

GRUNGIA

A Satire

By Jan Drabek

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Chapter 1

I hate flying. I sit in the first class darkness of a Boeing 747 with an occasional snore. Not mine. I'm wide awake. From time to time a mild tremor shakes the whole scene up, but no one seems bothered, except me, because... I hate flying.

My life's partner slumbers peacefully beside me. She wouldn't dream of allowing her beauty sleep to be disturbed by something as trivial as cruising to Africa through major turbulence. She is charming. I'd say most Wellesley graduates are charming, but there must be exceptions.

Staring into the darkness, my eyes see all sorts of horrors. On the screen a man with a hockey mask skillfully carves up people, but it's nothing compared to what haunts me. I know them well, those demons of uncertain future. What am I headed into this time?

I flick on a reading light and reach into the breast pocket of my jacket to retrieve a telegram folded neatly to a quarter of its original size. I unfold the pronouncement and begin to read it for the umpteenth time.

MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE
FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA
TO: BARTOLOMEJ KOBYLKA, BA
THIS IS TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR
APPOINTMENT AS THE CZECHOSLOVAK
AMBASSADOR TO THE REPUBLIC OF GRUNGIA
HAS BEEN APPROVED BY THE PRESIDENT OF
THE REPUBLIC ON MAY 13, 1992. DETAILS
WILL FOLLOW.
SIGNED: XMXMXX (Undecipherable)

The only details that followed were our airline tickets to Grungia and a voice message on my answering machine. And I still don't know who signed that telegram. Typical post cold-war era accountability – leave no trace.

I set the document down as my mind wanders to that fateful night several months ago...

Directly in front of our house an ancient Honda smashes into an SUV and the whole thing is followed by a sea of obscenity. Twilight time in Bellingham, WA.

On television a couple of guys in Berlin beat down the Iron Curtain with sledgehammers. Ginny, the idol of my life, slaves over a hot stove, producing an outstanding veal Parmigiano.

“So it's over, eh?” she asks.

I love it when she gets mysterious like that.

“You mean like our marriage? Didn't realize it was that bad.”

“Everyone around here thinks he's Jay Leno. No, Bart baby, that's got a while to go yet. I meant Communism.”

I am instantly on the *qui vive*. She's getting political and that's dangerous. Like the time I admitted that I voted for the Democrats and had to go without sex for a full month. Conservatism runs through Ginny's family like hemophilia through the Romanovs.

“Well, I don't know. Gorbachev's still in the Kremlin.”

“Not for long. What do your cousins write from Czechoslovakia?”

“Nothing. And I don't blame them. The Secret Police are still running things in Prague.”

The veal and some baby peas appear on my plate. I contribute Chablis out of a bottle I just opened and let breathe for about ten seconds.

“Hmm...but when it happens they'll have to adjust. Like with Queen's English. They'll have to learn pronto or lose out to the Poles. Every Pole I ever met could recite Shakespeare's sonnets from memory.”

She's kidding, of course. There is a Polish joke on the tip of my tongue, but at the last moment I manage to roll it back. My ears perk up. English is what she teaches at a local junior college and she has a sabbatical coming next year. It's planned for soggy Tofino, where we will watch the Pacific storms from a cabin with a fireplace. Not my favorite place but it will do. Certainly better than bleak post-Commie Europe.

“Tell you what,” she explains. “If they get rid of the Commies in Prague before Christmas, we'll go. I can still change the venue.”

...And the Lord indeed destroyed the Land of the Czech Marxists and Baal worshippers, saying to his servant, dissident George:

“Go to Cerninsky Palace and build there a Ministry of Foreign Affairs that will be proper for all Czech diplomats.” So his servant, dissident George, began building, but the evenings at the palace were still void and without form. What’s more, the spirit of a former foreign minister, murdered by the Reds, kept climbing up and down the main staircase with plenty of Commie ghosts in tag.

One such evening full of atmosphere I am called to the office of some department head that I've never met before.

“Mister Kobyłka, I want you should run the embassy in Grungia.”

“Don’t know how to run an embassy in Asia. I'm an umbrella salesman who is presently here on contract as an English instructor. And I am an American to boot. Haven’t been around these parts since the 1960s.”

“Doesn’t matter what’s now. The future matters. You have been born here, have dual citizenship and will make a good ambassador. You have potential. Also some nice dark suits.”

I promise I’ll talk to my wife. Have learned through bitter experience never to take a step without consulting her.

The department head addresses me on my way out.

“Fine. But before you go to her with this you should know that Grungia is in Africa. *Not* in Asia.”

I'm explaining my diplomatic problem to Ginny in our Prague apartment. Patiently. Sitting down at the kitchen table, I create two neat columns on a piece of paper, labeling one FOR the other AGST. (Before correction the second one comes out as AGHAST – prescience?). Then I suggest we approach the whole thing pragmatically. My wife understands such an approach. Not for nothing is she a genuine native-born Anglo-Saxon. From Seattle. You don't come across many sabras in this state.

Under AGST I put down malaria, yellow fever and AIDS, also the number 26.

“What's that?” Ginny asks, looking over my shoulder.

“What's what?”

“C'mon! The big 26.”

“That's the twenty six tribes that harbor genocidal intentions towards each other, and create the effect of perpetual civil war. Not one but three rebel groups are involved in Grungia. Currently they are fighting among themselves for the right of the final push against the government. Sort of like the World Series playoffs.”

I raise my head. I notice that Ginny has taken down her suitcase and is starting to pack.

“Moment,” I mumble in Czech. “Wait a minute!” I scream in English.

“Don't worry. Plenty of time,” quoth she. “I'm always eager for an opportunity to travel. I love flying.”

Plenty of time? Not really. *I* hadn't even decided yet, but I've already lost. It's Munich 1938 all over again. Once more foreigners have sealed the fate of the Czechs. Without us. It's getting to be a tradition.

As a newly minted ambassador, I am to be instructed in many things, among them the code. Secret code. The Department of Special Communications is above the minister's private kitchen. Here the aroma of the Wiener schnitzel blends with that of the sweat of perennially decoding and encoding men who have been trained at the Ministry of Interior when it was still Red. That's why they are known throughout the ministry as the Men of Coarse Interior.

All is top secret around here. No names on doors. Entrance is gained after pushing a button marked MAIL. Training takes place in offices equipped only with basic metal furniture, according to the template provided by Hollywood movies of the 1950s. The instructor, a true man of coarse interior, is of tall stature and gray countenance. He lacks any semblance of a smile but emits the odor characteristic of the superb brewery in Pilsen.

He explains the basics of the code, using a book from whose red cover an even redder star has been removed. Inside are blank spaces from which terms like "Marxist," "Comrade" and "friendly socialist states" have been deleted. The republic no longer has friends with whom it is bound forever by fraternal love.

Add 'em up, subtract, go to the tables. Add, subtract, tables. In the end it all comes out as *Wxth reverence to yopr yesperday's tplegram*.

The instructor has disappeared, gone for another beer, locking the door behind him. A figure of a workman appears outside the window. I am sure it's my paint-splattered guardian angel. That's before I realize the man is not hovering but standing on scaffolding.

"Are you a man of coarse interior?" he asks, fully enjoying a state in which such insults are now tolerated without the inconvenience of a lengthy prison term.

"No, I'm a diplomat," I reply, holding my head high.

"That's good. They're all agents. Quickly changed the red stars for a Czech lion and they're off again. Where are you going – to America?"

"No. To Grungia."

"The place Stalin came from?"

"That was Georgia. This is in Africa."

"Oh...Hey, have you ever been to America?"

"Yes. Yes, I have. I live there."

The workman deftly lowers himself into the office.

"Really? Where?"

"Bellingham."

"Hey, is that near Shikeigo? That's where I got a brother. Emigrated there in 1968 with his whole family."

He reaches into his pocket and comes up with several heavily used photos. He spreads them on the desk next to my coded message, as if scoring in gin rummy.

I find out a lot about the American economy (it's formidable), culture (very weak), and education (weak to the point of being laughable). Just as I am

about to enter the discussion with clarifying statements, there is a sound in the keyhole and the door flies open. The coarse man returns.

He is aghast.

“This area is top secret!” he manages to get out in the form of an angry hiss.

“Sure is,” my companion assures him.

“Actually we weren’t that much interested in your gibberish. Anyway, my lips are sealed. It won’t get out of this room, you can count on it.

“*Get OUT!*” screams the interior man. “You’ll be sorry about this – *you* can count on it!”

“He’s right. I’m sorry already,” the departing workman mumbles for my benefit.

A squadron of pigeons replaces him on the windowsill. The coarse man spots the birds, takes a couple steps toward them, then thinks better of it. Pigeons make good messengers but lousy spies. He waves his hand resignedly, turns on his heel and exits. The key rattles in the door.

Accorden to yoar ordares, I continue decoding.

Based on my extensive readings I muse on, now in a more serious manner:

Of all the continents Africa is the most solid. There are no serrated, uncertain edges to it, no embarrassing archipelagoes trailing off to nowhere. It’s just one big blob, sitting there contentedly with only Madagascar to keep it company. But unlike Australia, it’s sitting there the right side up. Entirely sure that it has a God-given right to be where it is, the continent exudes confidence. Geographically speaking, that is.

What's more, it isn't a hybrid. Below the Sahara it's all black. The few non-blacks who still hang on don't really belong there. They are an anomaly—a sad remnant of the colonial era. That's my thesis.

Their present situation actually must be quite embarrassing. Because, except for Winnie Mandela, Emperor Bokassa and Mobutu Seke Seko, Africans are poor. And as everyone knows, whites don't like to be poor. They just aren't up to it. Especially not in places where they once used to call the shots.

“Now then... the concept,” announces the head of the Africa department.

“The what?”

“The concept. For what you will do in Grungia.”

“We'll see when I get there. The main thing is to survive all those welcoming receptions. Now that'll require a certain amount of stamina, I hear.”

What the hell, I have already been named ambassador, so why not try a little humor for which I'm famous. Somewhat.

The department's head is not amused.

“No. We have to give it some thought now. Put it all down on paper.”

Under the Bolsheviks the idea of a concept used to serve as a test of sorts. The would-be ambassador formulated it, then defended it before a commission consisting of comrade minister and his comradely deputies. The commission asked him on which continent the country of his assignment was located,

what language they spoke there and whether they had adopted a socialist system. If the candidate was able to answer at least two questions correctly, he was sent abroad. But it was enough to answer only one question correctly – the one about the socialist system – and he was sent abroad, too.

If he answered correctly all three, he stayed at home. He was named deputy minister.

My mind wanders back to my musings on Africa.

Earlier, blacks used to be considered a commodity. Like sorghum and copra. They were successfully harvested by Arabs and white traders until along came Cecil Rhodes and King Leopold, who were among the first to realize that exporting Africans was a terrible waste. A waste because they were badly needed at home to mine cobalt, build railways and mix colonial cocktails.

This commodity of course had to be carefully researched and adapted for its proper use. And so in East Africa the Royal Geographical Society, the Anglican Church and pure unadulterated greed joined hands to do the job. Since Islam has made a few inroads along the coast, it is tolerated as well, but only to add a bit of color to the proceedings. Not to propose anything substantial. After all, they were Muslims.

Instruction in social graces comes next. Despite the fact that at first look the problem seems far more complicated, it is taken care of in one busy afternoon, neatly and efficiently. But after that the degree of complexity increases. After the second and third look, that is.

A husband and wife team of retired diplomats are the instructors. Their task seems monumental. Many of the suits around are purple with lower parts of the sleeves artificially turned up. It's the transitional fashion after the proletarian era and their cut is still far more influenced by Nikita Khrushchev than Pierre Cardin. White socks with dark pants are the *dernier cri*. In one or two cases the present diplomatic avant-garde is wearing no socks whatsoever.

We begin with protocol. Soiled invitations to long forgotten official functions are listlessly circulated around the room.

"You're staring at it like a cow," says my neighbor tenderly to his wife.

The Star of the Grand Cross: worn on the left side of the breast. That of the Grand Officer on the right.

Offering one's hand for a handshake: Must not be too hesitant or too powerful. And the entire palm is offered—not merely two or three fingers. On the other hand we must not reach up to the partner's wrist.

"Or anywhere else," whispers my neighbor with nary a chuckle of response.

Handkerchiefs: For social purposes only white ones are to be used, but they can have lace as well. That is proper for women only, though.

My neighbor with the wife of bovine stares leafs through a booklet entitled Diplomatic Practice which, it seems, comes from socialist times. Suddenly he laughs uproariously. He points, I read:

The process of elimination of the classification of embassy and legation personnel was begun by the proclamation of the Soviet Government immediately

after the Great October Revolution. By the Decree of 4.6.1918 entitled The Abolition of the Ranks of Diplomatic Representatives, signed by V.I. Lenin. In it, in order to establish the principle of equality among all Soviet diplomatic representatives, the official title of polpred has been established for all.

My neighbor slaps his knee and roars with laughter, this time with some justification: Pol definitely means half in Czech and pred in pronunciation comes pretty close to the Czech word for flatulence.

“Jesus, a half-fart!” he screams with mirth. Two pairs of eyes of our instructors give him reproving glances.

This is getting ridiculous. I flee for the sanctuary of my musing.

The colonial era in Africa ended a bit after the last war when Winston Churchill said he wouldn't preside over the dismantling of the British Empire. Clement Attlee (whom Churchill used to call a sheep in sheep's clothing), then had to take over. The sun resumed its normal route and started setting over the British Empire as well, but in East Africa this had already become something of a golden age. Of course, it didn't seem to glitter all that much for the native masses. Unlike other continents, things had been pretty much black and white on the Dark Continent from the very beginning. The imported Indians constituted a bit of an anomaly, so from the Somali coast to the Cape they had to decide whether to play marbles with the blacks or whites. Eventually they learned to speak singsong English and wheel and deal so they could be part of the white gang. But the one thing that the blacks

and whites and everyone else didn't count on was independence.

Good news, bad news. One of our fellow etiquette trainees knows well the residence of the Czechoslovak ambassador in Tikitiki, the capital of Grungia. A skillful plumber, he installed two new bathrooms there. He has been appointed as ambassador to Morocco.

“It’s a castle, sir. A real castle. With banana trees, tennis courts and a swimming pool. Tiled swimming pool. And it’s so big that a trip from the kitchen to the living room will tire you out.”

The first secretary at the Belgian embassy sees it from an entirely different angle.

“Tikitiki, c’est un trou d’enfer, mon ami.”

Tikitiki is a hellhole, buddy.

“Why?”

“Nothing but ritual mutilation of vaginas, spitting cobras and rivers full of crocodiles. Shall I continue?”

“No, I have formed a certain mental picture already.”

That evening I drop in the local pub for an addictive alcoholic drug called *Stara Myslivecka*. I manage nine glasses on an empty stomach. At one-thirty comes a moving farewell from the barman.

“You must have some terrible pain, my friend,” he says.

“Yes, I do,” I reply. “It’s called Tikitiki. With a subtitle of crocodiles and ritual mutilation of vaginas.”

At the consular department I am met by a young man who had sausages and onions for lunch.

“To obtain a visa for entry to the Republic of Grungia will take a minimum of six weeks. It’s done with the aid of our embassy in Moscow and then their embassy there,” he informs me.

The overly painted lady at the ministry’s travel bureau provides me with more bad news:

“Yes indeed, as an ambassador you are entitled to travel first class, but we are allowed to deal only with Sabena. Unfortunately Sabena planes flying to Grungia do not have a first class compartment.”

“And where’d you be going, young man?” asks a saucy cleaning lady bent in front of the consular department with a mop in her hand.

“To Africa,” I answer automatically.

“But Africa is a large continent, laddie. Where in Africa?”

“Grungia.”

“Oh, well, they aren’t represented here in Prague. They work it through Moscow.”

“I know. That’s why it’ll take a long time.”

“Not necessarily. What’re you going there as?”

“Ambassador.”

“Oh well, then don’t let them jerk you off. As a brand new ambassador the Brits will give you a Grungian visa right away. They’re in Thunovska Street.”

Fifteen minutes later I have my passport. Together with information that my wife doesn’t need a visa and a charming smile from the young lady consular officer.

As a bonus the cleaning lady refers me to Lufthansa. They do have a first class and fly to Tikitiki every Sunday and Wednesday night.

“This Sabena business, that’s a scam. The travel office gets a provision from each flight ticket issued. It’s called a kickback,” she informs me.

I had never seen her before. She must be either my fairy godmother or the chief of the ministry’s inspection department working undercover.

All sorts of platitudes emanated from the British, French and Belgians (the Portuguese at least mercifully kept quiet), how for years they had been educating the African natives. But as instructors in the art of self-government all three countries were a bust. One by one the new African countries deteriorated into various kinds of bloodthirsty dictatorships. Or worse, into territories with bloodthirsty factions battling for control. Most became economic basket cases in the process. The touted African leaders who were to lead their nations into greatness were either neatly deposed, crowned themselves emperors for life or embraced socialism with an inhuman face. The structure was built by cold war adversaries who regularly filled their troth with goodies for African allies. It didn’t work. Today the per capita income of the Grungians is lower than that of the Haitians.

There are only a few hours left before departure. I walk in the sun along the quay, biting into a hot dog. All around, my countrymen bite into the same kind of buns, greasing the corners of their mouths. As soon as I notice it, I wipe my own.

Full of nostalgia, I am saying goodbye to the city of my forefathers. Quite appropriately I salute them at one of the refreshment stands with a glass of schnapps called The Grandfather.

A group of tourists passes by with a guide who explains about Prague baroque styles. In German, which is liberally peppered with wrong articles, but I still feel relieved that for half a century now the Germans haven't been in uniform.

While deciding whether to join the long line-up at the toilets I watch the African dawn. It's coming up through the window like silent thunder. Fluffing up my pillow, I'm finally starting to relax... just in time for an unnerving jolt that causes the jumbo jet to shudder as it touches down on the unmaintained runway of the Tikitiki International Airport.

Chapter 2

It's a gorgeous Grungian day. The thermometer shows 103 degrees, there's a light drizzle and the humidity is only 97 per cent. The mood is reminiscent of the inside of a washing machine in the middle of the rinse cycle. In the street next to the embassy a mob catches a pickpocket, gets tired of waiting for the slow motion police. A tire is placed around his head, soaked in petrol, set on fire. It's called the African Necklace and it's a tradition here. Something like Halloween.

The police never arrive. Quite a number of them hang around our embassy, seated astride their aging BMW motorcycles. Their leader is a mildly obese inspector with a swagger stick under his arm. He has put on a gravely concerned face because Ginny is about to take a picture.

Nearby are parked three shiny Mercedes. The one for me has a Czechoslovak flag on its fender. When the time is ripe it will take me to the former British Governor's Palace, which is the dilapidated residence of the President of the Republic of Grungia.

Suddenly there is the sound of sirens. The policemen hurriedly put on white gloves for greater contrast and the motorcade with the motorcyclists in front is set in motion. The president has found the time. We

barrel toward the palace with drivers of less than official cars quickly getting out of the way, knowing well what would happen in this state with a single political party if they didn't. There's a great symbolic meaning attached to African necklaces here.

The ceremony is nothing to write home about. The president's face slopes from forehead to chin at 45 degrees and looks like it's been polished with a soft brush. He's ready with a smile, but not too often so that it doesn't detract from the seriousness of the occasion.

I present him with my credentials.

"Mr. President, I should like to convey to you the greetings from my President who has asked me to remind you of the long-time friendship between Grungia and Czechoslovakia, coupled with sincere wishes that with the establishment of the newly democratic Czechoslovakia this friendship will become even warmer."

I speak with such conviction that the president has managed to find Czechoslovakia on the big map in the reception room. The elegant chief of Grungian police smiles contentedly, the Minister of Foreign Affairs congratulates me, the European Department head congratulates me. So does the chief of the army.

As I pass through the entrance on my way out, I stop to give an emotional 'thanks for the warm reception' to a richly uniformed man... who turns out to be the assistant steward. And then, with all the nervous excitement behind me, I lounge in the back seat of the embassy's Mercedes, telling Charley, the driver, all about his charming president. He listens for a while, then opines simply:

"That son of a bitch!"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jan Drabek was born in Prague. In 1948 his family escaped on skis from the newly Communist Czechoslovakia, eventually making its way to the United States where he finished his schooling and served in the U.S. Navy. He has called various countries in North America, Europe, Asia and Africa his home while working as a taxi driver, refugee resettlement officer, high school teacher, radio broadcaster and an ambassador. Married with two daughters, he is the author of 17 books, both in English and Czech. He conducts seminars on memoir and biography writing and has served three terms as President of the Federation of British Columbia Writers. He presently lives in Vancouver, Canada.