

## **TWO FRAGMENTS FROM LUNCH BREAK**

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translated from the Bulgarian by Angela Rodel

### **1. The Lady in Pink**

Today the cafeteria offered its usual lunch menu – something with lots of meat. Big and greasy. Mashed potatoes slapped on a plate with no love for the food whatsoever. I took one look and quickly got out of there. I bought a sandwich from the bakery I don't like going into, because the clerk is very fast and demanding. Stern and serious. I always worry about taking too long to decide and agitating her all the more. I quickly point at a sandwich with cheese and a leaf of lettuce. Even before I can get my money out, she's already drumming her fingers on the counter impatiently, as if I'm taking ages. Then I set off to stroll through the streets. I decide to check whether there's a bench behind the church where a person could nibble on his sandwich in peace. It is a sandwich, after all.

I look inside the bag and the butter seems to be moving. Come on now, I know I'm just seeing things. I close the bag, squeezing the top tightly so that the greasy little beast can't jump out. I reach the church and duck down one of the paths to the left of it. I reach a metal gate covered with signs. It's not a playground. It's not open to the public. It's not for this. It's not for that. With the exception of the entrance to something or other and to the kindergarten. Well, I can pass as an exception, too, I tell myself. And inside – a quiet, magical garden. With narrow walkways, low trees, benches. My first thought is that it looks a bit like a cemetery.

An elderly woman in a pink suit is sitting on one of the benches. She looks sad. Quiet. Tired. I take a side path so as not to disturb her and sit on a distant bench. I open the bag with my living sandwich, close my eyes and take a bite. I'm still gonna eat it, so what? The woman soon gets up and slowly walks off, leaving me alone.

The whole garden is covered in white bird feathers. Fresh ones. The poor little things are shaking off their winter down like crazy right now. And so I gather up a few feathers here and there along the path, I look at all of that richness and think that it's so much, so not-mine, that it's better not to touch it. I think to myself that if feathers were gold, I would be a millionaire after my lunch break. If I were greedy enough to gather them up. Not that

I'm poor in the feathers department. It's just that so many at once suddenly makes my whole collecting of them worthless. So I decide not to touch them.

On the way back, when I reached my office building I see a woman waving at me from a window. I wave back. She's happy and smiling a toothy smile. She opens the window and calls out: "You were in the park."

"No, sorry, you must be thinking of someone else," I reply.

"No, no, I saw you!" the woman insisted. And it dawned on me that she called the little garden with its feather-covered walkways a "park."

"Ohhh, you're the woman in the pink suit."

"Yes," she replied, smiling cheerfully. "I've never gone to that park, I don't know why I thought of it today."

We work together, we often talk on the phone, but outside the office we are so different that she didn't recognize me, nor I her.

"Yes, I was in the park," I say and toss the bag from my sandwich into the trashcan in front of the door and go in.

A week later the woman in the pink suit retires and the park is mine alone, but I don't go there anymore.

## **2. The Man with the Black Leather Bag**

Once again I decide not to eat in the cafeteria. I buy a croissant, this time from a different bakery and look for a sunny place to eat it. In front of my building there is a dried-up fountain, some kind of modern structure – a metal arc with a stone bed where the water was supposed to pool and run out through some leaf-shaped, slightly branched spigots. Nothing special, in fact, it's pretty stupid looking. But the spot is sunny. Wide open. With views in many directions.

I sit on the stony edge of the fountain. I even have to jump up a bit, because it's high, I set my wallet, keys and jacket down next to me on the stone. The sun shines in my face, my sneakers dangle slightly above the pavement and I look at them smugly. My nice dark-blue sneakers, with their snow-white rubber caps on the toes, the delicate stripe of red. And just look how they hug my ankle – firmly yet loosely, so I can move my feet freely. And that fantastic purple sock in the sun! Across from me a cherry tree is blossoming like crazy.

Whole globes of pink flowers against the dingy brick-red façade of the building. I close my eyes to the sun and let my mind wander.

“Hello, there,” I hear and open my eyes. In front of me I see the white-haired man I often run into at lunch in the cafeteria.

“Hello!” I reply.

“Did you already have lunch?” he asks.

“Well, no. Today I decided to get a bit of sun, I didn’t feel like going to the cafeteria,” I answer.

“Do you work here?” he continues.

“In that building there.”

“Well, I’m a police inspector,” he announces. “A high-ranking official!”

“Well now!” I exclaim, with undisguised respect.

“Retired. For 17 years now,” he adds.

I almost say “for that long?” but catch myself. I don’t want to insult him, after all. It seems like he’s been a retiree for an eternity. So I just say “well now!” again.

“Yessiree... For 17 years now,” he adds and seems to sink into some thought. “But the food here is very good. I come here regularly. As you know.”

“Yes.”

We really do run into each other often at the cafeteria. I suddenly put two and two together and realize that this is the same old guy who on a frosty but clear winter day had raised the blinds on the window in front of the table I was eating at so I wouldn’t be staring “into nothingness.” Just like that – he got up from his table and opened me up a view. He surely had been watching me. And I had been so tired, gloomy and even sad then that his gesture had actually brought me to tears over my tray.

So it’s him, the old guy with the yellow sweater. The inspector!

Once again, a few days ago, the same diminutive elderly man with a slightly sly expression asked me to keep an eye on his bag at the next table as I ate lunch – he was just going to get coffee and would be back in a moment. I don’t like be tied down with that kind of watch-dog job, but still, I told myself – he’s just a harmless old guy, I doubt he’s got a bomb in his bag. And even if he does – that’ll be that. I’ll blow up right here in front of the

mashed potatoes and coffee-colored gravy. In the salad. I'll blow up in the rice along with the retiree's black leather bag. But he went and took far too long. I got a bit angry with him. I grabbed my tray and took it over to the window that reeked of steam, rags and soggy food. I told the woman from the kitchen that some old guy had saddled me with watching his bag, but was taking too long and I had to get back to work. She immediately knew who I was talking about, clearly this was one of his usual stunts, and promised to take care of the bag. On the way out I came across the old man at the coffee machines. I went over to him and with great concern explained that I was in a hurry and that his bag was with the woman from the kitchen. He smiled calmly at me and said: "But I just stepped out to the restroom for a bit." A bit? Almost half an hour!

And today this same character is standing in front of my magnificent dark-blue sneakers – again with his black leather bag and again in some kind of light and cheery t-shirt with short sleeves, underneath which his old man's arms with their white hairs are peeking out. And he finally adds: "It was a very high-ranking position. With a Group 15 salary!"

That must be very impressive, whatever it means. So I again repeat "well, now!" and click my tongue. What else can I do?

"Group 15!" he repeats, wagging his finger menacingly in the air, as if to frighten some unbelieving enemy.

"Well, I can't say I've ever met another police inspector," I reply, adding: "Actually, I do know this one guy, but he's not a real one."

"What do you mean, not a real one?" he asks, clearly puzzled.

"Well, he's not an inspector. He just writes stories about a police inspector. Stories... and detective novels."

"Ahhh, then he's not a real one." The old man waved dismissively.

"Yeah, that's just what I was saying."

Then we say "bye" and the real police inspector with his Group 15 salary sets off for the cafeteria, slightly stooped, but with a spring in his step. Swinging his black leather bag.