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DON'T FORGET THE STORK!

(SHORT STORY)

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A cheerful, lively Sunday with bright cars whizzing by in all directions... The very asphalt, swept by the wind and washed by the rain, seems to rush and hurry along. The sun disappears, then emerges again, as if someone were cutting it with a large pair of shears and throwing the shreds down. When the warm rays flow through the side window, Anta's eyes close, her long, blackened eyelashes stick together. Aldas likes his wife's comfortable pose; relaxed, leaning her whole body back, she arches her round and gentle chin, revealing a neck without a single wrinkle, although she is already thirty-five. Anta looks completely resigned to her fate, as if she would greet anything unexpected with a playful smile hovering around the corners of her mouth. Aldas is pleased by this resignation, which is undoubtedly intended for him, for his large hands, resting calmly on the wheel and barely vibrating like the wheel.

The road is plainly visible in the sudden flashes of sunshine as well as the shadows of the cold blue clouds. The motor hums as evenly and gently as Anta's breathing, which spreads open her leather jacket and then shuts it again. A small strip of unbelievably white breast flashes at the opening of her thin sweater. If there were nobody else in the car, Aldas would lift his right hand off the wheel and place it on her breast. Anta would probably be surprised. It was a long time since he had done that, or maybe she wouldn't be surprised; after all, she was resigned to her destiny and prepared for the unexpected.

I am her destiny, Aldas thought proudly. Or perhaps it wasn't a thought, but a feeling, which rose subconsciously when Anta was so near and at the same time so far.

Now she is far, and not only because she is smiling with half-shut eyes, leaning her large body back and breathing excitingly. String-bags containing bottles, glasses and food clatter between the seats. These sounds separate them like a pedestrian barrier in the street. They are not alone and will not be alone all day. Romas' dignified, somewhat bloated face and Elzé's succulent mouth, made for laughter, jump up and down alternately in the rearview mirror, sometimes giving way to Aistutė, who stands up on Romas' or Elzé's knees. Aldas loves Aistutė. Aistutė means almost as much to him as Anta, although what Anta is to him he still doesn't really know. The unhappy thought strikes him that to be Anta's destiny means to suffer this annoying, separating noise when you would like to listen only to her breathing.

Better not think anything, for we are driving out to the country — for the first time this late, cold, spring. Don't think, don't think, Aldas tries to convince himself. But is he really thinking? He has no thoughts, neither clear ones, with which you could disagree, nor scattered ones. Discontent gnaws at him like a piece of gravel in his shoe, which got there who knows when and how.

The din from the bottles and the sharp pebble somehow coincide; he is not sure which of them is the cause. If he could only shake them both out, a carefree atmosphere would be restored. But am I really in a bad mood? True, I am a bit annoyed...

Think about something else, it's a beautiful day. Later you'll be sorry you didn't enjoy the scurrying, swimming, sparkling world. You can step on the brake, and what loomed indistinctly in vague shadows will take root in the ground, will surround you with thick and thin trunks, with the rustle and smell of young leaves. The bitter taste of bark, soft grass under your feet — what could be better? You'll slam shut the car door, jump across the ditch, and everything you can possibly dream about will spread out before you. No. What you dream about most is right here, next to you, in the car. Anta's eyelashes do not

tremble, do not open, even when clouds cover the sun. Probably as far as Anta is concerned, it's always sunny. But that should make me happy, once I am her destiny. Why does her cheerful serenity annoy me?

Aldas takes a better look at the day, which is really not so fine. It's neither sunny nor rainy. Well, the rain will probably come. It always comes when you don't need it. And the verdure trembles somehow sad and frightened, stirred by the wind. Perhaps that is why the glimmering of the trees is more pleasant than the trunks, which you could stroke with your hand. The road is not prepared after the winter, bumpy, and by the roadside, thin, shedding cows are grazing. Romas is silent, as usual; no, he is not silent, he is smiling. He is probably smiling ironically because the cows of the collective farm are meager in the spring... Let him try trading places with some collective farm chairman! He's wearing his chair thin in the department and is content. He also knows how to settle himself comfortably in someone else's car. Just seat him! And Elzè, as usual is laughing, now soundlessly, only with her wide, succulent mouth, now in a sonorous, warbling voice. She does not, of course, notice the cows. She laughs loudly so that people would notice her, because she cannot say anything witty, just laugh and kiss... She often tells Anta how she kisses young instructors, and Anta listens, although she herself would hardly kiss another man.. .

Why am I so convinced of that?

Aldas is ashamed of his sudden, suspicious thought; after all, it's dishonorable to think like that about a somehow open and unarmed Anta with half-shut eyes. It's nobody's fault that he suddenly desires to be alone with her, when he himself invited both Romas and Elzè. He doesn't know why he always invites them — perhaps to ward off the unexpected in advance? Now, the bottles can clatter even more loudly, it's their right, their duty to clatter, and all that remains to him is to listen, while in his shoe the pebble he cannot shake out rolls around insolently, because they are the same bottles and food and Romas' quiet smile and Elzè's boisterous laughter... Soon he himself will forget the tender feeling toward Anta which overcame him and disturbed him...

"Daddy, where's the stork? You promised to show me a stork."

It was Aistuté, who had climbed up on Romas' knees, and pressed her nose, forehead and both fat little hands against the glass. Romas was meaningfully silent. Elzè let forth a peal of laughter. Where in the world would Aldas find a stork? And nonetheless, he finds it unpleasant, as usual, to answer.

"Aistuté, sit down. You're not supposed to stand up in the car. Don't worry, the stork will appear. Just be patient."

"Oh, I'm tired of waiting."

"Aistuté, sit down, you're not supposed to..."

"I won't sit down!"

"Aistè."

Aldas raised his voice. Elzè laughed quietly, as if she were being tickled, while Romas, maintaining his meaningful silence, seated Aistè on his knees. Aistuté was surprised and wrinkled up her tanned brow. Her father always spoke so lovingly to her. Mommy yelled at her more often.

"You're naughty. Uncle Romas is good, you're not."

Aistuté pronounces these words very seriously, and this seriousness saddens Aldas. But why should I be good? Always and to everybody? Here's Elzè, who's always good: to men, because she is prepared to kiss every last one of them; to women, because they can talk about it with her and laugh. Romas is always silent, and everyone considers him good also. He is good to Anta, good to Aistuté snuggled up against his shoulder. And also good to me. I can't drive out of town without him, and don't go to the theater without him. I feel something lacking when he's not nearby. Is he good because he is silent? Because he's still a bachelor, thirty years old and then some, and he has still not become anyone's destiny? Maybe to be good means to be no one's destiny?

A flame-colored Java darted by like a flash of lightning.

Damn it, I never noticed the Java turning in, even though no tree, no automobile blocked my view and the road through the fields was straight and smooth. How could I have been so absentminded? No, I kept my eyes on the road, my eyes were wide open, only I didn't see anything, and such a burning Java — like fire — sped by. Be more careful, man, remember that Anta is dozing and your hands are on the vibrating wheel. The smallest move would be enough to...

The stork blocked out the Java for Aldas. He was probably looking around for the damned stork. What else could have ruined his concentration if not the stork which he was supposed to show them? Everyone, everyone demanded something of him... Anta with half-shut eyes, exuding the warmth of her large, beautiful body and thick blond hair... Aistuté, who had not forgotten her grievance, with a strange grimace of discontent on her pudgy face. Actually, hardly a strange grimace, but the spit and image of Anta's grimace. When Anta opens her eyes, she will look at him in the same manner as Aistuté...

Even Romas demands something, because his silence is somewhat ironical. But is it really ironical? A sense of humor is as foreign to Romas as talkativeness. Even Elzé's laughter, of an unusually wide range, not obligating anyone, demands something of him...

The sun hid behind a large cold cloud, as if a firebrand were covered by a thick piece of sod. The fragile verdure blackened, the alluring distant vista disappeared. Anta stirred, stretched; her swollen eyelids opened, no longer warmed by the rays filtering through the glass.

"Why don't you want to show the child a stork, Aldas?"

Anta smiled with the corners of her mouth, as if just waking from a pleasant dream, but her words were ordinary, with a barely noticeable trace of reproachfulness.

So he hadn't shown them, as if the stork were strutting alongside the road waiting for them, especially for Anta's awakening, Romas' silence, and Elzé's laughter, and he had whizzed right by it. One might think there were as many storks by the wayside as stones, and all he had to do was wish it (he, yes, but especially she, with arms thrown back, almost imperceptibly smiling!) and the stones would grow wings and long red legs. As if it were the tape recorder which he dragged home yesterday. You wanted it, you went to buy it and you brought it home — here, have a good time. Only it wasn't he, but she, Anta, who decided on the tape recorder that nobody needed. A friend of hers, you see, bought a tape recorder to practice her English diction... At the university Anta was too lazy to study a foreign language, Aistuté wasn't in school yet. Who would practice diction? Of course, one could play with it, record one thing or another on tape. But what? Romas' wise silence, Elzé's immortal laugh? Aistuté was no child prodigy, just an ordinary, healthy child. Her voice was a pleasure to hear in the home, in the yard, and that was enough! And that discontented little grimace on her face — that was Anta's, really Anta's; how much innocent, reproachful forgiveness there was in it! Why a tape recorder, when there was a radio and a mountain of records? Also a television, which I likewise did not want... But, of course, I myself went and brought it home, and was as happy as if I'd longed for a television set all my life. And as I recall, I didn't want the car, either. I resisted it even more than the television, more than the tape recorder which I brought home yesterday and which will henceforth chatter, intervening in the television and radio's duet and filling in that small crevice of space, silence and peace that I had set aside for contemplation... I especially did not want the car, because sometimes a Java or bicycle leaps into view like an unexpectedly startled bird, and I am not sure if a small part of the Java or bicycle that goes by isn't left behind under my car or somewhere nearby in the ditch... I didn't want a car, and how could I, when the Volga drove at full speed into my work, my intimate thoughts and the sequel to my dissertation... Like a wild animal it roared between me and the final results which were expected of me, and were awaited most of all by me, not so much for the results themselves, which could be very interesting, as for the tens or even hundreds of people to whom the results could be useful. And now the car rolls along, well lubricated and well taken care of, while this evening the television set will reveal the announcer's new necklace. The only thing missing is the stork, which I, you see, do not want to show my only daughter, so wonderfully like her mother...

"OK, I'll go and buy a stork," said Aldas docilely, as usual, hiding his grudge. Anta's light eyes, although they were insulted, glanced at him sincerely and forgivingly.

"I don't want a toy one!" Aistuté sniffed.

"She already has a toy one," Anta clarified.

"I'll buy you a live one!" Aldas' voice trembled in anger. "Do you hear me? A live one!"

"A live one? Oh, daddy!"

Aistuté is satisfied, very satisfied; she claps her hands, but Anta is dissatisfied, and her light eyes, luxuriant hair and warm body, which draw away from him like a small cloud chased by the wind, are dissatisfied.

"You hear that, Romas, he'll buy her a live one! Not bad. His nerves need treatment."

Romas, as always, is silent, smiling ironically, but he is over thirty and he has chivalrous feelings. He cannot leave Anta's voice alone, without approval.

"Well, a stork you really can't buy, even if you put down your whole assistant professor's salary!"

Romas' voice squeaks like an unused door. He talks so rarely that he blushes, while Elzé, it seems, will die of laughter, which goes through all the stages before becoming a quiet scream.

"Yes, dear friend, storks are not for sale!" Aldas warmly concurs with Romas' unexpected wise words. He is delighted that there is at least one thing that is not for sale. At least once someone else's wishes will not become, his own and will not oppress him later like the car, television and tape recorder.

The road becomes smoother, although not repaired after the winter. The verdure blanketing the fields and woods is fragile, but the wind will not tear it away. Patiently, hopefully, it waits for the sun, which tires of smoldering under the sod of clouds. Suddenly the sun emerges dazzlingly, floods the car, Anta's eyelids close. She settles back more comfortably, and dreamily, without reproach, says:

"So don't forget the stork... You won't forget?"

Aldas doesn't answer. He won't forget.

Translated by Skirma Kondratas