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Chikungunya

Of course he didn't take him all the way to the Croatian border. He left him near Parecag, at a bus station. This driver, without saying a word, drove all the way to Koper in silence; all right, true, it was Monday, no one felt like talking. He only said *srečno*, wished him good luck, and motioned him to get out. He crossed the road and after only a few steps found the place where he could continue hitchhiking. He noticed a pile of worn car tires only after the first sting. The sun was not yet burning properly so the tires did not give that stifling smell he loved so much. The drops of last night's rain glistened on them. He approached them with anger. He knew it well, by the sting, tiger mosquitoes, they nested here and formed their little clouds of pleasure.

Relentless mosquitoes were part of everyday life around here. Ever since the 1980s, they'd been coming her together with imported goods from Asia, and now these little tigers were biting non-stop, regardless of the time of day and without much buzzing. The only thing was that these years there'd been more of them, too many.

The sun shined on the exact spot where he was standing. After a couple of minutes it became unbearable and he had to turn his back to the road. In front of him there was a patch of feeble clover and then reeds through which a path for joggers and hikers passed, where bicycles were ridden through. Behind that were soline, muddy fields of salt, their swampy stench slowly rising as the day grew older. For a while he couldn't take his eyes of a bicycle whose frame blazed unbearably under the sunrays. For a moment it seemed to him that the frame had freed itself from its wheels and floated in the air like a giant letter.

He turned towards the road and soon a car with Pula license plates stopped. This driver was very chatty, but unfortunately he went only as far as Buje. He didn't want to tell him what was business in Oprtalj; still, he gave him the basics about his illness and tiger mosquitoes.

Refik lived his life of a retiree in one of the blocks at Markovec, above Koper. He had a terrace, which he used as a dump yard for bicycle tires. Patching, fixing tires was his passion for the days in retirement, he did it for his own pleasure. To kill time, he charged people just for the sake of it, because the Slovenians loved that. The problem was the rain season: he'd dry, arrange and rearrange all of them, but in some tires, in that tangle, the water remained for months, and the mosquitoes thanked him wholeheartedly by laying their eggs, breeding relentlessly. Still, even after everything that had happened to him, Refik did not lose his sense of humor: "So the word of my generosity," he said to his curious driver, "spread among the mosquitoes and one day one of them treated me to some nasty virus. For two days I lay in Izola Hospital with a fever, a headache, I couldn't even glance at the sun, and the worst of all, and I feel it to this day, and it will stay with me until I die, my joints had swollen and it hurt as if a dog bit me and wanted to tear off my leg. *Ni zdravila za čikungunju*, that's what he told me, the doctor, there's no cure for Chikungunya. Hang in there, Refik, don't give up... That's how I won over the disease."

Buje were already in sight, up high; it seemed this had somehow quieted Refik down. The driver's eyes kept falling on his jittery hands, hands of a craftsman: a web of black lines over his fingers. Those fingers could not calm down, they were breaking from emptiness, straining with nothing to do.

As a mason, Refik also worked in this part of the country, especially in and around Grožnjan. Now he was supposed to go towards Oprtalj, luckily not all the way, but a bit closer, to Makovci. In any case, he no longer felt like hitchhiking: he took the road over Triban.

The sun shined on each step he made, he climbed uncaringly, not noticing things around him. Again he engaged in his deaf-and-dumb discussion with the Slovenian nurses in Izola; they showed no respect for the old Refik. At least not as much as he expected. He gloated that now, at this very moment, he was doing exactly what got him in quarrel with them in the first place; *izogibajte se gibanju na prostem*, that's what he caught on to, he didn't even listen to what else they had to say: he not to move, but that's like they gave him to sign his own death sentence! It might be that they got angry with him too because to their question, *Kje vas je pičil komar*, he answered with approval: "Bah, pinched me, yes – hell, yes, it pinched me like a motherfucker!"

He stopped for a second in the shadow of a rundown stone house, however, the swallows were so loud that his thoughts got completely tangled. Eh, if I pinch you...

Finally, he turned around to look where he was, clear shadows of trees danced on the edge of the road ahead of him. First grains of sweat appeared on his temples, he wiped them away with his palm. This reminded him that he was on the way to get urine.

The urine of a woman he'd never seen before, only talked to her on the phone. His neighbor Maja – when, over a cup of coffee, he told her how he suffered and read his half-wrinkled diagnosis to her, because that he didn't know by heart, that *Chikungunya*, which sounded like an insult to him – gave him the number. She could barely wait, don't you listen to them doctors, that was her favorite sentence, she always had all kinds of honey and tea, and now she came into her own; she knew of a woman who had such urine that not only healed your skin, but no mosquito would even smell you – and you don't smell – she added immediately. But this was precisely what interested Refik the most, how come you don't smell, she pees on you, yet you don't smell, how do you get that? First, she doesn't pee on you, you get the bottle, you pay for it, and then you rub it in yourself, second, this urine is left to rest for a couple of days, it's not like if you peed right now! – she snapped right back at him.

But, even now, when he was already on his way to Makovci, Refik could not get the image out of his mind: he's lying, some young woman above him – she's peeing, urinating on him. That's what pulled him on, until he freed himself of that image, until he got the urine, he would not be able to calm down, he realized one night. Nevertheless, it took him a few days, until he made a decision. Wherever he saw a woman, an attractive one, he imagined himself under her legs, soaked in urine, that image was stronger than him, he simply had to go see her. "Eh, damn you", he said to Maja, who stuck some money and a list of medicines she'd ordered from that same woman, Blanka, into his hands.

I'd already forgotten all about women, Refik thought in anguish, as Triban grew smaller behind his back. And now this urine! The more he imagined the scene, the wilder Blanka became, she took different positions and tortured him.

He closed his eyes, as if this will chase the images out of his mind, and picked up his pace. When he glanced at the road in front of him again, he realized there were only trees around him, no man in sight, no house. That always troubled him. He picked up his pace even more to set himself free from that inner fatigue – bah, he can't go back now, not after all these kilometers he's crossed!

Church towers had already sounded the noon, hunger started to bore around his stomach. He didn't like to eat. When there was light, he would spend time on his terrace among the tires, perhaps he would light a cigarette, but now not even that. He even avoided drinking water! He was only worried that he wouldn't be able to find Blanka's house, he'd hardly seen anyone along the way, and he'd have to ask around, people just had to know of her, if not by her pee, then by her herbs and teas.

He was all sticky with sweat and dust. His strength was giving up on him. He made his way through some bushes, entered a little among the trees and found a clearing where he could lie down. Oak

branches above him coiled like hungry snakes. An absolute quiet all around him. He smiled. To travel over such a distance by the end of your days because of a woman! And what for?! To have her pee on you.

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