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Tadej Golob (1967, Slovenia) is a unique best-selling author with a thematically broad range of works, who put Slovene crime fiction on the map of world literature. He won the Slovene Novel of the Year Award for his debut, has written several biographies, two YA novels, and a book about the first person to ski from the summit of Mount Everest, also conquered by the author himself.

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Lenin Park

translated from the Slovene by
Gregor Timothy Čeh



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Lenin Park

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The Voice of the New Age

Monday

CHAPTER 1.

Hanging on the wall was one of those antique clocks with pine cone weights. Surprisingly, it showed the right time. Nine thirty-six. His phone was two minutes fast but he had set it this way deliberately so as not to be late.

Taras was sitting on a chair at the dining table next to the open window, hoping to catch the breeze that should have been created by the draught, had the air outside not have been just as hot, stale and still as inside the flat. He had just had a shower but droplets of sweat were already appearing on his forehead and were about to trickle down his cheeks and neck...

He stood up and stepped to the sink that, with a narrow dishwasher and a ceramic hob with two burners created a kitchen corner, tore off a couple of paper towels from the roll and sat back down in the chair. Then he stood up again and pulled the chair closer to the window. It made no difference, though he could now hear all the noise from the street, conversations that reminded him of the hum at a badly attended football match where you can make out the individual voices of spectators but not make much sense in terms of what is being said. Not that sense is what one might expect at a football match or indeed a place like the joint just below the window of this flat.

He could have guessed the time, at least approximately, by the fact that the sun, at its strongest in mid-June, had already moved behind the Opera and waiters at the café on Cankar Street were putting away the last sunshades. As in the flat where

Taras was sitting, it made little difference. Even in the shade the thick, scorching humidity pressed down towards the ground with the same intensity as before.

Ljubljana was, as anyone in the know was quick to point out, experiencing its hottest summer on record. The hottest *beginning* of summer, Taras thought whenever this was mentioned. It was only the middle of June and they had already had fifteen consecutive days with temperatures no lower than thirty degrees, often rising close to forty at midday. What was worse – this was no dry, desert thirty plus. The heat that lingered over the town had arrived as a cloud of humidity and comparisons with places like Singapore were not far out. It was – as one weatherman on state TV had said in desperation over not being able to offer a better forecast – so hot you could just drop dead.

The gushing sound from the bathroom stopped and a little while later Tina's dark head appeared at the door connecting the kitchen with the hallway. Behind it her naked body of which little more than her neck and shoulders were visible.

"Won't be a minute. Do you have time for a coffee?"

He checked his watch, even though he had only just done so before, and nodded.

"Fifteen minutes."

Tina also nodded and her head disappeared behind the door.

The clock on the wall was still at nine thirty-six. Just as it had been three minutes ago, half an hour ago, and would be in an hour's time. As someone who didn't believe in coincidences, should Taras have taken this as some kind of an omen?

He used another paper towel to wipe his brow. He hated the heat and all it brought with it. He didn't mind sweating when he ran or cycled but he couldn't stand it when he was standing in a queue in a shop or at the bank, or when he leaned over a bowl of hot soup, or in front of people like Drvarič and Kristan. Were it not for Brajc who was even worse off, Taras would have believed he was the one person in the entire world least able to handle the heat.

"What was it that you wanted to show me?" she called out from the bedroom.

"In the hallway, in a plastic bag."

She put on a pair of shorts and an oversized T-shirt that made her look like a student, one not even close to graduation. She held the supermarket bag he had hung on the door handle in the hallway. In it she found his standard issue Beretta.

“What’s this? Why did you bring this with you?”

With the index finger and thumb of his right hand Taras formed a gun like a young child might do, playing at kindergarten... though kids at kindergarten these days probably don’t play games like that any more.

“Bang, bang...”

“Bang, bang?”

“My annual firearms training and assessment. I couldn’t just leave it in the car.”

“What, this late in the year? I thought we were all supposed to have completed it in the spring?”

“I couldn’t get to the previous one.”

He was not a bad shot, especially not when he used to enjoy it and practised a lot. Even now he would achieve a solid result, though after the age of forty his eyes were no longer as reliable in focusing between the sight and the target. Previously focusing, the alignment of the focus, happened so quickly, so automatically, that he used to think he could see both the sight and target in focus at the same time, but now... it was either one or the other, with a kind of slow-zoom adjustment in between. And while he used to see exactly where he was sending the nine-millimetre bullet, it now left the barrel on more of a zen Buddhist may-the-force-be-with-you kind of decision. Somewhere into or out of the mist. Of course this also showed in the results.

Tina put the weapon on the table and went across to the dishwasher to take the coffee pot. In which she wanted to make the coffee. Filling it with water, she placed it on the smaller of the two elements before sitting down on the only empty chair by the small round table.

“And, how did it go?”

“Well enough for me to pass.”

He told her his score.

“Thirty?! That’s borderline, and ten points lower than me!”

She laughed and when she laughed she was unbelievably

cute, not just beautiful or sexy. Why was it that, at their first meeting, he had kept asking himself whether he liked her or not? He looked at her as if this was the first time he was seeing her and she appeared to be blushing.

“What is it? Anything wrong?”

She knew there wasn't.

“Can I give you some advice? Colleague to colleague, police officer to police officer?”

“Police officer and colleague?”

“Police officer and colleague.”

“Go ahead, colleague.”

“When it comes to weapons, don't rely on your shooting abilities. They're relatively unimportant. It is *never* like on the shooting range.”

When it comes to weapons, people are capable of all kinds of stupidity. He had even seen someone turn towards their colleague when their gun had jammed.

“It doesn't work...”

The bullet was probably low quality and perhaps damp. The firing pin had done its work but the primer kindled and kindled, only to ignite properly at the exact moment the barrel was pointing at the left lung of the innocent observer. He survived but only just.

“Oh? And what *should* I rely on?” she asked him.

“On actually *using* the gun once you have drawn it.”

She saluted.

“I get it, Mr Eastwood.”

She stood up and finished making their coffee. They both knew that he would drink his, look at his watch and say he had to leave, but for now, at this moment, he could still afford to pretend that he was not in a hurry.

“Although I thought it was more like: drawing my gun means I *am* ready to use it.”

“It isn't.”

Tina thought he would explain but he didn't. He picked up the gun on the table, lifted it up and tried to straighten his arm. Then he gave up and put it back on the table.

“I can't extend my arm because of my elbow.”

“Oh? Is it still the same?”

“No change. Sometimes I think it’s better... but it isn’t. No change.”

When, about an hour ago he had shot a round of bullets, his eyes clouded over with pain. Just as well he scored what he had done. In fact he would not have passed the assessment were it not for Petrič. They were about the same age and knew each other from the police academy. Petrič saw that Taras was having difficulties, tapped him on the shoulder, stepped into his position and shot three bullets into the black centre. This gave him the score he needed to successfully pass the test.

“It’ll get better,” she said, putting the two cups of coffee on the table.

“But that was not what I wanted to show you. Look at this!”

Out of the bag he pulled a round, flat, silver gadget.

“Is that...?” she asked. “What were these called again?”

“It’s a *Discman*. They weren’t popular for very long. I found it by chance when I was moving some junk the other day.”

“And what’s so unusual about it?”

He didn’t even know himself. Perhaps it was that, at the time he had bought it, the *Discman* represented the height of technological achievement, something that would define his and everyone else’s future, but it turned out to be merely a blind alley in technological advance. A tiny silver non-flying saucer.

“Nothing,” he laughed. “Forget about it. It just looks like such a silly device.”

“I’m trying to remember if I ever actually used one.”

She pressed a button and the tiny silver saucer opened.

“It still has a CD inside!”

She took it out of its slot.

“Motörhead, *Ace of Spades*. Into one-note screeching were we?”

It was a clue as to exactly when he had last used it.

“Does it work?”

He looked inside the bag and shook his head.

“No batteries. I seem to have left them in the car.”

“Shame,” she said, put the CD back into the slot and closed the cover.

“Did you park at the station?”

“No, not far from here, on Župančič Street.”

On his way here he had been trying to find a parking space when, miraculously, he found one he could squeeze his Citroen C8 into one just a three-minute walk from her flat.

“Oh, then you must have walked through Lenin Park?”

“Lenin Park?”

“That green triangle between Župančič Street and that tiny street along the side that points in this direction, next to the Figovec Inn. The park has had various names, they changed it to Park Ajdovščina some years ago, now I think it is called Park Argentina or something like that.”

“I know the name. There used to be a petrol station close by where kids would buy booze. Not a night went by without someone reporting disorderly conduct and breach of the peace. I’m surprised *you* know it.”

“When I was a little girl, my grandmother would take me there. To her it was always just Lenin Park. This I now find rather interesting. She came from one of those old Ljubljana families that had lost so much after the war, and was the last person to endorse anything to do with ‘communism’, as she called the era. But to her the park was always just Lenin Park, even later.”

“In Lenin Park there are trees.

In Lenin Park there’s even a warehouse of seeds.”

“What?”

“Some song from the time when the park still belonged to Lenin. I only remember these lines. And it is now not even called Park Argentina any more, its official name is Slovene Reformation Park. Why do you want to know if I came through the park?”

She frowned for a moment, took a sip of coffee, wanting to gain a second before saying what she was going to say.

“Why?”

“Then you must have seen that homeless bag lady?”

“Yes, I did.”

When he had walked along the pavement bordering the park and not the diagonal path across it that Tina was thinking about, the old woman was lying on one of the benches a few feet within the grassy area. There were plastic bags everywhere around

her, some of them on the bench, others under it. Taras could recall the woman tirelessly dragging her plastic bags around town ever since he had first come to Ljubljana, meaning at least the last thirty years. She was not someone you wouldn't notice, and she didn't seem to change at all over the years. This was why he was so surprised when he noticed her this time. She looked very old and tired, terrible even for an old homeless woman.

"Every time I see her, and lately this has been often, because it seems she barely moves from the bench in the park any more, I get a guilty conscience. I should do something but I don't know what. The other day I tried to give her some small change. She didn't even want it. It was as if she had not even noticed me. And the stench. Could you smell it?"

He had done.

"It's as if she is rotting away alive. Isn't there some service in this country to look after people like her?"

Taras shrugged his shoulders. There probably was.

"If she can still be helped at all."

"What do you mean?" she gave him a surprised and accusing look. "There's always something that can be done."

"Really? A while back, about a year ago, I ran over a cat. It was one of those stray cats..."

The animal had jumped out of a bin and run straight out in front of his car. He hit it and the cat, despite its injuries, picked itself up and shot into some bushes beyond the ditch at the side of the road. He had thought about just driving on, but stopped and went across to the bushes where the dying animal stared at him with huge eyes he would never forget.

"I'm not talking about a cat," she said. "A person is not a cat."

She waited for him to agree, or at least add something, but he checked the clock on the wall, picked up his gun, thrust it in its holster and placed it back into the plastic bag. Only when he was putting on his trainers did he add, "Once, when I was still with the uniformed police, some writer was brought in one night and put into prison."

Taras had been on night duty and the writer was drunk so he had spent the night in the cell. In the morning, when he woke up, and before he was released, he had had a coffee with the

police officers and he told them a story...

A story about how he and his mother had been deported to Germany during the Second World War and how he survived the Dresden bombing. He had been placed with a German family on the outskirts of town and when the bombs began falling he was standing at the top of the stairs leading into the cellar. The force from a nearby blast threw him down the stairs and he broke his arm but that was not what stayed with him, what hurt him most...

After the bombing he had gone into town and down by the river – Taras had forgotten which river runs through Dresden – he saw SS officers shooting people who were in flames due to the phosphorus from the dropped bombs. There was no help for them, phosphorus cannot be extinguished. Not even by jumping into the river.

“They did the only thing they could.”

Taras stroked her hair and gave her a quick kiss. This always made her feel uncomfortable, dirty. It felt as if a guilty conscience was creeping its way into Taras, as if he could hardly wait to leave and sort out in his head what he had to sort out before going back home.

They did the only thing they could. Tina shuddered.

*

He unlocked the car on the passenger side and placed the bag with his gun onto the seat. Then he walked round the car and climbed in, put the key into the ignition and turned it. Even such a simple movement caused him pain in his bad elbow. When the engine started, so did the radio, and he caught the end of some bland and pointless song in English. He opened the glove compartment, found the pack of batteries and fitted them into the *Discman*. He tucked the earphones into his ears and turned up the volume.

*If you like to gamble, I tell you I'm your man,
You win some, lose some, all the same to me...*

*

Aleksander called her. He would be home in half an hour. Routine, this hiding of ours is becoming more and more of a rou-

tine, she thought to herself as she went around the flat, checking there were no tell-tale traces of Taras anywhere. The bedroom, the bathroom, the kitchen where she washed up one of the two coffee cups. Then she went to the refrigerator, took out a yoghurt and sat down in front of the TV.

She flicked through the channels. All the films that were just beginning seemed silly or at least uninteresting, the watchable ones were half way through, Eurosport was showing cycling on some plain stage and, flicking through all the channels for the third time, Tina realised that she wasn't at all in the mood for TV. Repeatedly her brain returned to the image of the tiny old lady surrounded with all those plastic bags that looked like drooping, deflating balloons.

Could Taras have walked past her without being touched in the slightest way? She stood up from the sofa, opened the fridge and found some cheese and salami with which she made a sandwich. Then she looked in the fridge again and found a chocolate milk. She put both in a bag, put on her sandals and left the flat.

There was still a crowd outside the cafés on Čop Street, noise that died down as soon as she disappeared into the passage under Nebotičnik. Silence then followed her all the way to the park where she found the bench with the old lady surrounded by bags. She hung the one she had brought onto the green slats above the woman's feet, hoping only that the old lady would notice it among all the others when she woke up in the morning.