

**A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE AIRPLANE**  
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translated from the Bulgarian by Zachary Karabashliev

It was spring when they brought it, transported in parts and assembled on the spot within a few days. They positioned it at the end of the village, close to the main road, between the private vineyards and the cooperative apricot orchards. Many outsiders fell into the false assumption that it just happened to be there because of our close proximity to Varna International Airport, Bulgaria's second largest, most modern. They were far from the truth. The locals, however, knew the truth: The white airplane was imported to our village directly from the distant USSR. The airplane was an idea of the local Communist Party leadership and it had been brought from faraway lands with the sole purpose of turning our *model* village into a *unique* one. We had been chosen to be the only village in the Republic with an airplane candy shop. And what a candy shop it was!

In the days after its grand opening, we'd wait with our parents in line for hours to climb up the narrow steps, sit down in the soft seats, and order pastries and Coca-Cola. Waitresses dressed as stewardesses would serve us with a smile. The interior of the airplane was preserved authentic, only the seats faced each other, little glass-topped tables between them, so that together they formed cozy booths.

The manager of this peculiar candy shop was a man named Stoicho. He wore a mustache and a pilot uniform. Stoicho would let every one of us get in the cockpit and vroom a little behind the navigation systems, but only if we didn't touch anything. Sometimes we'd get carried away, grab the steering wheel, and step hard on the pedal as if to take to the air, pulling the whole village behind us, and join the real planes soaring above the airport. Boys. Then Stoicho would ground us with a smack behind the neck and send us back to eat candy.

At the end of this memorable school year, before summer break, they organized a field trip and sent us to clean the area around the Airplane. They landscaped it with grass, flowerbeds, beautiful young pine trees, and planted a group of cypresses that stood tall and slender like watchmen. The area turned into a sort of park, maintained by volunteers and collective clean-ups.

Along with the white metal bird, other changes came to our village. On the main road connecting us to the big city, there was one more bus stop—"The Airplane." The sweaty bus drivers protested for a while, until they became accustomed to the fact that the Airplane was there to stay, and passengers would get on and off that bus stop just as they did at any other.

That same year, the traveling circus, which entertained us every summer, built its pavilion not at the stadium as usual but next to the Airplane. The big village fair at the end of that August turned into a misunderstanding. At dawn, the gypsy vendors put up their stands around the Airplane, while the Ferris wheel, the marry-go-rounds, and the shooting galleries had been erected at their usual place in the village square. So we had to shoot pellets and eat cotton candy at the one place, then run back to buy action-toy Indians at the other.

The Airplane greatly influenced the local social life. Before, we would hang out in the village square( we called it *The Center*), and hide behind the convenience store to smoke cigarettes. Now we began to prefer the more secluded atmosphere around the Airplane. The newly formed park attracted the youth with its new benches, its apricot orchards and vineyards, and its remoteness from the local police station.

That surrounding neighborhood remained sketchy with its large unfinished houses, chicken coops and laundry out back, only now, it had a name: "By the Airplane." The residents of "By the Airplane" began to conduct themselves differently, and alienated themselves a little from the rest of the village, as if ashamed of it. Their kids became cocky, which is exactly why they got beat up after school. And still we watched with envy as they grew smaller, walking down the hill, backpacks slung over shoulders, as if they were headed home not to their chickens but to some exotic island.

Back then, our fathers had good jobs, our mothers had time for us, our grandparents gave us spare change, and we lived just a few kilometers from the largest city on the Black Sea coast, in the only village with an airplane candy shop. Our village welcomed the highest-ranked communist leaders who came on government business or to hunt. Our village also hosted all sorts of foreign delegations. More than one or two heads of state weaved around the sun-baked pavement of the square, dancing the *horro*, and ate our white, honey-roasted breads.

But there was something that tormented the collective consciousness of the local folk. It was a small, tragic secret, unspoken and invisible to the outside world, perfectly concealed by us. The tragic thing was not that we lived in a *village*, but rather that we fervently desired for it to be a *city*. We had everything required to become a city: population, infrastructure, communications, and the people's will. Every year we expected our local Party leadership to solve this problem, but it was always delayed. The reason for this constant delay was that the "higher-ups" had decided to keep our village as a model of socialist life, and not let it become just another little city.

We were sentenced to live in the showcase of provincial socialism. And the Airplane only solidified our status.

Little by little the center of the village shifted toward the Airplane. Its white corpus, the blooming apricot trees, and the nearby vineyards became the places where the most important events of my adolescence happened – first cigarette (Assos), first kiss (Albena), first drink (Almond Joy), first girl (well, almost), first breakup. With time the Airplane evolved from a candy shop into a café bar. They got rid of the old stewardesses, sent them to serve bean soup to the construction workers in the village square cantina, and replaced all of them with one young mini-skirted waitress with a beauty mark on her cheek. Many nights the thought of her made me lose sleep, but she soon married Stoicho the Pilot. The two of them became the face of private initiative, and unofficially began the competition with the village center.

The Center opened a new supermarket.

The Airplane started selling imported chocolate and cigarettes.

The Center renewed the old restaurant and hired live music with a female singer.

The Airplane stayed open until two a.m.

The Center upholstered the old seats in the movie theater.

Stoicho the Pilot struck back by installing the first video player in the vicinity. The effect was indescribable! We just stopped going to the movies—how many

times can you watch "The Magnificent Seven" or "Zorro?" With a small well brandy ("*You better order or beat it kid, this ain't a theater*"), a bowl of peanuts, and a pack of cigarettes, we'd gaze through the thick tobacco smoke at bad copies of *Rambo*

and Bruce Lee movies while straining our ears so as not to miss a word of the poor dubbing. Those were the times.

One day, Stoicho the Pilot was arrested for fraud. The new owner—Valentin—was a member of *Comsomol*, and a slimeball. The older boys claimed that he played pornographic videos in the wee hours and that they had seen them. We would sneak around late at night to try to peek inside, but no luck.

After my middle-school graduation dance, I boozed up on cherry liqueur, and vomited under the wing of the Airplane. Valentin saw me and slapped me in the face so hard, I can't forget it.

One morning, the village woke up to the news that the Airplane had been broken into. The VCR, the TV set, two boxes of cigarettes, alcohol, chocolate—all gone. It was a serious scandal, but the police never found out who did it.

That fall, I started high school in the city, and had to ride the bus. In the beginning, after school, I would still get off two stops before mine, at the Airplane, to hang out with friends, but eventually that got old.

One grayish November day, on my way back from school, staring out the window of the grumbling old bus, for the first time, I saw the Airplane differently. Abandoned, alone, and so close to the International airport it stood, a motionless growth on our model village, above which soared its flying brothers.

I was drafted into the military and forgot about the Airplane. When I returned after two years, I found it run down, beat up, and considerably smaller than it was when I left. Still open. Around it, some new kids hung out, sniffing glue in the bushes. I learned that its owners kept changing, one after another.

The Iron Curtain lifted, Berlin Wall fell, *the changes* came, and the word “ownership” became an abstraction—there was no longer a *Comsomol* to manage the Airplane or rent it out. The Airplane started getting robbed every other month. At first, the police would catch the criminals and lock them up, then they'd catch and release them, then they stopped catching them, and in the end they didn't even bother looking for them.

For a few years, the Airplane shaped up when Tosho, a retired army bookkeeper, took command. He turned it into a base for benevolent alcoholics and headquarters for

moonshine distribution. Toshio the Bookkeeper was clean-shaven always, had rosy cheeks, and spoke politely, but died of cirrhosis. Orphaned, his clientele had to relocate.

No one took a chance at running the Airplane anymore.

One night, they say, it got broken into one more time and savagely robbed. The next morning, the village folk looted the seats and coffee tables, which later could be seen all over the place—in front of bungalows, shacks and trailers. Rumor had it that the Airplane turned into a crack house; the junkies built fires, warmed themselves, god knows what they did in there. I can see what it must have looked like at night: a carved Halloween pumpkin, a hollow womb trembling with flames and quivering human silhouettes.

The last time I saw it was when I came home for the winter holidays. Of the once copious white and proud body, only a small dark gray skeleton remained. Everything of value had been ripped out by people's calloused hands. The village had picked to the bone the abandoned metal bird.

One night, not long after that, gypsies managed to tear it apart and transport it to the port, where they sold it for scrap metal. I imagine its remains, pressed together with other remains, loaded onto a ship under a foreign flag, disappearing into the fogs of the Black Sea.