Tadej Golob

*Virus*

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

chapter 21.

Two days before the end of his two-week quarantine, Taras received a call from Ahlin. It was eight in the morning, Taras was already awake but, with Alenka still sleeping, he ran out of the bedroom with the phone, only answering when he reached the kitchen on the lower floor. He had rather hoped that Ahlin would have given up by then, but he didn’t.

“What’s up?” he answered the phone.

“You’re back at work on Monday, aren’t you?” Ahlin asked.

“Yes, if the test is negative. And it will be. Why?”

“I ask you to adhere to the quarantine rules until then.”

Taras was so surprised that he didn’t respond.

“I ask you to hold out until Monday and not leave your house.”

“And why is that suddenly your concern?” asked Taras.

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Ahlin took the news that he would have to limit himself to the walls of his flat for a week with stoic calm. As the Head of the Ljubljana Police Directorate, he could do most of what he does from home anyway. He sat at his desk, put a sheet of paper in front of him, and made a list of items he should not forget to take with him into this forced isolation. To his surprise he discovered there were negligibly few, that this much-praised digitalisation truly has spread everywhere. He would not really miss anything if he was to simply leave the office, like Taras had done, switching off his computer, checking he has his notebook, and saying goodbye to the surprised Tina, Osterc and an astonished Brajc.

“And what now? What now?” Brajc squeaked. “Didn’t I say so? Didn’t I tell you?”

Ahlin didn’t even possess a notebook, he used his phone for anything he wanted to make a note of.

Every morning he got up as usual at seven, had some breakfast, brushed his teeth and sat at the computer to check the reports that he had asked to be in his mail by eight o’clock. Reading them, he then skyped the leaders of the work groups, expressed his comments or asked for further clarifications. Interestingly, he always switched off the camera on his computer when doing this. To his satisfaction, after a while, on the second or third day of working remotely, his interlocutors also did the same. The only person he talked to with his camera switched on and the only person he missed was his son. But because he missed him anyway, even when he was not in quarantine, he remembered that week as one of blessed peace. He ordered in food, spent an hour a day on his exercise bike setting the difficulty level electronically, and as usual also completed a series of strength exercises – push-ups, plank, bending, sit-ups. In the evening he watched an episode of *Dr House* on catch-up TV and, as usual, went to bed at ten o’clock.

After a week without symptoms, he returned to the Directorate. He enquired about Taras’s group with which he had had no contact during isolation, and found out that Brajc was seriously ill. Of course, he could have called Tina earlier, or anyone else from the group, even Taras… He could have, but did not. Let Kristan do that, it was he who gave them the case, and in doing so humiliated Ahlin into the role of a plain go-between, a conveyer of messages. Unwittingly he also blamed the members of the group, especially Taras, but because Taras was not there, Tina ended up on the receiving end of some of his indignation.

“As was,” was his response when she called him as soon as he arrived back at work, gave him an update on Brajc, and asked how they should proceed.

She understood, she wasn’t stupid. Get on with it as best as you can, there would be no serious implications following this delay, anyway. It was not just their case that was on hold, the entire country was on hold. This was why Ahlin was so much more surprised to see Kristan’s number calling him.

“Hello?”

“Are you at work yet?”

He confirmed he was.

“Wait there, I’ll come in to see you.”

Something was not quite right if the Head of the General Police Directorate decided to call in at a police directorate that had had recent cases of corona virus.

Twenty minutes later he was in Ahlin’s office wearing a facemask and latex gloves. Ahlin wasn’t wearing a mask, neither was anyone at the time at the Ljubljana Police Directorate. He had not received any such instructions and even if he had done, he had no idea where to acquire a mask anyway. Despite this, Kristan’s gear instilled in him a feeling of further subordination. As if he was doing something wrong. He expected a few polite sentences to get the conversation going before Kristan would tell him the true reason for his visit but none were forthcoming. Kristan got straight to the point.

“I wasn’t wrong when I told you there would be problems with Taras.”

Ahlin gave him a puzzled look. Problems?

“Taras is in quarantine. How could there be problems with him?”

“Type in *coronaidiots*!”

He must have appeared confused because Kristan added, “Into Google.”

Ahlin typed *coronaidiots* into the search engine and nodded.

“*Control F: Taras Birsa*,” Kristan instructed.

Ahlin obediently searched Taras Birsa’s name and came across an image shot from behind of a cyclist in yellow-black cycling gear. Wearing a helmet and without the face, it would have been impossible to recognise who it was had the photo not had a caption *One such case on Toško Čelo* and an additional line below *Criminal Investigator Taras Birsa who should have been self-isolating at home because of corona virus.*

“Yesterday I had the minister call in at my office, demanding that I verify whether it really was Taras, and if it was, to dismiss him instantly.”

“And how were you supposed to check?” Ahlin asked.

“That’s the point. He demanded I check the base stations that are connected to his phone.”

“But that’s…”

“Not allowed. Of course it is not allowed. So I replied that I could not do so without a written order. Of course I didn’t get one. Nevertheless, we both know that the idiot in the picture is him.”

Even with a written order, the General Director of the Slovenian Police Force did not have the authority to do this, Ahlin thought to himself. He should have refused and resigned, but such a thing would obviously not have occurred to Kristan.

“And then I remembered, that I am not the person responsible for Taras,” he continued, giving Ahlin a venomous glance. “That someone else’s head is on the line before mine.”

Ahlin didn’t say anything. Kristan too stopped talking so they sat in silence for a while.

“Call him and tell him he should stay at home and only at home. Not to even think about stepping out into to the garden.”

He stood up and continued in a less aggressive way, absorbed in thought.

“I hope that they will forget about him by Monday. With all this shit going on, they almost should.”

The last part sounded like a question. Ahlin shrugged his shoulders, but that was clearly not enough. Kristan still stood there.

“Of course they will. With all that’s going on…” he eventually uttered.

Kristan nodded and disappeared through the door.

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Fortunately he was too weak and his stomach was entirely empty, otherwise he would have vomited. This would probably happen to anyone who had had a tube rammed down their throat and, from what it felt like, the damn thing must reach all the way to his duodenum. His breathing was shallow and his entire body felt that way but at least the nightmare with the ocean filling his lungs appeared to be over.

“Welcome back,” he heard a voice from his left. He tried to turn his head but couldn’t and didn’t really have to. Appearing within his field of vision was someone in a spacesuit with a huge plastic face protector. Unable to see through the fogged-up visor, he assumed from the voice that it must be a woman.

“Can you hear me?”

He made an effort to nod. He was not really convinced that he had succeeded until the being in the hazmat suit also nodded.

“You were in a coma for five days. I must admit that there were not many of us here who gave you any real chances, but look at you now, here you are, on a beautiful day like this. A little weak still, aren’t you?”

The room was bright, the sun shining straight into it. Brajc hated the sun on his head but now he just wanted burst into tears. Tears of joy.

“Basically, well done, Mr Brajc!”

He could hear clapping, applause from a number of people that now, one by one, appeared from the background. He tried to smile but when you have a tube down your throat, that too is rather difficult.

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It felt like returning to work after a longer, summer break. When he was leaving to go into quarantine, the duty policemen at the entrance was not yet wearing a protective face mask, now he had to look at him twice to figure out who he was. It was not only the policeman at the entrance who was wearing one. Everyone he met in the corridor also wore a facemask.

“Taras, they are mandatory,” the colleague in the booth said and offered him a mask through the opening.

“If I understand correctly, I suppose I’ve actually built up immunity to this shit…” he started saying but then just dismissively waved his hand and put on the mask.

Tina and Osterc were already in the office. They had been there for some three hours already. That was how long he had had to wait for the results of the test in the plastic tent in front of the infection clinic.

“It’s negative,” said the young doctor whose jaunty smile was evident even though his face was hidden behind his mask.

“Congratulations!”

He said this with such enthusiasm as if Taras had had to be revived a few times during his illness.

“You can go out into the wide world. One of the few who, in as much as we know the virus, doesn’t have to worry about it anymore.”

“Well, that’s what I wanted to know,” said Taras. “Since this was my only corona virus test, how am I supposed to know whether I actually had it or not? What if it was just a sore throat?”

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. This was the first time he had encountered a patient who showed no enthusiasm for having conquered the illness.

“We should test you for antibodies, but don’t have time for that. But because your wife was positive at the first test, we can assume with a large degree of certainty, that your symptoms were also evincive of corona virus.”

Alenka held his hand. She was also negative.

While they were waiting for the results, Alenka called Andolin, the doctor at the respiratory clinic she had known since they studied medicine together.

“How is Pavle Brajc?”

When she hung up, she looked at Taras. The expression on his face would not give someone who didn’t know him any clues as to what he was thinking.

“Brajc will survive, Taras. You can stop being gnawed by guilt. He is still in ICU, but if things continue as they have been over the last few hours, he will be taken off the respirator.”

Taras didn’t say anything.

And now, as he walked into his office, he thought that Tina and Osterc both looked at him with surprise, even though they knew he was coming.

“You are…?” Osterc asked.

“NAD,” Taras nodded and produced the results of the test from his jacket pocket. “You can hug me if you want.”

Osterc laughed but Tina stood up, walked across to Taras and actually hugged him. He stood there embarrassed, his hands up in the air, and then patted her on the shoulders. She let go of him and returned to her desk. He looked at Osterc and shrugged his shoulders.

“Brajc is better,” Osterc told him. “He came out of his coma yesterday and, if all goes well, he will be taken off the respirator tomorrow.”

“I know,” said Taras. “Is the case still ours?” he pointed to the whiteboard.

“It is,” said Tina. “Unless they forgot to tell us and send us instead to man the checkpoint at Malo Trebeljevo up in the hills on the eastern limits of Ljubljana.”

On Friday he had called her from there. When the government, in an attempt to limit the spread of the virus, prohibited all non-essential travel beyond one’s local municipality, Taras sat at the computer and for the first time in his life familiarised himself with the municipal boundaries of Ljubljana. He found out that he resided more or less on its western limits and that even on his ride to Toško Čelo, he had crossed into the municipality of Brezovica for a short while. On its eastern side, Ljubljana reaches much further into the countryside so on Friday afternoon he had hopped onto his bike, crossed town towards Janče, from there on to Trebeljevo and up to Javor from where he had a nice downhill ride back into town. It was wonderful, especially as he was feeling better, clearly on the mend from whatever it was he had fallen ill with. After Ahlin’s call, he stayed at home on Saturday and Sunday.

“Kristan looked pretty worried,” Ahlin had told him.

He gritted his teeth and stayed at home. Another one of those comments: *Would it really be the end of you if you spent a single day the way that other people ask of you?* The sun was out, persisting in the sky, and were Kristan to appear at his doorstep right then, he would have dragged him into the house and ripped his head off. That way, if he interpreted the regulations correctly, he would not be breaching quarantine.

“Try and find something positive in all this,” Alenka suggested.

“What?” he asked, not hiding his annoyance.

“That it will soon be over,” she suggested.

“Everything will soon be over,” came his reply and she stopped bothering him.

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On Sunday a health inspector called at his home. A man of around forty, as far as Taras could see, though his assessment might not have been reliable with the man’s face hidden behind his mask.

“We have received a report on breach of quarantine,” the inspector said.

“You have?” said Taras. “Just like that?”

“No, not just like that.”

He held in front of him a printout of the photo, the one in which Taras, shot from behind, had just lifted himself up in the pedals.

“And that’s supposed to be me?” Taras asked.

“Isn’t it?”

“I don’t know.” He called Alenka, “Is that me?”

She looked at the photo and shrugged her shoulders.

“It could be anyone.”

Taras signed the statement that the inspector wearing latex gloves held out for him and slammed the door shut in case the man might turn round as he disappeared towards the garden gate.

“He did you a favour,” Alenka said. “Now you have proof, black on white, that you were at home during quarantine.”

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“We checked all the packages that Frank Tepina supposedly received in the period of two weeks before the murder, and among them was nothing that could have contained the bottle. And, anyway, his brother says that he found it on his doorstep with a bow tied around the neck. The neck of the bottle,” she added when Taras gave her a puzzled look. “And no, we haven’t found the bow either.”

Taras gazed at the whiteboard, went over the names, the dates, trying to allow his thoughts to flow freely, hoping they might wash up something useful onto the shore. It didn’t help, no free flow of thoughts was forthcoming. What triggered in his mind was not enough of a flow to start moving even the tiniest water wheel that children used to build on forest streams.

“Nothing,” he said and turned towards Tina and Osterc.

He wanted to suggest they all went for a coffee but then remembered that the entire country is at a standstill, with it also Silva the waitress and Pisker, the place they regularly visited for coffee.

“Would anyone like a coffee?” he asked as he looked in his wallet for change to use in the coffee machine. “To celebrate my return and the return of Brajc to the living.”

He tapped lightly the wood on the surface of desk with his fingers. He really hadn’t expected Brajc to get through this. Sometimes people also survive.

chapter 22.

The Osterc family lived in Planinca nad Jezerom, that was the name of the closest settlement on the western slopes of Mount Krim. From their house they could not actually see Jezero, the village down below in the valley next to a popular small but deep lake amidst the fields in the Ljubljana Marshes, but they did have a nice view of the church of Saint Anne located directly above the lake. It was this view that was to blame for their decision to buy the plot of land, or, to be more precise, Maja Osterc’s decision. Five years after they married and a month after fighting with her parents above whose flat they had been living in a converted attic, the Osterces drove up to Krim with their children, partly as an outing, partly to collect wild garlic. They had a look at Ledena Jama, an ice cave that has not had ice in for quite a few years, not even in winter, and then reached the few houses below the smallest church in this part of Slovenia. The church of Saint Thomas was burnt down in 1942 during the Italian offensive, and restored a few decades later. The church, a few farms, a weekend house and a hunter’s lodge, that was the Planinca they came across and which Maja Osterc fell in love with. Her husband who also liked the place nearly as much, had a few doubts and also expressed them, albeit without much fervour, so they ended up buying their own piece of land. The plot was in the process of being granted a building licence, so they could not have begun building, even if they had had the money. Even before the land purchase went through, Osterc had found a rather unusual solution. They rented the cheapest metal mobile home they could find and had it transported to Planinca. Osterc levelled the ground and once the crane lorry had lifted it onto this flattened area, and they had painted and furnished it with the basics, it appeared like something one could call a home. The idyll lasted until the first winter when condensation inside the house meant they had to move all the pieces of furniture away from the walls, wiping away the droplets appeared on the walls every morning and mopping up the puddles from the floor. Osterc secretly measured the humidity in the house and was shocked to discover that it was at around eighty percent for most of the day. Even with regular airing. It was a reading he preferred not to mention to his wife.

By then, and partly because of this, Maja Osterc had already regretted her decision. Slowly her attitude to the view also changed. When she now looked towards the church of Saint Anne, she thought of the kilometres of dirt road they needed to drive down to reach a solid asphalted one, then the long road across the Ljubljana Marshes and traffic across town before she arrived at Bežigrad Library where she worked or at the nearby Bežigrad School where their sons had since enrolled, and also about the fact that, in the middle of nowhere, their sons are growing up more like bears than humans.

But they had the view, the fresh air, and actual bears in the surrounding forests. Like everyone around there, they had got used to this fact – after dark they simply didn’t go out around the house. They also had the plot which was impossible to sell, and they began giving up on the idea. Just as they had almost forgotten that they had applied for one, their building licence came though. Osterc once again sat at his computer and after days of careful calculations and head shaking, stepped before his wife with the face Saint Thomas must have had when he belatedly looked upon the resurrected Jesus.

“I found something…”

She stood behind him and looked at the screen.

“Packed clay,” she read. “Are you kidding me? What does packed clay mean anyway?”

He wasn’t kidding.

The frame was wooden, filled with straw, covered with slats and plastered with clay. There are various techniques, Osterc chose a barn frame construction, solid spruce beams that he then covered with spruce slats, creating a kind of basket structure, which he then stuffed with straw. Onto four-centimetre-wide slats with gaps of two centimetres between them, he then applied a two to three-centimetre-thick layer of clay. He had arranged for someone to deliver three cubic metres of clay from a site where they were digging foundations, and later bought a bag of clay sold specially for this purpose, which was actually not as good as the stuff he had originally had delivered. He mixed the clay with sand and water, one spadeful of clay to three spadefuls of sand. He intended to fit all the electrical and water installations once the main construction was finished, utilising the hollow space between the ceiling and the upper level floor. He covered the clay with a further layer of spruce slats that had been thermally processed in an oxygen-free chamber, the wood baked at three or four hundred degrees centigrade for twenty-four hours, changing its structure to become more like charcoal. It does not shrink or expand. The carpenter put up the construction as far as the roof, the basic frame, connected with woodworking joints, with pre-cut to size posts and beams.

“The straw costs a thousand euros, and you’ve got your insulation material,” he explained to his wife who still could not reconcile herself to living in a house made of clay. “You’d pay four or five times more for any other insulation material. The clay is two hundred euros including transport.”

“Nice,” said Alenka when they visited. “What about the journey? Do you get used to it?”

In embarrassment Maja Osterc looked at her husband.

“You need to change the clutch more often, that’s the only problem,” he lied.

Because of the steep and narrow road where one often had to move out of the way to wait for a tractor or some other vehicle to pass and then use the hand brake to get going again, the clutch did indeed suffer but of course that was not the only problem. More often the stabilisers went but they were consumables anyway. But if the clay house fulfils their expectations, at least there will be one difficulty less.

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“Brajc was released from hospital,” Osterc announced a week after Taras returned to work.

“Have you spoken to him?” Taras asked.

Osterc nodded.

“I thought we might organise some kind of welcome back party for him. Perhaps at my place up on Planinca. To make up for all the picnics that he always organised.”

Taras nodded, deep in thought whilst checking his computer.

“From tomorrow movement restrictions are being lifted….” Osterc continued and only then did Taras look up.

As if the restrictions on movement affected Taras or Tina. With their police investigator badge, nobody could prevent them from going anywhere.

“You mean, we’d all get together?” Taras slowly began to comprehend.

“Yes, of course, families included…”

He looked at Tina.

“Yes, of course,” said Taras.

“Yes,” Tina added.

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“We’re going on a picnic,” he told Alenka.

“A picnic?”

“*Quid pro quo*.”

She looked at him to see whether he was pulling her leg. Other than shopping, going on a picnic was the one thing that got on Taras’s nerves so much that he consistently avoided both. She was also not very enthusiastic about sitting around on benches, eating and drinking with the occasional game of badminton with the children who happened to be there, hitting shuttlecocks in every direction apart from towards the racket. She had had her fair share of such entertainment and intended to take a rest until any grandchildren come along.

“At Osterc’s place. To celebrate Brajc’s resurrection.”

“When I last saw him,” she said, “it was at a picnic which ended up with resuscitation. Are you sure that by organising a picnic you are giving him the right message, that we’re happy he is still with us?”

Taras nodded enthusiastically.

“It definitely has to be a picnic!”

So on Saturday, a week later, a wasted week in which nothing happened that would move their investigation forward by even a millimetre, Taras set off on his bicycle across the Ljubljana Marshes, uphill for a few kilometres on a road with nice bends and asphalt, towards Rakitna, and then rode down to Jezero where he waited for Alenka. During his descent, about a kilometre before reaching the first village, he came across a bear by the roadside. A bear cub. For the first time live outside a zoo. He noticed it about a hundred metres in front of him and first thought it was a dog. But as, at a speed of around sixty kilometres, he rode past it, this dog stood up on its hind legs and then disappeared into the nettles on the edge of the forest.

Behind the house, or its metal substitute, Osterc had set up a water heating system, thick piping wound into a spiral in which the water would be heated before reaching the shower. Now, in mid-spring, it was barely tepid enough for Taras to have a rinse and change into his jeans.

Brajc looked ten kilos lighter and ten years older. Grey, with translucent, sunken skin on his face. He was not there yet when Taras and Alenka arrived and drove up to the house just as Taras was taking a shower. Stepping out of the car, he smiled with embarrassment when everyone clapped to greet him.

“What did you think, that you’d get rid of me?” he managed to catch his balance after walking with cautious steps the few metres to the table.

He sat next to Alenka.

“How are you, Pavle?”

“Alive. But I do feel a little dizzy, even if I sit down.”

“That’s because of the coma,” said Alenka. “Partial pressure in the body changes.”

Taras appeared round the corner, rubbing his hair with a towel.

It was as if he had not even noticed Brajc.

“Always so nice, our Taras,” Alenka commented. “Finds a way to let you know how much he loves you.”

“Hello Brajc,” Taras said eventually as if they had been for out coffee together only a day ago, or rather, now that going out for coffee wasn’t possible, standing by the vending machine in the corridor at the Police Directorate.

“If we’re all here…” said Osterc looking down the table, “then perhaps we should make a toast with a shot of the best fruit brandy from our neighbour.”

His wife brought a bottle and glasses and placed them before the guests. She gave Taras a questioning look and he shook his head.

There were eight adults and two children who Osterc had entrusted with preparing the fire for the barbeque so there was now a two-metre high flame a couple of steps from the table where everyone was sitting. Attending beside both hosts and their two sons were Taras with Alenka, Tina and Matic, Brajc, and Ahlin to whom Osterc had almost had to explain the concept of a picnic and, when, after ten minutes of monologue interrupted with looks of bepuzzlement, he left Ahlin alone under the vigorous ficus plant in his office, he still wasn’t convinced whether he had promised to come or not.

“Speech,” Tina spoke, “it would be decent if someone made a speech.”

She looked at Taras who was pretending that he didn’t understand.

He was worried about this picnic. Alenka was there and Tina was there and he did not want to put to the test the fragile balance that he thought had been established in that field; he would never risk it unless it really was necessary. But because this was for Brajc, and Tina’s boyfriend would also be there, and because it had somehow prevailed that there was nothing going on between them and especially because there *was* nothing going on between them any more… Despite this, returning from using Osterc’s outdoor shower, he was glad to see Alenka talking to Tina and her guy.

“Taras felt ill but I didn’t feel any different to how I usually feel,” he caught her saying.

Alright, whatever. He couldn’t recall feeling particularly ill, but fine.

“In fact, I’d like to say something,” said Brajc and stood up.

His gaze travelled across the faces by the table and he smiled.

“Basically, I would just like to thank you all. It is nice if someone remembers you.”

He paused and stared at the table for a second or so. They all waited, holding their glasses, Brajc included.

“I’d like to thank all of you, but there is someone I need to thank particularly.”

He looked at Taras. Alenka sensed how he tensed.

“But I need to explain,” Brajc continued and looked at Osterc. “Osterc knows my GP. She’s a tiny, thin, annoying woman…”

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After being released from hospital, he needed to go and see her. He disliked going there. She was always rather blunt, to say the least. For years he had to listen to how he only had himself to blame for everything that had happened to him.

“You have high blood pressure but you’re also overweight.”

“Your cholesterol levels are as expected for such a neglected body. Far too high.”

“A worn meniscus. Of course, with the weight it has to carry.”

“Your liver – is white, swimming and soaked in fat.”

And so on. Brajc didn’t dare contradict her, because he knew, of course, that she was right. What was interesting was that she herself was hardly a sporty type. Yes, she was thin, but he had once caught her outside behind the corner from the health centre, nervously and eagerly inhaling her cigarette smoke. Their eyes caught and, if anyone, it was Brajc who felt confused and embarrassed.

“Does it bother you that I smoke?” she asked him when they met again half an hour later in her consulting room.

“No, no, of course not…”

“Well, it bothers me,” she said.

The first kind words he heard her utter were when he came in for a follow-up appointment two months after his heart attack and after he had been going up Rožnik with Taras for a while, more strolling than running, but still.

“You’ve lost weight,” she said, raising her eyebrows.

“I go running,” Brajc said cautiously.

“Running?”

He nodded. Damn it, is something wrong with that?

“That’s sensible,” she said, glancing at him mistrustfully from her chair. “And how long will you continue to do so?”

“I will...”

“Well, we shall see.”

“Look,” she said when he went to see her after he had won his battle with Covid and she looked up from the screen where she had been going through his medical file. “Do you know why you are still alive?”

He shook his head.

“You are alive because of your heart attack. Had it not knocked you out and had you not decided to do something for yourself because of it, you would not be here now.”

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“So,” Brajc ended his speech, “I would like to thank the best boss in the world. Thank you, Taras, and if you’re still up to wasting time on Rožnik with me, I will be grateful. And if I ever whinge about not being in the mood for it, just kick me in the arse.”

He raised his glass and extended his hand towards Taras. Taras clinked it gently with his can of Coke.

“And I thought we were going to listen to how it was me who got you into hospital,” said Taras when the applause and cheering had died down.

“Ah,” Brajc waved his hand dismissively. “When I woke up from the coma and was able to look around, I could see that those on respirators were all as bad as me. Like me and worse. At least those old men weren’t to blame, with me it was my own fault. How come Tina didn’t get it, you spend more time together than we do?”

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Ahlin had a few difficulties at the picnic. What Brajc took for granted and what he seemed to take to like a duck to water – not only Brajc, as he watched them from the side, Osterc looked just as comfortable, even Taras did – this leisurely wasting of time, was not his cup of tea. First he was affected by the shot of brandy that Osterc offered him. He had intended to only take a little sip but Brajc, who after a shy start seemed to have taken over as the master of this ceremony, gave him a stern frown, making Ahlin feel as if they had reversed roles, so he obediently drank the entire contents of his glass and, to general amusement, almost fell to the ground in bouts of involuntary coughing. Unused to drinking, he needed a good twenty minutes to come to again. During this time Osterc managed to tame his kids, and the flames on the barbeque grilled the first batch of meat, sausages and *ćevapčići.*

The atmosphere became relaxed. Osterc’s sons dragged Brajc off to see the Ledena Jama cave. He first told them that he could not be bothered to go but mid-sentence caught Taras’s gaze, dead cool as usual, but with an air of warning, it seemed to Brajc, so he muttered that it probably really is about time to get some exercise.

“It’s only a fifteen-minute walk,” said Osterc, instructing his sons to take care that Uncle Brajc doesn’t fall into the cave.

Taras introduced Ahlin to Alenka. By then he had eaten a *pleskavica* and stopped feeling dizzy. He extended his hand to greet her but then remembered the pandemic and moved it away.

“My condolences,” she joked. “One of the things I would not want to do in life was tame Taras.”

“It’s not that bad,” Ahlin muttered.

Even though they had a common point of feeling uneasy in company neither felt they really fitted into – Ahlin had never before met his subordinates outside the context of work – the conversation didn’t take off. Ahlin answered her questions but that was all he did and, after a few minutes of trying, Alenka seized the first excuse and escaped to talk to Maja Osterc. Ahlin was left sitting with Taras. For a while they stayed silent, then Taras spoke.

“Is there anything wrong with Kristan? He hasn’t bothered me for a few days now.”

Ahlin shrugged his shoulders. After Kristan’s last visit to his office, he hadn’t heard from him either.

“And how far has your case come?” Ahlin asked.

Taras frowned. What annoyed him was this ‘your’ case instead of ‘our’ case. Clearly the direct jurisdiction of the General Police Directorate over the case had gotten to Ahlin more than one would have initially imagined.

“It hasn’t,” Taras admitted. “Until we find out what connects Kovač from Gadova Peč and Tepina from Šentjanž.”

He shook his head. “Of course it is possible that in the meantime the guy will make a mistake and fall right into our hands.”

“There was no third murder, though,” Ahlin commented.

Taras nodded.

“Yes, there wasn’t. Unless, in this crazy situation with corona virus, we missed it.”

.

Ahlin stayed until Brajc retuned and listened to his description of the terribly steep and truly tough hole in the middle of the forest, then he bade farewell to everyone and drove off. He was exhausted.

Taras had promised that he and Alenka would take Brajc home, so could have a celebratory drink or two, but they had to wait for him to fully enjoy his return to the living. He didn’t eat or drink much but talked. Talked as if he had to make up for the week or so he had spent with a tube down his throat. Somehow he didn’t notice that everyone was waiting for him and that the Marshes below them were already sinking into darkness, or that Osterc’s sons kept the fire going strong but this time with their father’s amiable agreement. At an elevation of almost six-hundred metres, the evenings in mid-April were still very cold.

Who knows how long Brajc would have carried on had Taras’s phone not rung. He moved into the darkness away from the light of the fire and when he returned to the table the expression on his face was one that Alenka knew well and could describe in two short words – at last!

“Ahlin called,” he said and looked at Brajc and Tina. “We have a new body. Meet you all at the office in an hour’s time, right?”

“What about me?” said Brajc.

“Have a rest until Monday.”

Brajc thought of the house and the hospital he had spent a full three weeks in, and shuddered.

“I’m coming with you. Osterc will bring me.”

“Where are we going?” Tina asked.

“Styria,” said Taras. “At least I think the place is still in Styria.”

.

“So you spend more time with her than Brajc,” Alenka commented as they descended down the dirt road into the valley.

“We work as a pair. It would be strange if I didn’t.”

She didn’t reply. Taras stared at the road and took almost exaggerated care to avoid the larger stones. In the silence that lasted more or less all the way home, the thought did occur to him a couple of times that perhaps, in Brajc’s case, as far as he was concerned, it might have been simpler if Covid-19 had done its job a little more efficiently.

chapter 23.

There was no traffic and Taras’s new used Volvo was able to evenly slide along the optimum line, which also meant he swerved onto the opposite side of the roadway along the winding route above Kamnik towards the Črnivec Pass. In front of a number of road signs pointing towards a hidden left turn, just as the driver and his three passengers were about to reach the summit, Taras turned off onto a steep hill.

“Podvo…” Tina tried to read the signpost.

She was sitting next to Taras. In the back, Brajc was already asleep. Osterc was awake but had not said a word for the entire duration of their journey.

“Podvolovjek,” Taras helped her.

It was as if he was driving home. He did not need to use his phone to choose the best route. Well, it would have been pointless to try and find anything on his phone anyway. To Tina, the names of these hamlets they were travelling through meant nothing. Just as she had never heard of their destination: Sveti Duh pod Olševo?

“It’s right above Solčava,” he explained.

“I suppose it would help if I knew where Solčava was.”

“Just before you get to the Logar Valley… Above it, to the right.”

Whatever. Despite the fact that she had been looking out of the window, she would still need to use her phone to find it next time. It was dark now. Only the occasional light in some of the larger settlements. Not a soul to be seen. Was that because of this virus, or was it always like this?

In Solčava (that was one sign she managed to read), they turned right and uphill. The road narrowed into a continuous long bend, so even Brajc who had for some time been muttering in his sleep as he was being thrust back and forth from the window on his right towards Osterc’s shoulder on his left, now woke up and peered, his eyes still bleary, into the darkness outside.

“Where are we?” he asked once the wiring between his brain and the muscles responsible for speech had reconnected.

“Close,” said Taras when neither Osterc nor Tina reacted, knowing that the name Sveti Duh pod Olševo would ring no bells with Brajc either.

.

After endless bends and an unasphalted section, the road finally straightened. Taras drove up to the police car, one of three that appeared out of the darkness in front of them, parked next to it and switched off the engine. He checked the nearest blue and white van but there was nobody inside. Tina did not wait for him. She walked towards the lights but, before she reached the entrance to the building, the door opened and a uniformed policeman stood at the top of the three steps leading up to it.

“Are you from Ljubljana?” he asked.

“Good evening,” said Tina. “Yes, we’re from Ljubljana.”

“C’mon with me,” said the policeman.

*C’mon*… she thought for a moment, what the hell… but Taras was already following him, so she did too.

He led them into a kitchen with a dining area and a big table at which sat five uniformed policemen and an elderly gentleman in plain clothes. There were cups in front of them with remnants of coffee and an almost empty plastic bottle of milk. Three of them, among them also the plain-clothed gentleman, were smoking.

“Well, well, out from the wild!” he greeted them, clearly addressing Taras. “When they said that they would send someone up from Ljubljana, I never imagined it would be you, Taras Birsa. I’d sooner say I would find you in some jail somewhere.”

Taras laughed, stepped closer to the man and extended his hand. What about corona virus, Tina thought but, shaking hands warmly, both men seemed to be think that the virus had nothing to do them.

“Oh, do sit down. Coffee?”

“Go on, then, why not,” said Taras in an almost indistinguishable switch to casual chaff.

“Well, if anything, I’ve got time and money, right Taras?” the man in plain clothes said.

Taras introduced them. The man’s name was Pinter, and Brajc and Osterc shook his hand. Tina stayed on the opposite side of the table, giving him an embarrassed wave.

“Oh, yes, this virus,” Pinter scratched what was left of his hair, encircling most of his bald head like a wreath. “Well, if I drop dead, I drop dead, right?”

Taras nodded cheerfully. Tina still felt uncomfortable as one does in company only just met.

Taras seemed as if he was on home ground.

“We know each other from the Police Academy,” Pinter pointed at Taras. “Now, how long ago was that?”

Taras didn’t help him and Pinter counted the years, trying to remember.

“Back then I was a tamer of people like this guy,” said Pinter without explaining what that was supposed to mean.

Taras was suddenly no longer in a hurry to go anywhere. They were all served coffee made by the youngest policeman in the room, who did not get off without a comment from Pinter that he hoped this round was better than the previous one. He lifted his cup, smelt it, and after some hesitation, as if unable to decide whether it was better or not, put it back down onto the table.

“You have to show ‘em everything, or…” he muttered and then looked up, smiling at Taras. “So, how are you, cadet school legend?”

“Wonderful, and things are getting better,” Taras replied. “So, the parish priest is our client this time?”

Pinter nodded.

“We were given instructions to report to central office if anything bad or outré happened. That is what they said, outré. I had to check the dictionary before I understood what they meant.”

He shook his head.

“And this is bad and outré. Let’s drink this and go to take a look. He’s not running away anywhere!”

“No rush,” Taras added. “I’d like to wait for our forensic. I don’t want to listen to his complaints that I stomped all over his crime scene.”

And clearly he didn’t want to talk about his years as a cadet.

Golob with his team arrived half an hour later. In the meantime everyone finished their coffee and Pinter, who had clearly got the hint, no longer teased Taras. They talked about how things were at their respective work places. In fact, Pinter and Taras did all the talking until Pinter turned to Tina.

“And you’re new?”

“I’ve been at the Ljubljana Police Directorate for over a year.”

She had to think before answering. Had it really been only a year?

“And?” Pinter asked.

“Great,” she said. “It’s interesting. Most of the time.”

Pinter laughed.

“Well, this here today will certainly be interesting. You three,” he turned to Taras, Brajc and Osterc, “have probably seen similar stuff before, but, being in criminal investigation for only a year, I very much doubt you, young lady, have come across anything like this.”

“Her first case *was* the woman without a head near Lake Bohinj,” said Taras.

Pinter swayed his head in two short strokes left and right, as if considering, comparing.

“Well, maybe,” he admitted. “Anyway, this will most certainly be interesting as well.”

At that moment they heard the sound of a car engine. Had it not appeared, Tina would have got up and gone to take a look at the body alone.

.

“Where is it?” Golob asked straight away, the thought of coffee not even crossing his mind. Seeing him dressed in his Tyvek suit and a bag in his hand, Pinter didn’t think of offering him one.

He pointed towards the church. Golob turned towards Taras with a quizzical look.

“I waited for you,” said Taras.

So the procession, headed by Golob wrapped in white plastic, set off towards the church. Like some weird sect being led by its high priest to a secret ceremony. Taras, towards the front of the cortège, nudged Tina slightly and pointed at Golob.

“Do you know why this church is dedicated to the Holy Ghost? Apparently people once found some stones here that looked like white doves, the symbol of the Holy Ghost. The stones then disappeared and after a while reappeared. People saw this as a sign and built this church. And look at Golob now, what is he, if not a ghost in that white gown of his!”

She laughed louder than she intended. Where on earth had that story come from?

“Probably not holy, but definitely a ghost,” Taras continued.

She boxed him in the ribs and put her hand over her mouth to stifle a laugh. Golob, the ghost at the head of the procession, arrived at the church door and pulled the hood over his head. All he needed to say now was ‘boo!’

Tina had to bend over and hold her stomach with one hand and her mouth with the other not to burst into a loud guffaw.

“Anything wrong,” asked Brajc, turning around to see what the strange mumbling behind him was about.

She dismissively waved her hand. Brajc looked at Taras who simply shrugged his shoulders.

In the meantime, Golob cut the cord that the police had drawn across the door. He stepped into the church, coming to a halt in the darkness.

“Where’s the switch?”

Pinter stepped closer to Golob and found the light switch.

The illumination was not very bright. Soft and unobtrusive. The church was small but neatly set out. It had a few paintings on the wall, mostly of the Stations of the Cross, but also a portrait of an actual historical person, the Blessed Anton Martin Slomšek, 19th century Bishop of Maribor.

Perhaps because of this and the soft light, the interior of the church did not appear as a crime scene. After all, the man lying on the floor in front of the altar fitted into the surroundings just as much as the large cross with Christ hanging above him.

Golob measured the aisle between the pews that lead to the body and turned to Pinter.

“I assume the police officers walked down here?”

Pinter nodded.

“And the neighbour before them, the woman who found him, and then her husband and his three brothers.”

Golob sighed, turned left, and approached the altar and the body along the narrow gap between the pews and the side wall. Taras, Tina, Brajc and Osterc followed him. Pinter stayed at the door.

He was right, thought Tina. Both of them were right, Pinter and Taras. It was interesting enough, but seeing the priest’s face did overawe her. The body of the young headless woman on Cvilak’s autopsy table had prepared her for it.

The man who was lying on the floor, his hands spread at right angles from his body, forming a kind of cross, must have been around seventy years old, perhaps more. She could not tell precisely because all she could go by was his silver hair, matted in places by the blood that had trickled down it. Initially she did not even notice the hole in the head, mainly because it blended in with the impression of the cross burnt across the man’s face. Across his forehead and nose. The top of it ended in the middle of the forehead, precisely at the point where the bullet had pierced the skull. An iron cross lay next to the body and, at its feet, four burnt out candles stood in a straight line. Above the dead man’s head, someone had placed a brass chalice with a reddish liquid in it.

Taras glanced a few of times at this sorry installation, and then beckoned to Golob.

“We’re going to talk to a few people.”

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“Someone took his time,” said Brajc when they arrived at the doorstep.

“Pinter, will you take us to the people who found him?”

“Follow me,” said Pinter.

They walked down a small hill and after about two hundred yards turned off the road towards a farm with an outbuilding to one side and a house on the other. The guard dog they had woken up in its kennel next to the barn barked more out of surprise than duty. Before Pinter had a chance to ring the bell, the front door opened. Standing on the doorstep was a man of around forty, tall, strong, a real giant. His head almost touched the top of the doorframe.

“Good evening, once again,” Pinter greeted him. “As I told you, I’ve also brought my colleagues from Ljubljana who will take on the case. They would like to hear for themselves what happened.”

“Come in,” he said in a heavy local accent.

He led them into a room where three men and a woman sat at a large table next to a tiled stove. The woman was the wife of the man who came to the door, the other three, judging by their looks, probably the three brothers mentioned by Pinter.

Taras looked at Tina. She gave him a barely noticeable nod.

“Was it you who found him, ma’am?” she asked the woman.

“Yes,” came a matter-of-fact response. “I called him to tell him dinner was on the table but he didn’t answer his phone. He was recently left without a cook and has been having meals in various homes since. He makes his own breakfast, has lunch and dinners elsewhere. We gave him dinners. He was here the night before. I went to the rectory and because he wasn’t there and I noticed a light on in the church, I went to check there. And then… Well, you saw for yourself.”

It didn’t appear as if what she had come across upset her too much.

“What happened to the cook?”

“She died. She was old,” the woman answered calmly.

“When did you find the body? What time was it?” Tina asked.

“Seven, a quarter past. Then I went to find my husband and his brothers were here because we had been collecting wood, clearing the forest. But as soon as I saw him, I realised there was nothing we could do. He was already stiff.”

“And where would he go for lunch?” Taras asked.

She gave him the family name and explained where the house was. Taras beckoned to Brajc and Osterc. They stood up and took their leave.

“Had he been the local priest for long?” Tina continued her questioning.

The woman shook her head.

“He was sent here last year. We were all surprised. We hadn’t had a priest in this church for a long time. The priest from Solčava used to come up three times a year; for everything else we had to do down to the valley.”

“And where did he come from?”

The woman looked towards her husband.

“I think he said he was from Nova Gorica,” the husband said. “We didn’t ask him, all that mattered to us was that they sent someone.”

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Half an hour later Taras and Tina were back at the church. It looked very different, like a set for a video shoot. Golob had placed reflectors around the body, down the aisle, and among the pews. Under these lights moved three figures in white plastic overalls, a mute theatre performance. Taras and Tina stood at the door and watched. Five minutes later they were joined by Brajc and Osterc.

“They say he didn’t come for lunch,” Osterc reported. “But they didn’t call him because they were busy.”

“His favourite was the local soup, *oženjena župa*, and the cured sausage delicacy, *savinjski želodec*,” Brajc commented.

“Oženjena župa?” Tina asked, looking at Taras.

“I’ve heard of it,” he said, “but can’t remember what it is.”

“Oženjena župa?” Brajc who could never hide his partiality for food was becoming impatient, as if everyone was supposed to know all these very local dishes. “It’s a potato soup with pastry dumplings. How can you not know it?” he shook his head in disbelief.

“Other local specialities include egg *štruklji*, and *ubrnjenik*, and *žlikrofi*, *mohovt*, *solčavski sirnek*, *skipneki*, *ajdovi bratci*, and *zdrkanka*...”

“Zdrkanka? That sounds rude!” Osterc commented.

Brajc gave him a pitiful look.

“Crushed wheat grain in milk, cooked with butter and cinnamon.”

“Aren’t you in the wrong profession?” Osterc asked him. “You should have been an oenologist.”

“Ethnologist,” Tina corrected him. “An oenologist is an expert on wine, on everything made from grapes.”

Taras, clearly bored of listening, made his way along the wall towards Golob who was crouching next to the body.

“What do we have?” he asked.

Golob stood up, took two steps towards a large plastic satchel, opened it and produced from it a small transparent plastic pouch he held up to Taras who peered at it without holding it.

“A nine millimetre cartridge. Just like the first and second time. Considering the amount of effort he put into decorating the body, he could, had he wanted to, probably also have cleared it away.”

“It is as if he’s deliberately leaving them behind,” Taras said thoughtfully. “A kind of signature.”

“Talking of signatures,” Golob continued. “There’s something else.”

He bent down and picked up the brass chalice. Taras shook his head as he tried to hand it to him, and pointed towards Brajc. Hesitant and confused, Golob handed over the chalice to Brajc instead.

“Here!”

“What am I supposed to do with this?” Brajc asked.

“Smell it,” said Taras.

Brajc gave Golob a quizzical glance.

“We’ve already checked for fingerprints and DNA, and have also taken a sample of its contents.”

Still hesitant, Brajc held the chalice and brought it up to his nose. He sniffed it briefly and then dipped his finger in the contents and tried it. Then he brought the chalice to his lips and took a quick sip.

“*Cviček*?” Taras asked.

“Yes. This wine isn’t at all bad.”

“So you *could* also be an oenologist,” Osterc commented.

Taras ignored him.

“Our kind of man,” he said.

“How do you know it’s a man?” Tina asked.

“Our kind of… whatever,” Taras attempted to rectify his comment.

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Daylight was breaking by the time they had finished. Tina was the last to step outside, after Osterc, Brajc, and Taras, and she stood on the doorstep in awe. She stopped and stared. Taras turned round and smiled.

Before her was a range of high mountains that she had, at least from this angle, never seen before. She didn’t doubt that Taras knew each peak but he did not wait for her. The valley below was still wrapped in morning mists, the rocky faces of the massive mountains opposite were still dark, grey, but their summits glowed, basking in the rising sun.

She could have just stood there and stared but the others were now already waiting by the car. Besides, she had to move out of the way of the coroner whose team was bringing the dead body out of the church.

chapter 24.

Tina glanced at the sign they were driving past: Črnivec, 902 m. On the back seat Brajc and Osterc were fast asleep. The sun was rising behind the hills they were driving away from. Taras leaned across Tina’s knees and found his sunglasses in the glove compartment in front of her.

“Did we come this way?” she asked.

“No, we didn’t. This takes us via Gornji Grad and is a slightly longer route but with fewer bends.” He indicated the pair asleep on the back seat.

He drove slowly to avoid throwing them about too much. Brajc was bent forward, hanging with the top part of his body over his still rather large belly. On every corner it seemed he might topple over to one side or the other but, miraculously, he was able to hold his balance whilst asleep. After his stay in hospital he had become just a little less bloated but Taras had no doubts at all that Brajc would soon make up for his loss, jogging or no jogging up Rožnik.

“Well then, what about…?”

She pointed towards the back with her hand and an outsider might think she was indicating the sleeping men on the back seat. Taras of course understood that she was pointing beyond them, over Črnivec.

“I don’t know. I would be surprised if after his ballistic tests Golob doesn’t confirm that this is our third body. And even more surprised if we are not soon assigned a supervisor.”

“You predicted as much. The body, I mean.”

“And the supervisor,” Taras laughed. “I said we would probably get one just to get on Kristan and Ahlin’s nerves. Three guesses what their first question will be today when we meet up at the Directorate. *Taras*,” he tried to impersonate someone by changing his voice, “*now no need for hide and seek here. Out with it*!”

He was a bad impersonator and Tina could not decide whether he was trying to mimic Kristan or Ahlin. He probably realised this because he added, “No, I suppose that would be Drvarič’s tactic, Ahlin would just stare and wait for the hard rock before him to melt away. And Kristan would…”

He tried to imagine Kristan.

“*Taras, could you not inform us about the facts that are missing so we might understand the full story before any other unpleasantness befalls us*?”

He nodded.

“Yes, that’s what he would say, or rather, he will say.”

With that usual mischievous expression on his face, he turned to Tina on one of the few straight stretches of road down from Črnivec. She remained serious.

“Whatever, you predicted there would be another murder. I doubt you were just joking.”

He shrugged his shoulders. If she doesn’t believe him, she doesn’t believe him.

In the meantime, they had descended into the valley. By the time they had almost reached Kamnik and were driving past the long, rather weathered, concrete perimeter wall of the former gunpowder factory, Taras checked the time on the dashboard.

“What about a coffee?”

“Coffee? But everywhere is closed.”

“Not quite everywhere.”

He pulled into the petrol station on the Kamnik bypass. The coffee shop was closed. He pointed to the bench outside, barrier tape stuck across it. Pulling off the tape from one end, he made enough space for both of them.

“Long, black, right?”

Of course he didn’t have a facemask, so he pulled his T-shirt up over his mouth and nose. He returned from the petrol station with two cups, handing her one without checking which. Obviously the contents of both were the same. He sat down on the bench and pulled the T-shirt from his face.

“If I had walked into the petrol station only a week ago with my face masked, they would have called the police,” he said.

He had stopped the car so that he could see inside it from where they were sitting. It made him smile. Reflex. That was the way he always parked whenever his daughters would fall asleep in the car and Alenka and he had five minutes to themselves. If that – realising that the car had stopped moving, most often one of the girls would wake up, raise her head and ask, “Where are we? Is it still far?”

It seemed like yesterday. But it wasn’t. Fifteen years had passed since then.

From the pocket of his army jacket he produced an antacid pill and popped it into his mouth. He hated its taste and slow dissolution in his mouth but he needed the coffee right now. After his stomach troubles also extended to drinking coffee, he occasionally took black tea instead. He didn’t really like tea, any kind of tea, but he had to admit that it sometimes does more for you than the average dose of caffeine in any kind of coffee, espresso, long shot, or cappuccino… And tea didn’t cause him heartburn. Right now, though, he needed a coffee. And if he didn’t want the coffee to disturb the acids in his stomach and cause them to travel up from somewhere in the top end of his stomach through his gullet and throat towards his oral cavity, he had to first dissolve the antacid in his mouth. Tina noticed, of course.

“Stomach troubles again?”

“Yes,” he said. “Nothing new there. What’s new is that it now also affects me after drinking coffee. So, most of the time, I drink the milky variants.”

“But milk in coffee is supposed to cause greater damage to the stomach than the coffee itself,” she said.

“You tell that tomy stomach.”

Just how things are, he thought to himself.

“There were times when I could drink anything that was brought to the table and it didn’t bother me at all.”

He could drink till he was sick and then drink some more, and the next day got up and went to work, rounding up the drunkards at the railway station. Many of them laughed when they saw him; he had been there only a few hours earlier, though not in his uniform.

“I stopped when Anja was born, which was less than a year after Alenka and I met. My daughters never saw me drunk and it looks like they never will.”

He hadn’t become a teetotaller and had the occasional beer, a glass or two of wine – was basically a moderate drinker until one evening, after the usual glass of wine with his meal, he blacked out. His heartrate increased but this just made him weaker, he had had the feeling that he was sweating profusely but his brow was quite dry, his breathing was shallow and uneven. Alenka put him in the car and took him to A&E where the on-call doctor merely glanced at him and sent him to the back of the queue waiting in the corridor. When Taras, despite his poorly state, wanted to stand up and leave, Alenka, still only a registrar at the time, grabbed him by the shoulder.

“Doctor Karun,” she said quietly but with determination. “We are not leaving until you give him an antihistamine injection!”

He looked at her haughtily and laughed scornfully.

“Antihistamine? Does he have allergies?”

“No,” she shook her head, “but all the symptoms indicate he might.”

He gave her a surprised look.

“Doctor…? Who do I have the honour of speaking to?”

She told him her surname and didn’t mention that she was still completing her specialisation. He beckoned to the nurse and ordered her to bring an antihistamine and adrenalin injection. He handed them over to Alenka.

“Being a doctor, you can do it yourself, can’t you?”

A little later, when Taras came to on a wheelchair in the corridor, he had tried to lift himself up with his arms and stand up. He felt dizzy and weak but whatever it was that had happened to him was slowly easing. The worst was behind him. He was no longer afraid that he was about to die.

“What the hell was that?” he asked Alenka as they drove home.

His GP referred him for an allergy investigation at the University Clinic of Respiratory and Allergic Diseases in Golnik where he stayed two days. They conducted the basic tests, checked his sensitivity for mites and various animal fur, pollen, which was abundant in the air at the time, and all the results came back negative. Then Taras wrote down all that he had eaten that day and they checked that as well.

“Considering the intensity of your troubles,” a young doctor trying to find an answer to his problem said, “it is almost certainly an allergic reaction and not a case of food intolerance.”

He paused when he saw that Taras was not following what he was saying.

“Food intolerance is also about the body’s reaction to certain kinds of food. It is not, however, a life-threatening situation. It can be related to various unpleasant and often unexplained symptoms. The symptoms can last a few days or even weeks, often disappearing and then recur, so it is hard to determine what kind of food causes the problems. In your case, however, it was an instant reaction to something. All we need to do is find out what it was.”

They had had spaghetti, the kind you get in every shop. Alenka had made the sauce herself from a tin of chopped tomatoes, added tuna, also from a tin, and stirred it all in with some sautéed onion. They had also had some fresh lettuce. He was tested for all of these and, once again, all the results came back negative.

“Was this all you had to eat just before the problem started?”

Taras was about to nod but stopped mid-gesture.

“I also had half a glass of wine,” he said.

It was the wine. Or rather, it wasn’t the wine itself. They checked whether it might be the fault of pesticides sometimes detected in wine, perhaps sulphur… No. Taras’s body reacted with panic to the molecule of C2H5OH, ethanol. Ethyl alcohol, a component of basically all alcoholic drinks, wine, beer, spirits.

“Well, maybe,” the doctor nodded when Taras explained that this cannot be true because he had had a considerable lot more to drink in his life than the occasional glass of wine. “Maybe, but I certainly recommend that you don’t have any more.”

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“Just how things are,” he ended his explanation. “But this is not an allergic reaction to coffee, at least not yet that. The gastric mucosa is exhausted. I should leave it alone for a few days.”

He smiled.

“Like everything else, why would my stomach lining be an exemption.”

“During our brief but intense socialising, I didn’t get the feeling that quite everything was so exhausted,” she said and in embarrassment stirred her coffee with the plastic stirrer even though it was entirely unnecessary. Like Taras, she took her coffee plain, no sugar, no anything.

He could have sworn that she even blushed. He laughed and waved his hand dismissively.

“Well, that least of all…”

It starts when you can no longer complete the run from Katarina across Grmada to Tošč in the Polhov Gradec Hills in anywhere close to the forty-two minutes and thirty seconds you used to. Alright, a bad day, it’s been a while since you came along this route and have forgotten the details, where to conserve your energy, where to press harder, where there are roots you have to avoid, you didn’t do any warming up, didn’t give it all you had… And you try the next time, properly warming up, trying harder, and you are thirty seconds faster than the previous time and six minutes slower that you were fifteen years ago. Another year after that you are happy if you manage to do it in less than fifty minutes. After that you stop timing yourself. Just as long as you sweat and give it all you have. After a while you stop running fully to avoid twisting your ankle and damaging your knees.

Not only the hardware, the spirit too was exhausted. He could no longer be bothered.

A little while ago he had dug out his climbing gear and found his climbing shoes and chalk bag and set off to the Roman Wall. After warming up he had attempted to cross it along the upper level, which means traversing the length of the wall without utilising the masonry shelf a couple of centimetres deep at the lower level. He used to be able to climb it in his trainers. Now he had to jump down into the grass under the wall a few times before reaching the end of the fifty-metre-long section.

“But I swore I would climb it again,” he said. “Now I manage to complete it by stepping down three times. My next aim is two breaks, then only one…”

If the articular membrane of the tendon on some finger does not become inflamed, or if he does not twist an ankle when falling off the wall, and if the autumn rains don’t start too soon. Or if he simply realises that he just cannot do it any more. And if this pandemic will end and he will even be allowed onto the wall in the first place.

“I always looked reproachfully upon older climbers who gathered a few grams of fat around their waist,” he said and laughed. “Why the hell can’t they do a few extra sit-ups…” he stroked his stomach above his belt. “Well, and here we are.”

He wondered whether he should tell her, but he stopped himself. When he used to visit her, if it was evening, he did a few stabilisation exercises, a warmup before engaging in sports activities, but he did it so the body appeared compact. Standing in front of the mirror in the morning, brushing his teeth, it still seemed alright, by the evening though, brushing his teeth again, it was as if the same garment was worn out and stretched.

“Yes, well,” he said instead, “I’ll probably also get to the problems you’re hinting at. Almost certainly. Once I am… in my eighties.”

Tina laughed and Taras did too. He managed to dissolve the pill in his mouth and took a sip of water to wash down the taste before indulging in the coffee.

“What about you? How are you with…?”

“Matic,” she helped him. “We’re fine.”

She took a sip of coffee and as she replaced her cup her eyes met his quizzical gaze. Of course, she would not avoid this that easily.

“We’re fine,” she repeated. “We get on…”

She had been with Aleksander two years before she met Taras. Aleksander was, as her school friends had said, the catch of the year.

One of the cleverest and most promising computing students from an established Ljubljana family but at the same time not a swot. He made everything he did look as if he did it with ease, casually. Unfortunately, this had lost most of its charm. She did not know when. Like many digital whizz kids, he had ended up designing web pages for large companies. He earned enough money and had enough free time to get into serious gaming.

During the time they were together there were plenty of opportunities for… oh, how silly it sounds, fooling around. A number of his colleagues flirted with her and she was flattered but why would she try something else just because it was not the same when it was more or less alike? She found it childish, a waste of time and clearly, at least that was how she saw it now, she didn’t think it was worth the effort.

Taras didn’t make an effort with her. He was not even always friendly, especially not at their first meeting. The thought that she might become involved with him didn’t cross her mind, and, were she not mistaken, that first evening what she had said was something like: No doubt, like Brajc, you too would like to get into my knickers… And at that point she was quite convinced that it would all end as it always did. With words.

“We’re interested in the same things…”

“He’s nuts about you,” Taras commented. “That’s good. For the beginning.”

She nodded.

And of course she could not be with Taras. She had been taken in. Taras’s age showed whenever he complained about it. Aleksander was not Taras. He was, this she had to admit, someone she had spent too much time with because she didn’t know what she wanted. But Matic is not Taras either. He could not be. Perhaps he will be in twenty years’ time as he reaches the age Taras is now. Should she give him a chance? Is it worth her while waiting that long? What if he ends up becoming someone entirely different?

And if he’s so crazy about her, why has he not come round to her flat since the beginning of her quarantine. Not even now that she was no longer required to self-isolate.

“I’d like to wait a little longer, just in case,” he explained over the phone. “We are just about to finish developing a T-shirt that will charge your phone with static electricity as you run. The future of our firm and my future also are on the line, I don’t want to take the risk…”

“And anyway,” Tina continued indecisively, “these things are overrated. What’s wrong with a person being single?”

“Nothing is wrong. The question is whether it’s better to be alone or not.”

“Can I ask you something, Taras?”

She pulled the plastic stir stick from her cup and twiddled with it between her fingers.

“I’d like to know whether you ever thought of leaving Alenka and being with me.”

He didn’t answer.

“I am asking out of curiosity.”

“Did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Think about living with me. Falling asleep in the same bed, waking up with me by your side, introducing me to your mother and father who are probably my age, spending the weekends with me, having children, taking them to nursery school, to the doctors… and so on?”

“I asked first.”

Taras smiled.

“I did. Of course.”

She drank what coffee was left in the cup, crushed it and threw it in the bin next to the bench.

“Children? And how many would I need to have?”

They found Brajc and Osterc in the exact same position they had left them in. Osterc leaning against the window, Brajc bent over his belly. Taras switched on the engine. Still half asleep, Brajc swayed and muttered, “Where are we? Is it far?”

He then swayed once again between his belly and the front seat. Taras waited a few seconds to check the rear mirror that he really was asleep.

“I am glad that we can talk about all that. Friends?”

“Friends,” said Tina.