

K Is an Aeroplane *By Cosimo Bizzarri*

“Listen son, I’ve already got enough bibles”.

“But I’m not here to sell bibles, sir”.

At the sight of Brother Kapucinsky people usually reacted in three ways. One: they would make the sign of the cross. Two: their face would break into a fixed smile as though to say, “The sooner you go away the better it will be for both of us”. Three: they would run away. The boy spoke Italian with the Yankee accent of someone who had grown up on cornflakes and peanut butter. He wore the much-feared uniform of a Mormon missionary: black trousers, a short-sleeved white shirt, a perfectly knotted tie, a backpack weighed down by pounds of bibles, Mormon tracts, and pamphlets about group sex. The nameplate on his chest stated “Marcel Kapucinsky, the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints”. A very large nameplate. He wasn’t the type you would expect to find in a factory building on the outskirts of the industrial area of Quinto di Treviso. And yet.

In any other circumstances Bepi Guada would certainly have chosen option number three – to run away – but in that moment he was trapped between a lathe and a heap of pallets, concentrated on making a steel prototype. He continued to work, stone-faced, as though the big red-haired American boy with pork-coloured skin and a spotty face, was not stuck there in front of him but was kneeling in front of some provincial church bench in the State of Utah.

“I’m looking for something, sir”.

Bepi Guada continued to tinker with his lathe as though nothing were up.

“Well, let’s hear it, lad”, he said without even looking up. “What are you looking for?”.

“I’m looking for K, sir; for the K factor”.

This time Bepi stopped. The lathe continued to spin for a few seconds before stopping too. Brother Kapucinsky was already standing still so he didn’t have to do anything.

Bepi Guada shouted down to the other end of the factory building.

“Feltrin!”.

A few seconds later a raw-boned man in blue overalls came over to the lathe. Bepi Guada twitched his chin at him and, without a word, the other man took his place at the machine. The lathe began to spin again. Bepi Guada went to the factory building door, followed obediently by Brother Kapucinsky.

Bepi Guada lit a cigarette. He made the gesture of offering one to the Mormon then put it back in his pocket before the boy could respond. Bepi Guada was like an older version of Pinocchio. He had pale wrinkled skin, red cheeks, and the gangling gait of someone who, even though made from resilient material, gives the impression of being about to lose a forearm from one moment to the next. His employees were afraid of him all the same because as a youngster he had broken the collarbone of someone while arm-wrestling and had then taken him to the Treviso hospital on his moped.

“Who sent you lad?”, Bepi Guada asked Brother Kapucinsky.

“Mario Bonera, sir”.

“Mario Bonera the guy working Plexiglas?”.

“Mario Bonera the guy working Plexiglas, sir”.

“And who sent you to Mario Bonera, lad?”.

“Michela Fuser, sir”.

“Michela Fuser the woman making ceramics?”.

“Michela Fuser the woman making ceramics, sir”.

“And who sent you to Michela Fuser, lad?”.

“Alvise Granato, the guy who blows the glass, sir”.

“And him?”

“Mario Merin from Thiene, sir, and Mrs. Lotter from Marghera sent me to Mario Merln from Thiene”.

Bepi Guada’s nostrils puckered into a slight grimace. He always did this before having a last drag on his cigarette. Then he rolled up his shirtsleeves to show a network of thick, hard veins sticking out from almost a centimetre of hair. Marcel Kapucinsky looked away. In the car park there were about fifteen cars, motorbikes, and mopeds, more or less the same number as *Guada and Sons*’ employees. On the other side of the administration block’s window was a wall-clock. It was 2.30 in the afternoon of July 3. The slacks he was wearing were made from flannel. He was dying from the heat. The acne on his face began to be infected by the sweat dripping abundantly from his head. Bepi Guada handed him a Turkish cotton handkerchief.

“What do you know about the K factor, son?”

Marcel Kapucinsky wiped his forehead with the handkerchief.

“I’m studying economics. Not here, though. In the United States, sir. Apart from being a missionary, of course. God be praised...”

“Don’t start.”

“I beg you pardon, sir?”

“Don’t start on about God. I know you lot. You ring the doorbell, pretend to talk about something else and, before you know it – down with the backpack and out with the bibles. That doesn’t work with me”

“I’m not here to sell bibles, sir. Let me explain. I’m studying economics in the United States, I’m writing my thesis on the Role of Faith in Competitive Entrepreneurial Strategies”

“Oh my God”

“You said it this time, sir”

“Okay. Carry on”

“In a book I found a reference to a certain K factor which...”

Marcel Kapucinsky stopped himself and, with an automatic gesture, slipped his backpack from his shoulder, took out a black notebook and opened it at a page he had marked. Then he started talking again, reading from the book.

“I’m sorry. A K factor, as I was saying, *intervenes as a constant in the productive function of North-East Italy and acts as a propulsive force for employment and the general economic process*. That’s all. The book didn’t explain much more. I’ve surfed Internet and searched through books down the whole west coast. I’ve found a dozen references to the K factor, but none of the authors dared inquire too deeply into the question. To tell you the truth, it didn’t seem as if any of them knew what it was”

Marcel Kapucinsky looked at Bepi Guada. Bepi Guada looked down.

The Mormon continued.

“Don’t tell anybody, but when they sent me to Italy to be a missionary, I thought I’d make the most of it and start some inquiries. I know I oughtn’t to: I’m here to preach, not to study. For something like this they could expel me from the church for ever, but there’s nothing else I can do. I’m fascinated. I’ve asked around. But no one wants to talk about it. It seems

a secret. What is the K factor Mr. Guada? A chemical compound? A revolutionary technology? An agreement with the trade unions?"

For a while Bepi Guada stared at the Mormon's shadow on the cement of his firm's car park. He rocked backwards and forwards in his white-and-blue striped gym shoes with their shock-absorbent, cushioned heels. He grimaced again but, as he wasn't smoking, it could even have been taken for a smile.

"Wait for me here, lad", he said, and went back into the factory building.

The employees began to leave at six. First of all was Tano Zanon who couldn't wait because his son had been born just a week before. His Panda roared off over the pebbles of the garden before the others even had time to get out of their overalls or put down their goggles. Then, one after the other, they all left, whether on an old Piaggio-made Ciao, on foot, or on their bike because they lived nearby and could take a shortcut over the fields. Luciano Feltrin was the last to leave; he had been a widower for three months and often stayed after-hours since those other fifteen buggers were the only family he had left. Marcel Kapucinsky hadn't moved an inch. He stood stock-still with his vacant stare just where Bepi had left him. In some five hours' wait he hadn't taken two steps, he hadn't fiddled with his glasses, he hadn't even sneezed. It might be said that his main business under the blazing July sky had been to find a balance between the heat of his body and that of the open cement space he was planted on. He hadn't managed it. His face was tortured; sweat soaked his armpits. He was overjoyed when Bepi Guada, precisely at seven, pushed the door-bar and stepped out. The head of *Guada and Sons*' lit a cigarette, hinted at offering one to the Mormon, but then put the packet back into his pocket before there was any response. Sniffing the country air, he enjoyed his smoke and finished it off with a wry expression of pleasure.

"Come with me", he said to the Mormon, and went towards a smaller shed set to one side. Brother followed him obediently.

The smell inside was different, mixed. It smelled of paint, tyres, and sawdust. Having passed a mountain of pallets, they stopped in front of a dozen little aeroplanes. To give you an idea, they were from five to seven metres long. Yellow, red, blue, and silver. Some were fully-made and perfect: they only needed a push to take off shakily from the earth and glide soundlessly up into the air – up, up towards the Alps, past Montello and the river Piave. Others, instead, were incomplete stumps, waiting for a soul and an engine, hoping to become motorised. A wooden wing lay on a worktop. Bepi Guada walked along one side and something caught his attention. He picked up a piece of sandpaper from the table, carefully rubbed it over a part of the wing and puffed off a sprinkling of sawdust. He smiled contentedly.

Brother Kapucinsky had never before seen such a place. It was like a miniature hanger. *Guada and Sons*' spoke.

"There are two things I like about planes. First, to start building one you must of course have an aim: to fly. The second, you have to make it carefully because if there's just a single bolt missing it will crash. Are you following me lad?"

"I think so, sir".

"Well then. Since a boy I've always been fixed on planes. I would spend days at a time looking up, hoping to glimpse a white path take shape in the sky. I only read aeroplane magazines. My school-friends' idol was Altobelli. Mine was the Red Baron, the Great War pilot. Do you know who he was, son?"

"No, sir; I've never heard of him".

Bepi Guada shook his head and mumbled something, then began to speak again.

“When I’d finished school I decided to take a test to become a military pilot. They asked me a lot of questions and analysed by body inch by inch. At the end they declared me unfit because I was nearly an inch taller than was allowed for a bomber pilot. I went back home and told my father I wanted to work in the factory with him. My sister joined us a few years later. That was how *Guada and Sons* came about, grew, and became a genuine industry. We built new premises, the one you saw this morning. The old shed, the one you’re in now, was never abandoned. Every evening, for the past twenty years or so, when the last worker goes home I come here to make my planes. I buy plans from the Internet. Then I build them. I’m an expert by now”.

Bepi Guada stopped speaking and happily looked all around, checking out every small plane. When he looked at the Mormon again he had a divine grin placidly fixed on his face. He had the look of an orator who has said just what he had to say and could now move away from the microphone and accept his due applause. His audience, though, was not of the same opinion.

“Excuse me”, Marcel Kapucinsky shyly asked. “But what has all this got to do with the K factor?”

“What’s it got to do with it?”, Bepi Guada burst out elated. “What has *what* got to do with it, boy? Don’t you understand? This old shed is the K factor! Bolts, paint, sheet-metal, stink, hammers. K is an aeroplane, lad! When you’re haunted by a dream like this and have the ability to make it with your own hands then everything runs perfectly. Don’t you understand? A plane; a dream. Mario Bonera, Michela Fuser, Alvise Granato. Everyone you’ve met has a dream inside their own shed. That dream is the K factor you’ve read about in your books. Today my dream is this aeroplane I’m assembling with just the force of my hands and my mind, night after night, for the past bloody six months of my life”.

Bepi Guada lifted up a white cotton sheet to reveal a tiny maroon plane with a white circle painted on its side. Inside the circle was a single letter of the alphabet. Black.

“I finished this yesterday”, he said. “Now it’s ready to fly. Or at least I think so. It’s a two-seater, as you can see”.

Bepi Guada rummaged in the plane’s back seat, took out a pair of aviator’s goggles, and handed them to the Mormon. Marcel Kapucinsky stood still for a few moments. He thought back to the altar in his church in Utah. Then he remembered his thesis, blocked at page seventy-three since he had left the United States. He shifted his gaze to the little, flaming plane and thought that he would have cut a terrible figure even in Mickey Mouse’s garage. He also thought that he had never made a cock-up in his life and that outside there was a pleasant breeze and a twilight evening, both clear signs that God was, for the time being, in a happy state of mind. Then he stopped thinking. He undid his tie and hung it on a hook on the tool-board.

The end.