

MILOSLAV BREUER

A CONTRIVANCE OF LIFE

*TRANSLATION AND INTRODUCTORY NOTE BY
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Miloslav (Miles) J. Breuer (1889-1945) was a physician who wrote two novels and dozens of short science-fiction and speculative-fiction stories, both in Czech and in English. His stories appeared both in Czech émigré publications and in Hugo Gernsback's journal *Amazing Stories* (1926-) and elsewhere. The "dean of science fiction" Jack Williamson (1908-2006) has ranked Breuer "among the first and best amateurs" to publish in Gernsback's groundbreaking journal,¹ while science-fiction encyclopedist John Clute (b. 1940) finds Breuer's stories, if "crudely written," to be "intelligent and noted for new ideas."²

Breuer was born in Chicago to Czech immigrant parents. In 1893, his family moved to Nebraska, where he grew up in the local Czech émigré community and his father became a physician. After completing medical studies in Chicago, Breuer returned to Nebraska and settled there, joining his father's medical

practice as well as marrying and starting a family of his own. During World War I, he served in France and then returned to his father's practice in Nebraska.

Miloslav Breuer's works have been included in several anthologies, and a selection of them appeared in 2008.³ "Padělané žití" (A Contrivance of Life, 1943)⁴ is one of his final stories, written after a nervous breakdown in 1942 and the author's subsequent move to Los Angeles, where he died.

"A Contrivance of Life" reflects a nostalgic vision of the family farm in the U.S., where the number of farms peaked at 6.8 million in 1935 and declined to 2.1 million in 2002.⁵ The story's charms include its setting in a European émigré community in a small town, its fantastical vision of the future of cinematic technology, and a title that describes both the content of the main character's filmic creations and his loveless existence.

¹ Jack Williamson, *Wonder's Child: My Life in Science Fiction*, Dallas (Texas), BenBella Books, 2005, pp. 61-62.

² Jaroslav Jr. Olša, *Miloslav (Miles) J. Breuer: česko-americký spisovatel u zrodu moderní science fiction*, Praha, Nová vlna, 2023; John Clute & Jaroslav Olša Jr. "Breuer, Miles J.," in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. Eds. John Clute & David Langford. SFE Ltd/Ansible Editions, 12 Sept. 2022 (accessed 5 February 2023) https://sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/breuer_miles_j

³ Miles J. Breuer, *The Man with the Strange Head and Other Early Science Fiction Stories*, Lincoln (Nebraska), University of Nebraska Press, 2008.

⁴ Miloslav (Miles) J. Breuer, "Padělané žití," in *Amerikán Národní Kalendář*, vol. 66 (1943), pp. 51-55. This is the text on which the following translation is based.

⁵ Jacob C. Toews, "The Disappearing Family Farm" [n.d., after 2001.] (Access 5 February 2023) <https://wildfarmlands.org/the-disappearing-family-farm>

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A quarter of an hour ago, the last pair of moviegoers had already gone to Ploužek's Pharmacy for refreshments, ice cream, lemonade, or something stronger. Lumír Jelínek, the young theater owner, locked the box with the evening's receipts in the iron cash register and took the account ledger from his red-haired ticket seller, bookkeeper, and all-around assistant, Milada Dvořáková.

Lumír shook his head. "I don't seem to be getting rich out of this," he said somewhat ruefully.

"Everything has to start somewhere," the girl consoled him. "It'll work out in the end." She looked up at him, and the expression in her eyes was not only sorry for him but spoke of something more, something deeper. It was truly a struggle for poor Lumír to make the theater profitable.

"I need to check on my equipment..." he said, as if to apologize for not offering to see Milada home.

"I'll go, then," said Milada. "It's not far, and the streetlights are on. Good night! And don't lose hope. It'll work out eventually."

Lumír watched her slender figure receding from the theater building. He felt a certain longing in his heart. He didn't know why. Perhaps it was because he had seen a few young people enjoying themselves in Ploužek's brightly lit pharmacy with its adjoining refreshment room. And he was by himself. He wasn't good with girls somehow, he realized.

Lumír climbed the stairs to the theater's third floor and opened the carefully locked door. In the large room that occupied the whole floor, he looked at the array of equipment, among which he could make out the electrical film apparatus.

"My invention!" he sighed. A little gloomily, he glanced over the various machines.

"I won't work on it any more tonight," he thought to himself.

He made his way to the phone and called his parents' house, telling them he would be staying the night there, something he did about once a week. He carefully locked the door to the room and left the building. He went to the garage, where he kept his small car. He climbed inside and covered the five miles that lay between the town and his parents' farm in a matter of minutes. It was about one in the morning when he reached the farm. Everyone was fast asleep. Since he knew every nook and cranny of his old home, he could easily find his way to bed in his small bedroom, even in the dark.

In the morning, he got up at nine o'clock. His greying father had been awake since six o'clock.

"You look a little sad, Lumír," said old Jelínek when he met his son.

"But what do you mean," replied Lumír. "Everything's fine."

"The theater's not working out, is it?" asked the old farmer. "People haven't got the money for little things like that."

"I've only been at it a year, but it'll work out," Lumír protested.

"You're wasting your time and money," Lumír's father replied. "You were doing all right as a farmer before you went off to college. You'd make a decent living at it here, despite the bad times we have now."

"This would be a waste of all the engineering I learned," Lumír responded, dodging the herd of pigs that his father's farmhand was driving across the yard. "And I don't like farming," he added after a moment.

"But you've always liked it," old Jelinek contradicted his son. "I had to force you to go to school, and now you've got your head full of machines and movies, so that maybe you've forgotten that there are still cows and pigs in the world. You're wasting people's time with those movies." said old Jelinek a little wistfully.

"You know I'm also working on an invention, and there'll be money in it," said Lumír.

The old farmer smiled. "Inventors usually die like beggars and it's usually someone else who gets rich from their inventions. You should marry that Dvořák girl and look after the farm here. You'd do right with about four children."

Lumír blushed but made no reply. The old man said nothing more on the subject he had raised.

"Come with me to the corral, let's take a look at the horses."

"Thank you, Father," Lumír said in response to the invitation. "I have to get back to town and work on my machine."

"Then come see us again soon," old Jelinek called after his son. Then he muttered to himself: "Doggone stupid machine!"

It was already one o'clock in the afternoon by the time Lumír had eaten lunch in town and reached the theater. Milada was sitting in the small room they used as an office.

"It's a beautiful day," she said after they had exchanged greetings.

Deep in thought, Lumír was looking out the window at the blue sky, the green of the adjacent lawns, and the blue of the many flowers growing in a nearby vacant lot. They were much the same color as Milada's eyes.

"What is this invention you've been so wrapped up in all this time?" Milada asked. She was gazing at Lumír with her kind eyes, which the young man hardly seemed to notice.

"It's a secret," he answered. "Wait until I've made a go of it, maybe I'll get rich someday."

Lumír left the room and went up to the third floor, where he locked himself in once again. Milada heaved a sigh, and her gaze wandered through the window to a bed of dandelion flowers in the nearby city park. A moment later, she heard a banging sound upstairs in Lumír's laboratory. Then she turned her attention back to her ledgers.

Arriving at his workshop, Lumír got to work.

"It's all ready for the first test," he said out loud, "and that's what we're going to do now."

He began to insert the film into one of the machines.

For many years, since Lumír's childhood, when sound was added to moving pictures and then color to sound, he had been fascinated by the idea that something new could always be added to the range of sensations that the pictures entertained people with. For years, when he was a student in the engineering department at the university, he had pursued this idea. Why not improve and increase the number of these sensations? If sound, why not smell? If color, why not the sensation of touch? And taste? Taste! That was the hardest part.

So, after his graduation from college, Lumír promptly raised a little capital and devoted himself to the moving-picture theater. He put

great effort into mastering the entire subject of his interest. When business was done, he devoted his spare time to research and working on his invention.

It was a hard life. He had to work day and night. During his youth, he had no time for amusements. When the Czech theater was occasionally playing in Sokolov, Lumír would be tinkering with the cogs of his machine. When young lovers were strolling down Pilsen's main street, Nebraska, after the evening's last screening, he had to rewind the films. All in all, it did not bother him that he had to deny himself the company of girls or good times with them. His father had always been strict and never allowed him such amusements when he was young. For four whole years after his graduation from college, he did not date any girl. Here he was, more than a year into his relations with Milada, and he had to confess that his heart had not yet been melted. Though he would admit that he felt that way about girls from afar, in an idealized sense; but he had no particular desire for any one of them. At most, he sometimes wished he could take some girl out for a walk in the evening and some refreshment after the last screening at the theater.

Now he was about to test his machine for the first time. At one end of the room, a board had been set up to display the projected images. In the middle of the room was a chair. Lumír sat down on it and fastened himself to it with leather straps. On one side, there was a series of levers, knobs, and buttons.

Lumír had to admit to himself that, although he had been anticipating this, it was all strangely compelling. First, the room went completely dark. Then he adjusted a few knobs and pressed a few buttons. After that, he remained sitting quietly. A picture came up onscreen showing the harvest in a wheat field. The balers were clattering, the wind was gently

whistling, and occasionally one of the men shouted something. A golden field stretched away into the distance, white clouds above it. Soon the gasoline from the engines and the smells of dust and straw entered the room. Lumír felt like he was sitting on a tractor; the chair was jerking and rocking him back and forth. His hands were holding the steering wheel and the gearstick to drive the tractor. It all felt perfectly real. A cluster of sunflowers appeared before Lumír's eyes. A moment later, the smell of their shredded stalks came drifting up, and then their broad, green leaves turned up in several sheaves of wheat, tumbling out of the rattling machinery. The steering wheel was shuddering in his hands, and he had to strain to hold onto it. When the tractor changed direction, Lumír had to lean on the sturdy gearstick. The sun was scorching hot; Lumír could feel its actual heat on himself. He was getting tired.

Occasionally, one of the men carrying bales or driving another tractor called out to him. Someone looked at his watch and announced:

"It's noon."

And then, to his surprise, Lumír felt hungry. He had eaten a full meal at Vondrášek's restaurant only an hour before. Now he was eagerly listening for the signal for supper. Finally, somewhere in the distance, an iron bar struck a bell, announcing the supper break. The tractors came to a halt, their motors went idle, and the tumbling of the golden bundles from the balers stopped. The men stretched their legs and arms, stiff from sitting in one position for so long on the machinery. The setting changed as the men walked to supper.

Then came a scene inside a farmhouse room where all was plain and simple. The table was sagging under the weight of various dishes. Such a lunch would have cost a thousand dollars in Vondrášek's restaurant. Lumír saw himself

rinsing his hands in the wash basin, brushing his hair, and taking his seat at the table with the others. Beef, pork, duck, dumplings, cabbage, rye bread with butter...

Lumír picked up his knife and fork, and his mouth was watering so much from the sight of all the tasty food and the smells coming from it that he had to stop the projection machine. Then he put on his coat and rushed past the astonished Milada, out of the building, and across the street to Vondrášek's restaurant, where he ordered a steak with French fries. And yet he'd had had a good lunch only an hour before.

Lumír ate with great gusto. His first test with the machine had been a complete success and proved that it was now possible to replace all the sensations of life at once using a machine.

"This will take the experts by storm," the young man reflected.

He returned to the theater a half hour before it was time for the first screening. He found Milada bent over a pile of papers on her desk.

"Hey there, why so glum?" Lumír asked the girl cheerfully.

Milada bowed her head at first but then straightened up and looked him straight in the eye.

"This is the final notice to pay the electric bill, and we have nothing to pay it with," she announced in a strained voice. "They're going to close the theater on us."

"Don't be afraid," Lumír reassured her. "I'm sure now that everything's going to turn out all right."

"Why do you bother so much with the theater?" asked Milada, with tears in her eyes. "You can see it's going nowhere. And you could be so happy. Such a beautiful farm your father has. He's old and wants to give it up, and..." She blushed and fixed her eyes on the floor.

But there was no time for any more talk. The movie was scheduled to start. Lumír ran the projector mechanically, not even conscious of what he was doing. He was planning a more thorough test of his invention for tomorrow, and his heart thumped hard with excitement as he thought of it.

"This will really be something," he mused. "And they say I have no sense of romance."

Somehow the wait until noon the next day dragged on endlessly for Lumír. He was looking forward to the test of the machine with even greater excitement than he was to selling the patent for it, although he also promised himself that once he had sold the patent, he would get the theater up and running and continue with his research.

Meanwhile, in the booth where Milada sold tickets, she was secretly brooding. "What's wrong with me," she wondered, "that he can't even see me? As if I weren't even there."

She listened as he pounded away at something upstairs again.

"And he's going to waste all his time on that invention! He treats it like some kind of mistress. I wonder what he's got going on up there?"

After the screening, she couldn't help going up to the staircase that led to the upper floors of the theater building.

"I've got a mind to go burst in on him," she thought.

Meanwhile on the third floor, Lumír was getting set up for his momentous test. He strapped himself into the chair, turned down the lights, and when the room was completely dark, he started the motors, and they began to hum one after the other in different tones; and finally, he switched on the projector lamp.

He had it all set up perfectly. On the screen, a beautiful princess was sitting on a throne. She

wore a golden crown and a scarlet cloak; she also had red hair and blue eyes. A burly knight stood in front of her; at the same time, Lumír could feel a sword in his hand and the weight of armor on his body.

The knight was bowing to the princess, and with soaring words he praised her as lovelier than the sun and the moon, promising her his undying devotion in chivalry. The princess stretched out her hand, and the knight was bending down to kiss it when a barbarian king burst into the room with a loud cry. His men-at-arms began to slaughter the princess's guard, the king rushing up to the princess to abduct her. The knight barred his way, and their swords clashed with violent blows. Lumír, pinned to his chair, felt the blows raining down upon him.

At last the fight turned in the knight's favor, the barbarian king was drenched in blood, the princess was swooning, and the floor was stained and spattered.

Meanwhile, down in the office, Milada's patience had worn thin. She picked up a flashlight and tiptoed up the stairs. Outside the door, she hesitated; she was inclined to go back downstairs and give up on her plan, for there were all sorts of strange noises coming from the room where Lumír had holed himself up. At last, she opened the door and stopped on the threshold with a scream. In the bright light at the other end of the room, she could see Lumír dressed like a knight in armor, covered with blood, and everything around him was bloody. At the same time, she could hear a terrible shouting. And there was a strange woman sitting there!

Then she sighed with relief, for she realized that all this was only a movie.

"There! That's how he's been frittering away his time while the theater goes down the drain," she thought to herself. She flung the

flashlight angrily into the room and turned to leave.

The flashlight hit the diligently chugging machine squarely in the center. In the blink of an eye, a long blue spark erupted from somewhere in the depths of the machine. Lumír spun around in surprise. Another spark, and something in the whirring machine began to clank at regular intervals. In the picture, the blood was still pouring and swords still clanging against each other.

Milada cried out. She could not find the door. Another long spark came crackling. The discarded flashlight must have broken something in the machine. Milada screamed several times in succession.

"Oh, Lumír! What's happening here? Save me!" cried the girl, almost beside herself with fright.

In the darkness, Lumír struggled to unbuckle himself from the chair. When at last he succeeded, he turned on the light and rushed over to Milada.

Once the girl saw him coming up, alive, unbloodied, she wrapped her arms around his neck and clung tightly to him. She laid her red hair on his shoulder. Lumír caught the slumping girl in his arms and held onto her to keep her from falling to the floor.

All at once, he became conscious of an extraordinarily strange feeling inside. He had never known anything like it before: something sweet, tender, very powerful. He felt himself to be this vulnerable girl's protector. Not even the finest of his movies had ever stirred such a feeling in him. He pressed Milada tightly to himself and kissed her.

He, Lumír, who had never had anything to do with girls, kissed her, and when she remained motionless in his arms, he kissed her again, many times over.

Suddenly, a pillar of fire sprang up at the far end of the room as if from a furnace. The building began to go up in smoke like paper. Electric sparks were crackling inside the flames. Without thinking, Lumír lifted Milada into his arms and sped with her down the stairs to the street.

There they stood, embracing while the burning building lit up the entire town. By the time the volunteer firemen arrived, there was barely time to save the buildings next door. Lumír and Milada stood some distance away, occasionally kissing each other. People left an

empty circle around them. Only when the fire was dying down did Milada say:

“There, that’s the end!”

“The end? Not a chance,” cried Lumír. “Let’s go to the farm. Father needs help, I need you. What do you say?”

Instead of answering, Milada gave Lumír an even warmer embrace.

A smile on his lips, the thought occurred to Lumír:

“No machine could possibly ever make me this happy!”