

Make a doctor run

1. An innocent joke

“Make a doctor run” is a game which needs at least one hitchhiking doctor of science and at least two grave-diggers in their official car. The game consists of grave-diggers slowing down as soon as they spot a doctor with his thumb up, so the poor man thinks the car is really going to stop. An experienced hitchhiker would normally hesitate for a while before hitching a lift in the black funeral caravan, but then he would still run to catch it. A car is a car, albeit a hearse. The beauty of the game is in accelerating, slightly, just at the moment when a doctor starts to run and suspending him in that philosophical position. If the running doctor is very stubborn and trudges along long enough and fast enough, the grave-diggers will wholeheartedly take pity on him and stop. If he gives up quickly, he will have another chance next time. The whole game was indirectly made possible by the town council, which built the Institute for nuclear physics in the immediate proximity of the cemetery and its secondary buildings, both a fair distance from the nearest tram stop. None of the grave-diggers knew why the doctors of science employed in the Institute did not tend to drive. Some speculated that it is because of their eyesight, and others say it is because the doctors are so absent-minded that they present a potential traffic hazard. The same people, for example, cite Einstein having never tied his shoelaces and walking the streets dressed as if he were going to the guillotine. Be that as it may, at three o’clock, after working hours, on the road leading to the town one can find a large number of scientists with their thumbs pointing upwards. They normally do it on a fairly long stretch of the straight Cemetery road, before the sharp leftwards bend, where the camber is a few

metres higher than the rest of the ground, forming on both sides a small ravine. On the metal rail that goes along the bend there is a small wreath of dried flowers. That part of the road is very awkward for pedestrians and hitchhiking there can be life-threatening. That is why the doctors try to hitch a lift on the straight part of the road before that Charybdis.

One part of the game is ‘doctor measuring’. Doctors are measured according to the distance between the thumb and index finger as seen a few centimetres in front of the right eye. If a doctor runs up fairly close to the car he becomes big enough to deserve a ride. That is decided by the passenger grave-digger because the driver is of course engaged with events taking place on the road. That is the two players are needed for the game: one for making a doctor run, and the other for taking the measurements. In principle, doctors that do not grow big enough must be content with walking. Interestingly, these types, in spite of their disappointing results never give up hitchhiking; on the contrary, they give themselves to the game with even more passion and determination.

2. The Black Spot

The south wind that blew all weekend turned January into April. The clouds that stacked up at the beginning of the week had for a few days now stood above the mountains.

“I hate April”, said Al while driving along the cemetery avenue towards town, “I feel fatigued by this weather.” “April is a cruel month”, his passenger Mac said, (he bore the surname of a cult post-war politician).

“Pardon?” said Al.

“People mostly die in April. Can you remember last year?” Their black ties and impeccably white shirts under the winter sun were an interesting sight. Al wore a black jacket with silky lapels, while Mac was content with a waistcoat of navy baize. They both looked very sophisticated. From afar they could see a doctor from the Institute raising his thumb.

“It never occurred to me before”, said Al, “how that hitchhiking reminds me of *pollice presso*.”

“Reminds you ... of what?”

“A thumb facing upwards in the gladiator arena. It means amnesty.”

“Shall we make him run?”, Mac said. It seemed as if that would make him very happy. They passed the unfortunate hitchhiker and Al slowed down about ten metres ahead of him. When the doctor in question speeded up, even though it was more of a scurrying than real running, Al accelerated. A tiny bit. He was aware that a body moving behind another moving body cannot immediately estimate the distance. He only needed to accelerate slightly: engage the clutch and gradually step on the gas. In twenty seconds the man was already sprinting. Al was an expert at making people run. Sometimes he just used the clutch, other times gas too. The latter was more difficult, there was always a possibility the vehicle would suddenly jerk and discourage the runner. Most grave-diggers used the clutch, Al was one of the rare ones who was capable of doing it just by stepping on the gas.

“He is getting bigger”, Al said. It meant that the doctor was really trying hard. Mac was holding his thumb and index finger in front of him, as if he was demonstrating the thickness of a book he had read.

“Is he big enough?” Al asked, turning towards the runner.

“Watch how you drive, you idiot!”

“You will vouch that I kept him on gas”, said Al. Obviously that was very important for him.

Somewhere before the bend they stopped and let him get in the car, on the third, auxiliary seat. The doctor’s glasses were misted up.

“Thanks very much guys”, he said. It felt he was going to say something else but he remained silent. The silence lasted for the greater part of the journey, one could hear only the rapid breathing of a man not used to running.

“Low wages, uh?”, Mac said. “And expensive petrol...”

“I don’t drive”, said the doctor while taking his glasses off to wipe. He looked fairly decent without glasses.

“Is it because of your eye sight?”, Al asked.

“No. It never interested me. It seemed a waste of time.”

Again they stopped talking. Terraced town houses passed by as they drove. They were approaching the town and for the doctor the journey was coming to its end.

“We’re sorry you had to run a bit”, Al said, “but the brakes don’t seem to be working properly.”

“Don’t worry”, the doctor said, “I’ve heard about your game. Everybody at the Institute has heard about it. You guys must be having great fun. ”

Silence set in again. Al didn’t know what to say. He was aware there was nothing else to say. Mac seemed slightly uncomfortable. All of a sudden he was very interested in the cars passing them by. Mac loved cars, they were his comfort in difficult situations.

“I need to get out here”, said the doctor by the first tram stop. “This is from my colleagues at the Institute.”

He thrust into Mac’s hand a circular cardboard plate the size of a beer coaster.

“What is it?” Mac asked.

“The black spot”, doctor said. There was a sense of malice in his tone.

When the toiler of science got out, Mac showed Al the unusual object. It was a circle made out of strong cardboard, completely black, with writing only on one side: $E = mc^2$

“What’s this joke?” Mac asked.

“Some fackin’ threat”, Al answered. “ I don’t like it. I don’t like it at all.”

3. Spooky things

By midweek in the managing board of the town cemeteries strange things had started to happen. Some sausages which head grave-digger Krpan had brought in after slaughtering his pig, and which they had dry smoked as a joined effort, became infested with maggots.

“It wasn’t a good smoke”, Al said, “I warned you the smoke was no good.”

“It was a brilliant smoke, Alan”, said Krpez who always called Al by his whole name, “but the trick is in something else.”

“I think it should’ve been done with a saw-dust smoke.”

“The thing is, it’sbeen too warm”, Mac said, “I can’t remember when was ever so mild around this time year.”

“It could be that”, Al said, “ but we should’ve still smoked them on saw-dust.”

Dorica, the woman who looked after the flowers on graves of important people, said she hadn’t seen such large maggots for a long time. Dorica said when she opened the sausage, they began to wriggle. A whole bloody army of the biggest worms she had ever seen. She said they’d reminded her of the worms found in children’s shit. Apart from that they were incredibly wiggly. In any case very strange worms.

“Something’s not right here”, the head grave-digger said, “seems like a dodgy business.”

The same afternoon, a young lady, Dorica, walked into the greenhouse and found that the biggest and nicest rubber plant was drying up. She immediately telephoned the authorities.

“I looked after it with utmost care”, she said through tears, “ it should’ve never happened. “

The head grave-digger Krpan advised her to remove any leaves which were beginning to dry, and to water it every half hour with Biocal solution and nitric fertiliser.

“I shall stay here all afternoon”, she said. That was an important rubber-plant. They used it as decoration at march-past events for the funerals of virtuous people.

They normally organised these events in the central mortuary hall, and for such occasions the rubber-plant would be brought in from the greenhouse. Miss Dorica was very unhappy about its illness.

The following morning when Al came to work, he noticed that both wing mirrors of his Mercedes were broken. That couldn’t have been by accident, so he immediately informed the administration board. That was something that needed thought.

On Friday, just before the weekend, a fatal mistake was discovered. Instead of a seven year old girl who had died of leukemia, an eighty-year old man had been buried.

“All this smells badly”, said Krpan, “those bastards from the Institute have cast a spell on us.”

4. The event

At the beginning of the week the weather was still unnaturally mild. Unseen south winds made lots of work for the grave-diggers. On Monday afternoon Mac and Al set off for a business trip to Bjelovar. Mac was just trying to sort out some messy paperwork when they spotted the doctor who had given them the black spot.

“He’s going to pay now”, Al said. “I’ll make him run to the town centre.”

“It’s better to leave him alone. I don’t like all of this.”

“Shut up and watch.” Al was obviously up to all sorts of unreasonable things. He stopped the car ten metres after passing the doctor and, the same as last time, when the doctor began to run, he stepped on the gas. However, the doctor wasn’t baffled by that. He ran very fast, so Al needed to speed up.

“Just look at this athlete”, said Al, “he’s pretty good.”

“I haven’t seen a big one like this before”, said Mac. With his thumb and the index finger he was measuring the doctor’s size. And really, the running doctor managed to reach the back window. His head was huge.

“There comes another one”, Mac said.

“Where?”

“Behind.”

“It looks like there are more of them. Where are they coming from?”

“Don’t turn! Drive!”, Mac shouted.

Doctors run fast. Much faster than one would expect. The one that was just behind them, the owner of the black spot, took his jacket off and gently swirled it over his head before he throwing it aside.

“The gentleman has made himself more comfortable”, Mac said. “Now he will be coming even faster. ”

“Look! There are two more.”

“How many are there all together?”

“Five”, Mac said.

“Fuck me, they’ve gone crazy”, said Al.

Things became even more serious, yet more doctors joined the race. Their coats were flying, ties floating, glasses smashing upon contact with tarmac.

“I haven’t seen anything like it before”, Mac uttered. “ I don’t like this at all.”

“What a party ”, Mac exclaimed.

Some of the doctors following them made strange signs with their hands. The gentleman who was right behind them took his shirt off, leaving only a sporty vest on which something was written. Another one at the back took his clothes off and continued to run bare down to his waist. White steam rose from his body.

“Jesus!”, Mac screamed, “the old Nobel-prize winner has joined in.“

“This is getting serious”, Al said. The smile had disappeared off his face. The old Nobel prize guy ran with the help of a stick. At one moment someone from the background shouted: “NOW!”

All the doctors started sprinting. They ran incredibly fast.

“Oh my God! ”, Mac shouted. “Step on the gas. “

“What is... what are they doing?”, said Al while turning around.

At the same time the motor of their powerful Mercedes roared intensely. They were approaching the bend.

“Watch!”, Mac screamed. That was the last he said.

5. The grave-diggers' funeral

What does the funeral of grave diggers look like? Professionall, above all. A first class funeral, with wreaths made of roses and orchids, hand written golden letters on black ribbons, a rubber-plant in the room for the march-past. In the place of the accident there were three dead bodies, two grave-diggers and the deceased they had been taking to Bjelovar. The coffin, having been in the back of the car had smashed their heads in the collision- inevitable owing to their speed and the weight of the coffin. The commission which investigated the cause of the accident claimed they had gone through the road barrier as if it was made of paper. The front of the car literally dug into the ground. There were some strange details in the commission's report: there were no signs of braking, and breathless scientists from the nearby Institute for physics were there by the time the police arrived at the scene. One of them, a certain Dr. Jungwirth, doyen of our quantum physics, murmured something odd while looking at his watch. After the funeral the weather changed. Cold winds started blowing and with them came the first drops of snow that winter.

“Lucky the ground wasn't frozen”, said one of the men who dug the graves.