

CUPCAKE

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translated from the Bulgarian by Angela Rodel

One day Cupcake stopped showing up altogether. For the last few months they'd seen him less and less often on his favorite bench, and when he did turn up, he more or less behaved himself. Finally he disappeared entirely. Had the neighborhood thugs beaten him up? No, they hadn't, or at least nobody had run into him on the street with a black eye or a broken nose, not for months now. The neighborhood started getting used to the idea that Cupcake had settled down, that he was sitting at home with his Mattie the Fatty and sobering up. It was the logical end to their whole culinary romance, and besides, nobody had seen an obituary. Good old Cupcake was sitting at home, sobering up, and was surely ashamed to show his face outside after all he had said to the girls over the years.

He surely wants us to forget about him, we thought to ourselves, we had even already mercifully blocked out one or other of his features, some trill in his intonation, some specific tang of his unwashed aroma, this or that wild hairstyle that would appear on his head on windier days. We sensed these absences most keenly in the "before Mattie" column, and the more Cupcake was gone, the harder it was for us to imagine that he had even existed before her.

When Mattie started working at the supermarket, she wasn't too sure what people should call her or how she should introduce herself. She was a mastodonic Serbian woman, she didn't like standing in the kitchen behind the deli case, because the space was too tight for her, instead she was always smoking cigarettes at the back door, winding her long bleached-blond hair around a finger and sometimes even giving the local kids bruised cupcakes that were still fine to eat but unsellable due to their sorry appearance. In return, the little brats stubbornly refused to call her Auntie Mattie, as she had introduced herself, and instead shouted "Mattie the Fatty!" every morning as they passed each other on the street – they on their way to some fictionally functioning and even more fictionally prestigious local school, and she with her ever-present cigarette in one hand on her way from the subway to the supermarket.

Mattie and Cupcake were among the local characters, they loved hanging around

outside, gawking and being gawked at, each of them at their favorite spots – the benches on the square or the backdoor of the supermarket. In fact, of the thirty people who worked at the corrugated-iron store which had somehow survived from the 70s and which had suddenly turned out to be practically swanky, only the Serb ever poked her nose outside. The others stayed at their counters, fiddling with something under the counter and rarely uttering so much as a “goodmorning” to the overly polite clients in this slightly parvenue neighborhood. They looked down on Izgrev and likely on its wealthy residents as well, they swore at the teenagers’ strange haircuts, grew indignant at the perfect Bulgarian spoken by the Russian and Vietnamese ladies from the embassies, and looked to reduce their contact with them to a minimum.

Not that Cupcake was one of these clients, but he was somehow even more repulsive to them. Weather permitting, he would sit on his bench around the clock with his plastic bottle of draught brandy in one hand, his head slightly cocked to one side, in those same “shit-stained” – as the saleswomen and stock boys put it – pants, with his hair grown out to exactly no length in particular, staticky and creased every which way, which made it look even dirtier. So Cupcake would sit on his bench and drink his booze, but the most annoying thing was whenever some young girl would cut through the square, he would start screaming at her. When school got out and the girls were walking home, he would launch into two straight hours of uninterrupted wolf howls: “Hey there, cupcake, hey, little creampuff, come over here, why dontcha sit by me, sweet little meringue, stop a second, my little chocolate éclair, sit with me a while, sugar” and so on, Cupcake really did have enviable knowledge of pastries, even though no one could ever remember seeing him with any sweets besides the distilled variety. By the time I moved into the neighborhood, nobody remembered his name anymore and what his job had been before he had parked himself once and for all on that bench by the playground.

Cupcake’s daily life passed by utterly uneventfully – the bench, the booze, the shit-stained pants, the constant shouting at the girls, a beating now and then, when he irked one of the neighborhood thugs’ girlfriends, but the next day he would be back in his usual spot, slightly beat up, but always at his post. He never went hoarse, because his voice had long since lost all superfluous timbral embellishments, he was left with only the raw thread of screeching, like a parrot who throughout its entire twenty-year life repeats the same dirty

word over and over in unceasing euphoria.

One day Mattie the Fatty saw Cupcake. Who had strayed from their regular route, where their meeting had taken place, how exactly the sparks flew we didn't know, but Cupcake started eating Cesar salads and stuffed grape leaves out of square plastic deli boxes, and he would even leave his post sometimes to keep the Serbian woman company in her ever more frequent smoke breaks by the back door. She, for her part, started gussying herself up, as she herself put it – she was just now substituting Serbian *schminka* with “make-up” in her vocabulary, but from the gang of kids that was eternally kicking around the parking lot behind the supermarket she'd also learned a few choice Bulgarian phrases. She started slimming down, which did not go unnoticed by the neighborhood squaws.

Cupcake grew neater by the day – first, one tail of his shirt turned up surprisingly tucked into those fearsome pants, then the other; one day he was spotted with his hair combed, afterwards a new pair of jeans even appeared, and it's not that he wasn't drinking, but now he kept his balance, he almost didn't stagger and he even gave up on hollering at the school girls. It's not that he wasn't drinking, but in the evenings Mattie the Fatty would take him by the arm and lead him home somewhere, and with every passing day Cupcake leaned a little less heavily on her huge, pastry-pink elbow. By day, he would always sit on his usual bench and stuff himself with culinary wonders from the supermarket, while by night, it was said that he even sometimes made it into the shower. While on other days he would straight up disappear and afterwards we would see him, say, with a new haircut.

Mattie the Fatty grew prettier, never mind that she was enormous and not particularly young, and the kids would run after her singing the wedding march, but she didn't say anything and kept on bringing them the beat-up cupcakes that couldn't be sold, she just stopped smoking between her thumb and her pointer finger with that bitterness of hers, now she would simply watch the world around the backdoor of the store, barely inhaling, with a refined, TV-worthy gesture. What with all of that, no one was surprised when Cupcake disappeared altogether, abandoning his bench and putting a stop to his strolls to the moonshine booth at the market. Like I started to tell you, we would have erased him from our memories entirely, would have written him off as officially recovered and forgotten all about him if we hadn't seen him on the news one night. It was June, muggy, a storm was just beginning, the neighbors were propping open the windows to let the gusty wind in along

with the raindrops, dust and fluff from the poplar trees, letting it rage through their homes for a few minutes to cool them down, they brought their little tables, deck chairs and tomcats in from the balconies, and exactly at a few minutes to eight, when the warning rumbles changed into a true deluge, they closed the balcony doors and turned on their TVs.

So-and-so's body had been discovered in the Suhodol Dump, they said, the man had three perfectly normal names and, besides a missing toe on one foot, he seems to have died a natural death. Nobody would've paid attention to such a report, especially not in this neighborhood, where doors were left unlocked and kids hung around outside until the retirees began to gripe about the late-night racket. So-and-so's body could not have been a part of our reality, if it weren't for the passport picture (or perhaps mug shot) of Cupcake from his most drunken period staring out at us from the news. The time of death was put at approximately a month ago, but the precise cause could not be discerned from the body's external appearance, it had been discovered a week ago, but the police ran up against quite a few difficulties in identifying it. "People think that the Bulgarian police must have a database with photo and dental records of every one of our fellow citizens like on those crime-scene shows," a surprisingly intelligent-looking Sergeant So-and-So said on camera, "but the fact of the matter is that our morgues are full of unidentified corpses. Thousands of bodies are lying there, waiting for somebody to come looking for them, frozen solid, wrapped in army blankets and piled up in heaps, and that's precisely the problem – nobody has reported them missing. In the case of so-and-so, we had a unbelievable stroke of luck, since there was a receipt in his pocket, but even with that bit of evidence it took us seven days to confirm his identity. The individual in question, Mr. So-and-So, had no living relatives, he lived alone, was unemployed, and got by on loans." The intelligent sergeant opened his mouth to say something more, but was rudely interrupted by the following report on road rage, an edifyingly ominous series of parallel cuts of bent up guardrails, highway patrol men with thick necks and even thicker accents, and plenty of tragic consequences.

It took about a week to untangle the story around his death. First, it got around that a large, bleached-blonde woman had been seen tossing a huge black trash bag with suspicious contents into the dumpster behind supermarket X in neighborhood I very early on the morning of May 1. The garbage from this region was in principle baled, but due to corruption schemes that have yet to be clarified, on certain nights it was illegally transported to the

supposedly closed dump in Suhodol. The case of so-and-so's body marked the beginning of yet another investigation into the siphoning of money from who-knows-what EU program, which would later lead to precisely zero results, or more precisely, to the dump in Suhodol in the form of a well-shredded folder of letters, complaints, reports and who knows what else.

And now just imagine Cupcake. Cupcake, who already almost died from drink once or twice, his organism had given up on life and only the doctors' pummeling dragged him back into this world. Cupcake, who loves sweets, of course, but whom was told that if he kept on drinking or if he so much as touched something sweet, he would die, "you understand, you worthless piece of trash, next time we're not going to save you!" the last young and frowning doctor had said at the last ER, where he had ended up recently, dying of shame that he would have to lose the first of what perhaps would be most of his toes, as if he'd lost yet another battle, he arrives at the hospital hanging his head, the doctors hate, they downright despise people who systematically destroy themselves, Cupcake leaves, limping out of the hospital and keeps right on doing what he had decided to do – drinking and not touching anything sweet. Then he meets Mattie and even cuts down on his drinking. With Mattie, the game is clear – he wants someone to take care of him, she wants citizenship, they're already practically married; besides that, he likes her, all pink and plentiful, a mountain of strawberry cream, whipped frosting, caramel folds, the lemony scent of her skin, other places with a whiff of rum, melon and mascarpone, they love food, they devote themselves to it, they had both gone to cooking schools, at night they often lie next to each other helplessly, he likes Mattie and tries to get back on his feet, but one night he gives in to temptation. She had long since told him how to get into the supermarket, because she doesn't always sleep at his place, and he gets hungry as a wolf sometimes, and there was so much good food there which will be thrown out if it isn't sold, it's a crying shame. He enters the deli trembling and his path is blocked by a huge tray of petits fours. Potatoes, I'll just take some potatoes, he tells the tray, he's drunk, he's making excuses, he's begging and pleading, but the tray doesn't want to hear it, the drizzled lines of chocolate pull him in like an octopuses' tentacles, the scent of cream drives him wild, the tray grows before his eyes, so what if I just take a macaroon or two? Everybody does. Nothing will happen from three or four, five won't do any harm, six have never killed anyone, Cupcake keeps counting and polishes off the tray, discovers the jiggling pattie-pans of crème brûlée, two little chocolate cakes take him back to the days when he was

a head chef, and a good deal heavier at that, I was a real man, Cupcake murmurs, as he sets upon the tiramisu, his head is spinning from the alcohol, but not so badly as to miss the donuts, he decides to open up a liqueur to wash down the baklava, as he finishes off the Sachertorte he switches to vodka, and somewhere amidst the éclairs, sobbing softly, he loses consciousness. His last thought is: "In the morning, my Mattie the Fatty will have to lie that she fainted on top of the bakery case, my sweetest Mattie will have to lie because of me, she'll have all sorts of troubles because of me, the poor thing," and his eyes close in a sweet tenderness, even with slight pride, because now they would see that he was certainly not to be tossed aside.