Vaněk Yes, he's feeling better.

Vlasta And you're also feeling good—here, I mean.

Vaněk Yes, certainly, I'm good, thanks.

Líba enters.

Milada Well?

Líba Nothing's happening.

Vlasta They could let us go home, couldn't they?

Milada We're getting paid, so what difference does it make?
Cigarette, Líba?

Líba Thanks.

Milada I must be out of lighter fluid. Have you got a light, Mr. Vaněk?

Vaněk Here.

Líba Thanks.

Milada I'm going back inside to see if they've started up again.

Líba Karel's working on it.

Milada Sure. (*She exits*)

Vlasta You know how it is, Mr. Vaněk. Chinese stuff in a German factory.

Vaněk . . . that Dr. Husák opened.

Vlasta Right, but the times were different then. (*She stubs out her cigarette and exits.*)

3. The smoking area

Vaněk and Líba have a short exchange consisting entirely of coughs.

Líba Should I give you a slap on the back?

Vaněk No, it's just that I don't normally smoke much.

Líba I thought all intellectuals smoked.

Vaněk What kind of intellectual works in a jigsaw puzzle factory for minimum wages?

Líba But you've got a university degree, don't you?

Vaněk As a matter of fact, I have two.

Líba See what I mean? You're an intellectual.

Vaněk Yes, one who works in a jigsaw puzzle factory for minimum wages and lives with his family.

Líba Maybe you got a bad degree.

Vaněk I suppose I did.

Líba I'm sorry, would you like another cigarette?

Vaněk No thanks.

Líba Are you going somewhere after work to celebrate New Year's?

Vaněk Probably not. Thing is, I thought we might celebrate it right here. . . .

Can I let you in on a secret?

Líba What?

Vaněk A secret. About why we're not working now. You won't tell anyone, will you?

Líba I don't know. Probably not.

Vaněk You won't tell anyone.

(Whispers something in her ear)

So, since they work us to the bone here for a pittance, and moreover, since the working conditions in this factory are inhumane, what do you think about it? After all, don't you deserve – I mean don't we deserve – to breathe more freely?

Líba I don't think you understand anything. . . .

And you're an idiot.

(She stubs out her cigarette and exits.)

4. On the production line

(Everyone is working on the line. The rhythm of the dialogue corresponds to the rhythm of the work. Individual phrases can be repeated more than once; otherwise, the scene is structured around rhythm and motion.)

Vlasta No snow this year

Milada Probably won't be either

Líba Just mud puddles

Vlasta Puddles and mud

Milada I'm patching my trousers

Vlasta Dirty old trousers

Milada I'm patching my trousers

Vlasta The patches are rough

Vaněk So throw them out and buy new ones.
Think about it: you live with your husband, who also has
a job, in a two bedroom flat; you eat in the factory
canteen and you have no mouths to feed, so even with
minimum wages you can save enough money from a
single paycheck to buy new pants, isn't that right?

Vlasta Trousers with holes

Milada My knees are in pain

Líba You walk with a cane

Vlasta I'm patching my trousers

Milada My elbows are sore

Líba Aspirin for elbows

Milada Aspirin for headaches

Vlasta Aspirin for backaches

Vaněk But you know that the overuse of painkillers is bad for your health. The company should be providing you with sick leave and compensation for chronic conditions caused by the work process. Isn't that so?

Vlasta Meantime take Prozac

Milada Prozac for you

Líba And Prozac for me

Vaněk Prozac for everyone

Milada Please give us Prozac

Vlasta Prozac, Our Father

Líba Prozac, our daily bread

Vlasta Prozac, deliver us

Vaněk The casual use of anti-depressants may lead to serious psychological problems. The company should provide you with paid holidays, and if that's not enough, you should be allowed to take leave without pay. Isn't that so?

Vlasta Pain in the back

Milada Can't keep my head up

Líba I wonder what's next

Vlasta Which way will the scales tip. . .

Milada . . . with us in the balance?

Líba I wonder what's next

Vlasta So painful a time

Milada Can't keep my head up

Líba I wonder what's next

The Women: We'll end up in the mud

Milada I'm in it already

The Women: We'll end up in the mud

Vlasta I'm in it already

The Women: We'll end up in the mud

Líba I'm in it already

Milada Right, and Karel said they weren't going to give us credit for today or else they'll take it out of our wages and we're also going to have to pay for repairs to the broken assembly line. And that almost no work got done. It's disgusting! So much for your "different time," Mr. Vaněk. . . .

Why don't you say something?

4. The smoking area

Vlasta Anyway, it's a paradox. I mean you, an educated man nattering away with two old women about how they're going to cut your wages because you didn't produce enough jigsaw puzzles. You're an honest man, like your father. What would become of this country if all the university graduates worked in a jigsaw puzzle factory?

Milada They should stop teaching useless things like geography and drawing.

- Vaněk I'm sorry, but that's not the point. In Spain and Greece, for instance, youth unemployment is at about twenty-five percent.
- Milada But the Spaniards are lazy as sin, whereas we've always been a hard-working nation. Tradition is tradition and history is history, you can't change that. This isn't Spain, Mr. Vaněk. Take a walk outside if you don't believe me, and you'll see you're not at the seaside here.
- Vlasta Your father was a hard-working man. He put this factory on its feet, so don't go about looking like a sourpuss because you have to work here. Why, you're completely at home here.
- Milada Everyone has to work, even intellectuals.
- Vaněk I know. I'm only trying to see this from another perspective. For me, these jigsaw puzzles are a pretty accurate metaphor for the world today, don't you feel that?
- Milada You intellectuals always have feelings about things, but what about us? We always end up having to do the work for you, right?
- Vaněk Several jigsaw puzzles mixed up together – an automobile and a wolf with bared fangs: there's the confusion of the world and the impossibility of finding the right piece. *Homo economicus* is just a lost little piece of the puzzle.
- Vlasta You'll say that you've compared a jigsaw puzzle to two old women, and you'll be a hot shot among your own kind, but everyone will go on shitting on us. (*She stubs out her cigarette and exits.*)
- Milada All the same, all you intellectuals will end up on the assembly line. (*She stubs out her cigarette and exits.*)

Vaněk A picture carved up into little pieces, society's innards on display in a toy-store window, but what's to be done with the left-over trimmings?

Líba (*enters*) I think you need to go and explain to the management, and to my mum and Vlasta, how that breakdown came about. . .

Vaněk You know, Líba, one thing I learned when I was abroad is that anyone with his own jigsaw puzzle in his pocket will never come up short. Now if you'll please excuse me. . . .

(He tosses away his cigarette and exits. Líba picks up the cigarette, finishes smoking it, and exits.)

6. On the production line

Vlasta The tomcat's hungry

Milada He's got milk in the bottle

Vlasta A feeder for birdies

Milada Dust on the window frame

Líba The window half open!

Milada The curtains gone deaf

Vlasta Seeds on the balcony

Milada And holes in the carpet

Vlasta Varicose ulcers

Líba The window half open!

Vaněk The tide can't drown out this roaring in my ears.
If I shed my skins, will the rustle drown it out?
Mine, here, forever?

Milada What about yesterday

Vlasta On the morning shift

Milada When tomorrow

Vlasta Not till evening

Líba Must get away from here!

Milada What about today?

Vlasta On the TV

Milada What about last year

Vlasta That too

Líba Must get away from here!

Milada What about a year from now

Vlasta On the morning shift

Milada What about the weekend?

Vlasta From six o'clock

Líba Must get away from here!

Vaněk The rustle of my shedding skins,
Mine, here, forever?

Milada a

Vlasta b

Milada a

Vlasta b

Líba X!

Milada a

Vlasta b

Milada a

Vlasta b

Líba X!

Milada a

Vlasta b

Milada a

Vlasta c

Líba X!

Vaněk Beta, gamma, sigma, pi, epsilon, omicron, tau . . .

Isn't that how it is?

Líba Yes, but when I roll a seven or eleven I'll get my own jigsaw puzzle as a dowry and then no amount of "would you be so kind" will move me!

7. On the production line

(Vaněk is off, smoking in the smoking area. A peeping sound comes from his jacket by the production line.)

Vlasta You've got a phone-call, Mr. Vaněk. . . .

I'll take it to him.

Is anyone up for a cigarette?

(She rummages in his jacket pockets and discovers a recording device. The three women press the replay button and hear their own voices. Vaněk enters.)

Vlasta You've been snooping on us here.

Milada I've got to sit down. This makes me feel ill.

Vaněk I can explain

Vlasta You've been spying on us, pure and simple.

Milada Líba, please don't look.

Líba What's this thing for?

Vaněk It's for my work. I'm actually writing something.

(Milada vomits into a jigsaw puzzle box)

Vaněk In fact, it's more like a social survey.

Vlasta You're making fools of us.

Vaněk No, please, I'm not. I'm actually trying to help you.

- Milada To hell with your help.
- Vaněk I can see why this kind of research can seem a little invasive, but you have to understand that the methodology doesn't permit me to do it any other way because the results would be completely distorted.
- Vlasta You're all so clever, you lot.
- Líba Wipe it out right now!
- Vaněk I can't do it and I won't.
- Líba Well you're just going to have to.
- Vaněk Have to why?
- Líba Because otherwise we'll sue you. We have our rights.
- Vaněk I won't use your names anywhere, of course.
- Vlasta But everyone will know it's us and we'll look like fools.
- Vaněk Not at all.
- Vlasta Yes, fools, and on top of that, they'll fire us, and at our age! All because of you.
- Milada (*wiping her mouth*) You intellectuals always have your own methods and principles and truths, that's for sure, but when it comes to our stomach ulcers, no one gives a damn about them. The thing is, you've got your eyes on the problems of the whole universe, except that your universe is swimming on the bottom of a fancy cup of coffee. And you've been hanging onto your coffee cup so long your hands have turned to china.
- Vlasta Mr. Vaněk, at first I took you for a good person, a fair person.

- Milada Exactly, someone tailor-made for Líba here. But now I see that you're a parasite from another world. A bug from outer space.
- Vaněk I've been putting all my effort into throwing light on your problems. . .
- Vlasta But no one asked you to.
- Vaněk . . . so I could help you find a way out of this situation, d'you understand?
- Líba If you want to help us, then tell us what happened to the production line when it broke down?
- Vaněk Leave that out of it. That's not the issue here. Sometimes you have to give things a little nudge so the problems will come to light and stand out all the more starkly. You can appreciate that, surely.
- Vlasta And you can surely appreciate that you've made lab rats out of us.
- Milada You're a disgusting parasite from outer space.
- Vaněk I'm sorry, but I don't intend to listen to this kind of talk..
- Milada Not so fast, honey.
- Líba You're going to erase all of it and apologize!
- Vaněk Certainly, I'm sorry, and I apologize. But I'm not erasing anything. Now, if you'll excuse me. . . .
- Milada Where are you going, eh? Your shift isn't over and in a little while we'll be celebrating New Years. Surely you're not thinking of going home?
- Líba We're ringing in the New Year in the factory, just like you wanted, Mr. Vaněk.

- Milada What are your New Year's resolutions this year?
- Vlasta I'll bet you're going to quit smoking, right?
- Vaněk Normally I don't smoke much. It's not healthy. And you should give it up too. Otherwise you'll be susceptible to all kinds of cancer—lung, tongue, esophageal, and intestinal. You'll risk heart attacks, strokes, dementia, aging skin, varicose veins . . .
- Vlasta I'm sure that's all very true, but couldn't you just shush up, Mr. Vaněk?
- Líba Shush up, and a happy New Year.
You shit!

*(Líba hits Vaněk over the head with something, he collapses and all three of them tear him to pieces, turning him into a jigsaw puzzle in the rhythmic style of the production line scenes.
Perhaps part of that dialogue could be played, or a song from their youth.)*