

Tadej Golob: Coma

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

How do you investigate a crime if you don't even know it happened?

introduction

'Give me my tracksuit and help me put it on. Hurry...'

Alenka gave him a confused look but then took the tracksuit bottoms out of the bag and handed them to Taras. He propped himself up in the bed with his right hand and clumsily, jerking like a fish out of water, tried to rid himself of the hospital pyjamas.

'First I must speak to your doctor,' his wife had her doubts. 'He needs to sign the discharge report...'

Taras somehow managed to slip off the hospital pyjama trousers and set about getting himself into the tracksuit. Alenka stood indecisively by the bed, waiting for an explanation. She didn't get one. He was behaving as if a fire had broken out on the ward.

For over a month he had been watching fellow sufferers going home, saw how, like him, they were in a hurry to do so, and how their departure was always drawn out. All day. And when it looked as if they wouldn't be discharged and they themselves were already resigned to the fact that they would have one more dinner in their hospital bed, that the nurses would once again switch off the lights, they would suddenly wave at the door, some of them in wheelchairs, others on crutches, and disappear. He didn't want to spend another whole day in hospital.

Later, when he was already back home, and even before, when he was still lying in the hospital bed, Alenka kept asking him what was the first thing he remembered after waking up from his coma. Did he remember this or that...

Nothing. Perhaps the daylight in the hospital room or the various doctors standing around him. In his mind, their faces seemed to blend into one and he would never recognise any of them were he ever to meet them in the street. One of them looked very much like the owner of the joint where, before his accident and before

the pandemic, he used to go often to coffee. Alenka did agree that there was some resemblance, but to Taras he looked so like the man, he was sure it was him. He smiled at him every time he 'recognised' him, and about a month and a half ago, when he thought he would be discharged from hospital straight away, he had even said to him,

'Today I'll come for a beer, a pint of draught.'

The doctor in white nodded and a while later returned with a glass filled with orange liquid. He handed it over to Taras.

'That's the kind of beer I brew.'

Thirsty as he was, Taras tried it. For the first few days he was constantly thirsty. It was a vitamin drink.

'Beer?' Alenka was surprised. 'Where did that come from?'

'Why not beer?' he asked.

She gave up. She would explain when he recovered.

Somehow he managed to don the tracksuit, not without the help of Alenka, who kept looking around the room, towards the door, as if she was waiting for someone. Eventually a nurse entered. He couldn't tell the nurses apart either. Immediately her gaze fixed on Taras's new trousers.

'What are you doing, Madam?' she addressed Alenka as if Taras had nothing to do with it. 'Why are you giving him a change of clothes?'

'He's going home today,' Alenka tried.

The woman in hospital uniform shook her head.

'He fainted when he went to radiology today. You'd better talk about this with Dr Bečirovič.'

Alenka gave Taras a worried look and followed the nurse out of the room. He was alone. Alone, not counting his four fellow patients – the old man on his right who couldn't talk, the man next to him, also elderly, who fell when the plank of wood he was sitting on tipped over and he broke his hip, another older man who was gathering fruit when the branch against which he had propped the ladder snapped, and the only younger patient about his age, who had, this he didn't

understand, apparently damaged his leg playing football. What was a person who injured themselves at football doing here among the half living?

The nurse returned before Alenka. She took everyone's blood pressure, asked what hurt who and how badly, waiting in vain for an answer. In room seven of the Trauma Clinic at the University Medical Centre, nothing ever hurt anybody, and the nurse had to almost force the patients to take some of their medication. Taras along with his broken bones also had an impaired swallowing reflex, had difficulty even drinking mineral water, and was given a few small, ergonomically shaped pills as well as some of the usual, large round ones. The latter he no longer even tried to swallow and chewed on them instead.

Dr Bečirovič did not allow himself to be disturbed when Alenka entered his office and continued entering some data into the computer. He only looked up from the screen when she sat down on one of the two chairs by his desk. The other was already occupied by Dr Bečirovič's younger colleague who nodded encouragingly to Alenka when she knocked and opened the door.

'Yes please?' said Dr Bečirovič.

It looked as if he was trying to remember whether he had arranged with Alenka to see her, also simultaneously wondering how this could have escaped him.

'I've come to get a patient of yours, Taras Birsa,' she said.

'Come to get him? What do you mean 'get him?'' he asked. Dr Bečirovič gave the impression that he was losing track of this conversation. 'He's not going anywhere.'

'He fainted in radiography this morning,' Bečirovič's younger colleague jumped in.

'But,' Alenka persisted, 'he's convinced that he is going home.'

Dr Bečirovič smiled.

'Foremost, he is too weak for us to let him go. Even if we believed it might work, we can't afford to do so, due to regulations. What if something happened to him at home?'

He waited for a moment before continuing.

'I have just been discussing his case with to my colleague from radiology,' he pointed towards the younger man. 'He was supposed to x-ray him today to see what is going on with his bones, whether they are healing or not. But your husband couldn't even manage those five seconds. He fell on the floor.'

'He lowered himself,' the radiologist corrected him. In his white attire he looked no different to his older surgeon colleague. 'He didn't really fall.'

'Whatever,' said Dr Bečirovič. 'He ended up on the floor.'

He fell silent and waited for Alenka who from the sentence *He's not going anywhere* had looked as if she was about to sob.

'But he thinks he's going home and, if that is not the case, you are the ones who will need to tell him that.'

Dr Bečirovič smiled and looked at his colleague.

'That we shall do, won't we, Dr Galé?'

chapter 1

When she returned to Taras accompanied by the two men in white gowns, he was just chewing on a round and bitter pill. The doctors greeted him and he muttered a barely comprehensible good morning through the pieces of analgesic rolling around his mouth. Had they known him better, they would have realised that his good morning was uttered as a question, that awakening within the patient before them was the chief inspector who found it very suspicious that his wife who was supposed to take him home had returned accompanied by two doctors. And, at least it seemed so, she was avoiding eye contact with him.

'Apparently you expected to go home today?' Dr Bečirovič began.

Taras didn't answer.

'Unfortunately, that won't be possible.'

He then spent the next minute explaining why not, how Alenka would not be able to look after him alone...'

'I *am* a doctor,' Alenka interrupted him.

'But you are not a nurse,' Dr Bečirovič answered calmly. He already knew, of course, that Alenka was a doctor. He continued talking.

Taras listened to him to the end, or to what seemed like the concluding sentence, then said, 'It's out of the question.'

Alenka flinched and looked at both doctors who also exchanged confused glances.

'I am going home today,' Taras continued in a voice that would not take no for an answer.

'But this morning you fainted when we took you for an x-ray. Without it we can't let you go. And anyway, how will you manage at home without all the nurses and people monitoring you?'

In the corner of his mouth Taras found the final piece of the pill he had been chewing and swallowed it. It made him cough, choke, and Alenka jumped towards him, patting him on the back. He coughed clear his airways and looked at Dr Bečirovič.

'I'm going home. At least I'll be able to take a piss when I want to.'

He glanced at the urine bottle hanging at the side of his bed. He was not joking about peeing when he wanted to. He was being serious and that was what it sounded like. Nobody around the bed smiled.

In fact, Taras had not told Alenka the whole truth when she had been asking him about what he remembered after waking up from the coma. One of his first memories was of the nurse who was looking after him – he didn't know her name. There were many nurses but Taras didn't remember their faces. After a while he divided them into two groups. The female physiotherapist and a younger male nurse in one, and all the rest in the other. He remembered how he pressed the button on the wooden panel hanging above his head and one of the other nurses appeared...

'I need to go to the toilet.'

'Mr Birsa, you can't go to the toilet,' she replied. He got used to it after a while, but it still enraged him every time.

Even though there was a wheelchair next to his bed and even after he could manage the distance to the toilets, about fifteen metres there and fifteen back, with a walking stabiliser, a frame with three wheels that he pushed along with his weight,

almost lying on it. When the physiotherapist was around or Alenka came to visit, he somehow managed to get himself to the toilet and back. Barely, but at least he did.

‘This was a little like climbing Dhaulagiri,’ he said entirely seriously on one of those trips, dragging himself to his bed with extreme effort.

The physiotherapist laughed.

‘It’s true,’ he said. ‘The feelings are surprisingly similar.’

Both at the hospital and at an altitude of eight thousand metres, the slightest moves and simplest tasks caused him problems and needed great effort. Sitting on the side of the bed from where he could only reach the handle of the walker reminded him of getting dressed in a tent in the howling wind blowing from Tibet, wrapping the tent tarp round his body. Just as he had dragged himself up the snow gully at an altitude already above eight thousand, a short distance below the summit of Dhaulagiri, gasping for molecules of air, now he climbed with the stabiliser along the corridor from the toilet, past two doors, turning right at the third towards his bed next to the window, climbed onto it and lay there, out of breath.

‘Why?’ he sighed when he was able to. ‘I was fit before the accident.’

‘You’ve just been in a coma for fourteen days.’

Fourteen days in which he had lost just as many kilos, and, what was worse, just as many kilos of muscles. In the two weeks he had wasted away.

If Saša the physiotherapist or Filip the male nurse were not around, he was doomed to the urine bottle and the stainless-steel bedpan. Luckily, fourteen days of lying in a coma had slowed his digestion so much that he didn’t have to use the bedpan. Not even once? Well, at least not that he remembered.

‘But...’ Dr Bečirovič tried again. Taras stopped him, raising his index finger.

‘Out of the question,’ he repeated. ‘I waited until all... this stuff...’ he pointed at the bottle on the stand next to his bed, connected by plastic tube with the vein on his left hand, ‘trickled into me, like we agreed, and even that could have been taken care of by Alenka, and I see no other reason why I would occupy your bed any longer. At home I will progress much faster.’

He had to go home. In hospital he was carried away every night to the trenches of the First World War, among the wounded and the dead, among rotting

corpses, the stench of which was so vivid that he believed they were real, that they were lying among the piles of earth, among the rocks, in bomb craters. He would see them. By morning he was tangled in all the tubes bringing medication to his vein, soaked in sweat and urine.

‘Tell me,’ he said to the nurse who came to change his bedding. ‘I know we’re in the First World War, but what side are we on? The Austrian or the Italian?’

The baffled nurse listened to him. ‘The First World War is over,’ she said. ‘But you hit your head somewhere, and that’s why...’

He wasn’t sure why, but he was convinced that the War would only be over when he went home. Thus he now looked at the hesitating Dr Bečirovič and repeated,

‘It’s out of the question. The progress of my recovery will be much better at home.’

It seemed he had used the magic words. Dr Bečirovič looked at his radiologist colleague who just shrugged his shoulders. He then turned back to Taras.

‘What floor is your flat on?’

‘House,’ Taras corrected him. ‘And I will stay on the ground floor, the same level as the outside terrace.’

Dr Bečirovič nodded.

‘But before we discharge you, you absolutely need to have your leg and spine x-rayed. Will you manage that?’

He looked at Taras and the radiologist. Taras nodded, in as much as he could with the plastic support collar around his neck, and the radiologist once again shrugged his shoulders.

‘I don’t know... He couldn’t manage it this morning, but perhaps we can take an image sitting down.’

‘Do so,’ said Dr Bečirovič.

Taras spent the next two hours as he had done the last month and a half, lying down on the hospital bed, propped up slightly on his pillow. For a while he talked with Alenka about the morning x-ray and how everything just went dark before his eyes.

‘Did you hit on anything when you fell? Did you...’

She didn't finish the question but he understood it as *Did you break anything else?*

'No,' he said, and indeed it had seemed as if he had slid softly into the darkness and that the hands of the nurse or whoever happened to be standing close by had caught him before he could hit the ground with his head or any other part of his body.

'I fell once before,' he told her. That time it was much worse. He had collapsed in front of the toilet while under Filip's supervision. He had lost his balance and fallen, and in doing so twisted his left leg, the one that was broken, at such a nasty angle that just looking at it, his head hurt him as much as the leg itself. Filip, who had been trying to catch the stabiliser Taras had let go of before leaning on the toilet, turned pale, pushed away the walking frame and started picking him up from the floor. For a while the leg hurt him a little more than usual, but how could it not, it was broken anyway.

'How are the girls?' he asked Alenka when they had exhausted the subject.

'They send their love. They're stuck in Vienna due to Covid and aren't allowed to travel here, otherwise they would come to visit you. If they did come, they would not be allowed to go back.'

Taras had last seen his daughters at the end of summer when they came to Ljubljana for a few days after their summer holidays, before their lectures began in Vienna, but he couldn't remember this either. When he woke up after two weeks in a coma, Dr Balmazović called Alenka.

'Do tell me, you know him better, is he always this quiet?' she asked. 'If he does speak he mentions his daughter Mojca, or swears.'

Alenka had never thought about it, but now that she was being asked, she had to admit that Taras was indeed more of a quiet person. He never prattled, he abruptly ended phone conversations or, if that was not possible, appeared increasingly irritated until the final *OK, OK, speak later. Bye!*

'If he's swearing, then he's fine,' Brajc replied instead of her. He had accompanied Alenka to visit Dr Balmazović, Head of the IC unit at the University Medical Centre in Ljubljana.

He mentions Mojca? Why only Mojca? Brajc could not understand this. Taras had two daughters.

Brajc had heard about Taras's accident on the radio news at half past six in the evening. He immediately called Tina who knew nothing about it.

'How?' she asked.

'He fell down a cliff on one of the hills near Ljubljana,' said Brajc.

'Ljubljana?' Tina wondered. 'Do hills near here also have cliffs?'

'I think they mentioned Polhograjska Grmada,' Brajc tried to remember what was said on the radio. When Tina didn't even respond to the name of the hill with a *yes* or a *hmm*, he added, 'Apparently he is seriously injured. In a critical condition, or so they said.'

'Are you certain they were talking about Taras?'

He called Osterc but his phone kept telling him that he was unavailable, so, after some hesitation, he also called Alenka. As soon as she answered, he knew from the tone of her voice that the person fighting for their life at that moment was indeed Taras.

'And what are your colleagues saying about it?' Brajc asked Alenka.

'Nothing, as yet,' she told him.

Brajc's colleagues, who visited the scene of the accident soon after the paramedics, established that the unfortunate Senior Criminal Inspector had fallen on an apparently non-dangerous path up the southern sub peak of the hill on the outskirts of Ljubljana with an altitude below 900 metres, a popular excursion point for numerous citizens from the capital, especially during the pandemic.

'Nobody has ever fallen down here,' said Tomič, the on-call crime inspector who visited the site. By 'down here' he meant the path below the southern sub peak also known as Mala Grmada. The track leads towards the steeper southern flank of the hill, and at one short twenty-metre section, the drop below the path is almost vertical. Clearly this was precisely where Taras had fallen. He was found by two elderly ladies on a walk. They were crossing the mountain below the summit ridge, intending to go as far as the hunting lodge where they would sit and rest before

returning to their car parked next to the Katarina Inn that in these corona virus times offered take-away tea or coffee, as well as veal stew, *štruklji*, and similar food.

Taras's fall was stopped by a tree above the path. He was conscious and groaning when the two ladies came past. Had he not been, and had they not moments earlier have heard the racket caused by a falling body a good eighty kilos in weight, they would probably not have noticed the figure tangled in the branches of the tree and not have called emergency services on 112. In doing so they had saved his life. Taras could not remember them, just as he could not remember the fall or even walking there that day.

'What exactly happened?' he asked Alenka, not immediately, but about a week after waking up from the coma.

She told him what she knew and he stared at her in disbelief. For some reason he did not really seem surprised by the fact that he was in hospital or even by the fact that he was badly injured – it seemed that his brain, despite being temporarily switched off during his coma, subconsciously comprehended what was going on – what totally confused him was the cause of the accident and all that. And the place.

'Polhograjska Grmada?'

'Remember, you went for a run that day, up Grmada?'

He tried to shake his head but it hurt despite the support collar he was wearing. Instead he just grimaced and uttered, 'No.'

'So you don't remember the fall either?'

'No.'

His memory was also blank about the few months before the accident. The last thing he could remember fully were the May Day celebrations. He remembered that he and Alenka had gone on a trip to Istria for a few days. After that, only fragments.

'How much is four times five,' Alenka asked him.

'Twenty.'

'Six times seven?'

'Forty-two.'

'Five times seven?'

‘Thirty-five.’

She looked at him with a mix of pity and reproach.

‘Taras!’

‘What? It’s thirty-five.’

She thought for a while, furrowed her brow, then her face relaxed and she smiled.

‘Sorry. Clearly your brain is working better than mine.’

Hours passed. Like those leaving the hospital before him who didn’t know until the last minute whether they would be discharged or not, Taras was also more and more impatient. He kept nervously checking his phone that he had used over the past few days to follow the La Vuelta Tour of Spain. He had slept through the Tour de France, and when Breznik from the Moste Police Station with whom he often cycled with sent him a message that Tadej Pogačar had won the cycling tournament, he thought he had misread the message and that there was something seriously wrong with his head. Pogačar? If a Slovene was going to win it, surely it would be Primož Roglič? Where did Pogačar come into it?

‘If they hurry up with these discharge procedures, we could even go for a coffee to Homan’s. Under that big tree.’

Alenka gave him a surprised look.

‘Everything is closed due to Covid. Don’t you know that?’ she said. ‘And even if it wasn’t, why would we drive all the way to Škofja Loka just for a coffee?’

Now it was Taras who gave her a puzzled look.

‘But we are in Škofja Loka, aren’t we?’

‘We’re in Ljubljana. At the Traumatology Clinic. I’ve been telling you this all along.’

When he had woken up from his coma, Taras was moved to the semi-critical care unit. His window looked out onto a block of flats basking in the sun, and it reminded him (at least that was his explanation to Alenka) of the residential blocks past which he had cycled in the summer across Bukova towards Cerkno on the way to the road that led across Kladje. He was confused by the fact that there was no hospital in Cerkno. When he was moved on from semi-critical care to the ordinary

ward at the Trauma Clinic, he acquired the fixed idea that he had been brought to Škofja Loka. He could not explain why.

‘And everything is closed?’

He did remember that they had only just come through one dark patch. That he had never had as many take-away coffees in his life as he had in those three months before the summer. That for a while the coffee machine in the corridor of the Ljubljana Police Department was almost the only chance of a coffee within a radius of about a kilometre. That, as he waited with his facemask outside the petrol station to pay for his fuel, he would always search his wallet to see whether he had a euro and a half for a quick coffee. And now things were the same?

‘Worse than in the spring,’ said Alenka.

‘Didn’t we have a flyover to mark the victory over Covid?’ he asked with a wry grin across his face.

Alenka muttered to herself, ‘Alright, he’s fine. The humour is there, so things are probably working.’

Alenka happened to be there when he was brought to the hospital. She was on her way to the A & E Department to see one of the colleagues she had studied with, Dr Berne, to ask her about what kind of new measures for the pandemic she could expect that would affect the private clinic she ran. As she was crossing the bridge over the river in her car on her way there, she noticed the military helicopter landing on the hospital roof.

‘What poor sod are they bringing here now?’ she wondered and parked in a nearby street.

Dr Berne did not seem surprised when she saw Alenka, the way one would be surprised to see a former university friend who turns up unannounced. She gave her a weary look that Alenka, until Dr Berne spoke, attributed to the circumstances of a medical worker facing a second wave of the pandemic.

‘Here already, Alenka? How did you find out?’

‘Find out what?’ Alenka was confused.

Dr Berne looked at her again, one of those glances when you realise the person you are talking to has not understood what you are saying. Then she explained. 'Taras was brought in, that's why I am asking.'

When Alenka had last seen Taras he had said he would go running up Grmada after work and asked her if she would like to come with him.

'No, I need to go to the University Hospital this afternoon to find out what official measures they are likely to put in place,' she told him over breakfast.

Taras was brought in! Where from? Did he have a car accident? That was the first thing she thought of. Long gone were the days when she had to worry about him climbing up rock faces of mountains she had never heard of before. The North Face of Široka Peč, Rzenik, Votli Vrh... He still climbed, but as he put it himself, only the 'tourist routes' in walls she knew, the North Face of Triglav, the South Face of Skuta, the South Face of Kogel where, when they first started going out together, she had even allowed him to take her.

'Brought?'

'With the helicopter,' Dr Berne said. 'He is on his way here. If you don't want to...' She fell silent. Both because of Alenka and because the nurse who had just entered the room said, 'The injured mountaineer is being brought in.'

Immediately after that, Taras was wheeled through on the ambulance stretcher. He looked as if he was asleep. There were no signs of injury, no blood.

'Alenka, I would still ask you to...' Dr Berne continued and hinted at the door with her head.

A month and a half later she was taking him home. Taras was half sitting, half lying across the seat, half conscious, half in the darkness that he had not got rid of even after he was woken from his coma. He was pale and kept saying he felt nauseous. Had Dr Bečirovič been right? Would she be able to look after him?

Twelve fractures. The left shoulder blade, all seven cervical vertebrae (although she initially wrongly understood that it was only three), two thoracic vertebrae, the pelvis and both thigh bones. Plus a diffuse axonal injury, which Alenka, even though a paediatrician by training, understood only too well: a multiple injury to the brain with severed nerve tissues.

She talked about it with the Head of the Neurology Department at the University Hospital as soon as Taras was brought to them. She listened to him and interrupted him when he began explaining what axons are.

‘Just tell me,’ she said impatiently, ‘will he ever be back to normal?’

Dr Pak, a younger, blond, man, shrugged his shoulders.

‘It depends on what you see as normal.’

With the help of a wheelchair, Alenka somehow managed to get Taras out of the car noticing that from their garden gate to the sofa in front of the TV in their living room, there were no steps or any other impediments to moving about on wheels, something she had never considered before. He rolled himself over onto the sofa and groaned.

‘This won’t work.’

He couldn’t sit up on the sofa. He was too weak. It took Alenka a few minutes to get him back into the wheelchair where he could lean on the handrails. She then pulled out the sofa and changed in into a bed. By placing two pillows he could raise his head just enough to watch first the finish of one of the stages of the La Vuelta cycle race and then an episode of the TV series *Dr House*. Just before it ended, his phone rang. Alenka brought it to him. She didn’t recognise the number. He did.

‘Hi,’ he said.

This was followed by a few monosyllabic responses which was his usual way of speaking on the phone. Mostly yes and no.

‘It was Tina,’ he said when he hung up five minutes later. ‘She wanted to see how I was doing.’

‘Nice,’ said Alenka.

‘Apparently the court threw out our stuff with Krep,’ he added.

‘So I heard,’ she said. ‘But of everything you’ve been through, that’s the least.’

He didn’t smile. His brow furrowed.

‘Don’t tell me, please, that you’ll get all upset about that now?’ she asked him. ‘After all, you’re on sick leave and will be for a while.’

He would have shaken his head had the support collar around his neck and the pain that such movement caused not prevented him from doing so. Instead he just scowled.

‘It’s not that.’

‘What then?’

‘I didn’t mention it to Tina, but I cannot for the life of me recall that I would ever have any dealings with this Krep person. The name doesn’t ring any bells.’

chapter 2

Tina was the first to arrive at the office. How odd that Taras wasn’t in yet. Usually he was there before everyone else. When she once mentioned it to him, he waved his hand dismissively and explained.

‘There are enough people who want to get rid of me anyway, so I make sure I don’t offer them a reason.’

She wasn’t sure what to do with herself. She switched on the computer and began looking through and verifying the material they had sent to the Supreme State Prosecutor's Office in relation to the Krep case. The casing of the bullet shot, gunshot residue from the scene of the shooting and from the jacket of Tomaž Srakar, the journalist who was shot, and from the jumper belonging to Jure Krep. When they searched for names that possibly resented Srakar, either for his work or personally, they came up with a list of around a hundred people. Krep was among them. As a journalist for a left-wing magazine, Srakar had hundreds of opponents, or at least that was how it seemed. Some were spontaneous, others employed to oppose him, but it was hard to differentiate between them.

Then Taras had looked at the articles reporting on the murder of Tomaž Srakar and the responses to them. All were reverential, indignant, demanding the head of the killer. Only one stood out from this collective outrage.

‘Justice prevails!’ Jure Krep had written, adding a link to an interview with the murdered journalist, underlining his answer where he claimed, ‘Jure Krep cannot be taken seriously as a psychoanalyst.’ Srakar had also added that, ‘The best thing

would be to send him to the corner shop to buy a packet of cigarettes, tell him that he can take one, light it, and shut up.'

When he pointed this out, Tina merely waved dismissively. Just another idiot. But, probably also due to a lack of any better leads, Taras dug into this and continued with a kind of intuition based on 'justice prevails' that Tina was not familiar with, and eventually brought Krep to court. He might as well not have bothered. The court released Krep.

Tina closed the file in front of her – Taras is in charge of the Krep case anyway, and until he turns up and says what they should do, anything she did was... Well, there was no point. She turned to the internet. Checking what is going on with the pandemic, what colour the country was approaching on the Covid map. A banner with a headline advert for the *Slovenske Novice* tabloid appeared in the bottom right corner of her screen: *Serious Accident in Hills Close to Ljubljana*. She preferred not to click the link.

She had still not got over Brajc's call. He never called her outside office hours and the fact that he was calling her this time did not bode well. Whether it was work-related or not.

Taras had had a serious accident, just how serious, Brajc was not able to say. She put down the phone but was not too concerned. In the time she had known him, Taras had twice had an accident with his bicycle. Once when he fell on the gravel on a sharp corner as he descended from Toško Čelo, and the second time when he was knocked over by a car between Polhov Gradec and Samotorica, a village she had never heard of until then. Both times he got away with a few scratches. This time would probably be the same. But then Brajc gave her a few more details... Now she called him.

'Where are you?' she asked.

'I'm on Krim...' he muttered. 'I'll be a bit late.'

Brajc had woken up before the alarm clock and then remembered that Taras wouldn't be coming to work. 'At least he won't be on our backs all day...' he thought

to himself but then felt guilty for doing so. He won't come to work, but he also won't come to Mostec for their evening run. Who will now make him run up the hill?

Brajc had to admit to himself that recently he had, if not exactly come to enjoy running, at least to accept it. In any case, he acknowledged that after this torturous activity he felt better. What he did still didn't look like serious running, he was still an overweight beginner with two left feet tripping along the road from Mostec to the inn in front of the church on Rožnik Hill, but at least now he knew what clothes and shoes to wear for the occasion. He also noticed that he was not the only one of his kind. And interestingly, although Taras had on more than one occasion said he could forget dieting and similar restrictions because a person who is athletic can eat anything they want, he also noticed that he was inadvertently also careful about his food intake. Before running simply because it is very hard to move with a stomach full of Wiener schnitzel, sausages, or whatever happened to be around. And recently he was also more careful about what he would eat after running. He did not feel the need, so why suffer so much and then immediately go and spoil it all?

Initially, when he had first started running with Taras, he weighed himself a number of times a day. Before and after running. In the first two weeks he lost two kilos and then nothing more for a long time. Some weeks he even put on weight. Now he had not stepped onto the scales for a few months, since the beginning of summer. He had noticed very few changes, perhaps the ring of fat around his waist was a little firmer but there was no less of it, and his legs were slightly stronger. Then one day, after breakfast, instead of eating three fried eggs, he had two. In the corridor, a few metres from their office, he came across Tina who was just leaving. After greeting him, she gave him a peculiar look.

'Hey, Brajc...' she said from behind her screen once she had returned.

'Yes?'

'Sorry to ask, but is there anything wrong with you?'

'No, why should there be anything wrong with me?'

'You've lost weight.'

So when he returned from work he looked for the scales. Six kilos. Six! He wanted to shout with joy and then cry with emotion. Instead he sniffled a little, blew his nose, and called Taras. He felt like running.

'Can do,' Taras said. 'First I am going for a bike ride, but we can meet up before dark for a round.'

'I've lost six kilos,' he told him.

'I've noticed,' said Taras.

And now Taras won't be around for a long time. Goodness knows how long. Brajc called Alenka.

'How bad is it?'

After their conversation he wanted to cry. They would probably never run together again. How will he manage without him? Who will force him to move in a way so that for a brief moment both feet are off the ground? He sat on the edge of the bed, staring across the room. Then he got up, went across to the cupboard, took out his tracksuit and a pair of cotton socks and hung them across the chair.

After a sleepless night, tossing around and staring at the ceiling, Brajc got up an hour earlier than usual, put on his tracksuit and drove across the Ljubljana Marshes to Podpeč, to the lake, where he stopped the car and stared at the steep forest covering the hill right to the top of Krim. The parking area was empty and there was nobody around the lake, barely larger than a pond, created at the western end of the Marshes but deeper than the sea down on the Slovene coast. He walked back about a hundred metres on the asphalt road and then a few metres up to the last houses on the edge of the forest, continuing through the woods on the dirt track that soon turned into a steep footpath.

In places where it levelled out slightly, he tried running and a few times also ran up the steeper parts. When he thought he would not manage much more of this, he thought of Taras, and how, were he able to, he would have been by his side. Not for himself but for Brajc. Even on days he had cycled enough to cover a stage of the Tour de France and needed no further exercise, Taras would still come running up Rožnik with Brajc. Brajc had to admit that his boss, a sombre and antisocial guy, was

at the same time his best friend. His only one, in fact. So he now decided that he would walk up that hill, all the way to Osterc's house. After all, a few months ago, he could not have even dreamt of doing something like that.

The sign at the bottom of the path said: Krim, two and a half hours. Planinca, where Osterc lived, Brajc thought to himself, is about a third of the way, so an hour would be enough. If he sets out at seven, he should be at Osterc's house by eight, and considering that Osterc comes to work at half past eight, he should be in time to catch him at home. What he had forgotten to take into consideration was that Osterc needs to first take his kids to school and drop his wife off at the library. In order to come to the Police Headquarters before half past, he needed to leave home before eight. Brajc indeed arrived at the first farmhouse in the village forty-five minutes after he had set off, and five minutes later he was in front of Osterc's clay-built house, just in time to catch sight of the rear of Osterc's Citroën C8, the same car that Taras drove whenever it was in working order, descending the dirt road towards the valley. He ran after the car, waving his hands and shouting but unfortunately neither Osterc, nor his wife, nor his children saw him. He stopped when the car disappeared round the corner in a cloud of dust, and swore. What now? Would he have to walk back down?

His gaze travelled across the few houses that made up the village of Planinca. There was no sign of life apart from a small tractor leaving the farm past which he had walked up, but it didn't turn into the road down which Osterc had driven but onto a track leading to the grassy fields at the edge of the forest. Brajc sighed and started walking back down the path he had come on.

He reached the office just before ten, still in his tracksuit. Tina didn't say anything, neither did Osterc, but he never said anything anyway, not even the courtesy hello. He was sitting at the computer but was not looking at anything. Just sitting there. Clearly he had also already spoken to Alenka.

'His condition is unchanged,' Osterc eventually uttered. 'Taras has been in an induced coma due to multiple injuries to his brain. And he broke all his cervical vertebrae. They don't dare predict how things will turn out.'

'How many cervical vertebrae are there anyway?' Brajc asked.

Tina sobbed.

Brajc sat at his desk and looked at Osterc.

'I was at your place,' he said. 'In Planinca, just as you drove off.'

'Surely not on foot?' Osterc was amazed.

'Yes, from Podpeč, and I returned the same way,' Brajc told him. He responded to Osterc's quizzical look by adding, 'Because of Taras.'

Osterc's gaze was no less puzzled, at least so it appeared to Brajc, so he just waved his hand. He would not know how to explain what his morning walk up the hill had to do with Taras. He could not even explain it to himself. Was he trying to help him in some strange way? Honour his memory before he actually...

Tina sobbed again and wiped her eyes with a handkerchief. Criminal Investigator Brajc was slowly having enough of this. After all, nobody has died. Well, not yet, at least. He cleared his throat and both his colleagues turned towards him.

'Things are as they are, we can't do anything about it. Just as well, if we can see something good in this, is that it happened to Taras and not one of us.'

Tina wiped her other eye and looked at him questioningly.

'That it happened to Taras...?'

'...and not an ordinary person,' Brajc finished her sentence. 'I didn't even know that a person can survive if they break all their cervical vertebrae. I should ask Cvilak if he has ever come across such a case with his patients before.'

'But Cvilak's *patients* are all...' Osterc started saying but stopped when he looked at Tina.

'What I mean,' Brajc continued, 'what I want to say, is that the three of us and a million other people would be dead if something like what happened to Taras has happened to us. Dead on the spot. We would not burden any hospitals, not be put into any kind of coma. But Taras is alive. Against all expectations.'

Tina burst into tears.

Well, at least he had tried. He wouldn't say anything else. The three of them would not say anything else.

Brajc only spoke with Taras two months later. He did go to see him once in the intensive care unit but at the time Taras, with a tube in his mouth and artificial

ventilation in coma, was, of course unable to speak. Once he was moved to the high-dependency unit he was not allowed visitors due to Covid, so the first time they spoke was only a week after Taras had returned home from hospital. Even then Taras was unable to answer the key question.

‘I don’t know how it happened,’ he said. ‘I cannot remember that day, or the days before the accident. The first thing I can talk about with certainty are the May Day holidays. All the summer is a blank, apart from a few individual fragments.’

They were sitting at the table but after a while Taras became uncomfortable and tired, so with the help of his walking frame and Alenka, he got himself to the sofa in the living room.

‘So you don’t remember the Krep case either...’ Brajc tried.

‘I don’t,’ said Taras. ‘I read on the internet about it being dismissed at court. Tina told me it was my case.’

Alenka asked them whether they wanted a coffee. Taras asked for a *lungo*, Brajc for ordinary coffee with milk, and Alenka went to the kitchen to prepare them. Brajc felt he had to say something simply to break the silence.

‘Strange, all those mountains you climbed, all those walls, and you go and fall off Polhograjska Grmada.’

Taras was silent. He slowly and with great difficulty turned toward the kitchen, checked where Alenka was, who was still only putting the water in the coffee pot. Then he straightened himself against the pillows and replied in a low voice.

‘I did some serious climbing for fifteen years. All this time, or at least after my first ever accident, I was very much aware that a single wrong move is enough, and that I could not afford to make it. And I didn’t. Not in serious or in less serious climbs. Every move needed to be one hundred percent. It was the only thing that kept me among the living. This stayed with me even after I stopped climbing the serious routes. I simply cannot understand how I could have forgotten about that this time, I cannot get my head around it.’

Brajc shrugged his shoulders.

‘An accident. An unfortunate set of circumstances.’

‘I don’t know...’ said Taras.

Brajc gave him a surprised look.

'What do you mean? It was an accident, wasn't it?'

Taras too tried to lift his shoulders in an imitation of shrugging. Alenka was coming into the living room with their coffees.

'I don't know,' he replied quickly. I really don't know what happened up there.'