

THE BAKER

The bakery looked like all the others in that chain, just a few carefully designed square metres ready for the franchise holder to move in. Frozen pastries were delivered in a van every morning, and stood in the front hall of the building on green plastic pallets, slowly defrosting. Cakes and almond croissants were covered with white icing that stuck to your fingers. The coffee came out of a stainless-steel monolith bearing the legend ‘Coffee Specialities – Fully Automatic’. The machine made nasty noises as it sucked in milk. The baker was a fat man, red-faced, small hands, his knuckles mere dimples in the backs of them. In the shop he wore a white apron with the company logo sewn on the shoulder straps. He moved fast, but the space behind the display shelves was too narrow; the counter cut into his belly, leaving a line of breadcrumbs on it.

The baker was a local man, and the people of the neighbourhood liked him. He was forty-seven years old. As a young man he had taken over his father’s big patisserie and café. Everything seemed to be going well; he had passed his master pastry-cook’s exam, married and had a son. Their house on

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the outskirts of the city was new, and they had gone out to the building site every weekend, picturing their future life there.

On the day when all that changed, the baker had come home early, intending to give his wife a surprise. Another man, taller and leaner than he, and fair-haired, was standing just inside the front door of the house. The baker knew him; he was a salesman in a furniture store. The man was saying goodbye to his wife, who laughed with a high, clear sound, looking happy, and suddenly the baker realized that she had been cheating on him. Then everything happened very fast. The baker picked up the spade that he had left standing beside the door after doing some gardening at the weekend. He struck the man's throat with it. There was earth on the edge of the spade, and the baker thought to himself that now the earth was inside the man. Then he watched as blood flowed out of the hole in the man's neck and seeped into the pale rug, forming strange patterns.

That's a very expensive rug, he thought, far too expensive for us. When they were in the furnishing store his wife had said how good the rug would look in the front hall of their house, and he had agreed with her, feeling uncomfortable about discussing money with the salesman. 'The front hall,' his wife had kept saying to the salesman, not just 'inside the door' like the baker. She had flirted with the salesman, and the baker had felt stupid, but now the salesman was lying on the floor in front of him with part of his throat missing. After a while the blood stopped flowing, and the baker thought that now the salesman was entirely empty, and it was an odd way to die.

Later, at his trial, the public prosecutor called it a tragic mistake. The man, he added, had not been the baker's wife's

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lover – he had only come to measure up the sitting room. The court-appointed psychiatrist explained that the baker was dangerously disturbed. He used a great many expressions that the baker didn't understand. That was all long ago now, and the baker had stopped thinking about it.

These days, when he had no customers, he would often sit in front of his shop with the owner of the newsagent's kiosk. He had put a couple of old wooden chairs out on the pavement. The baker never talked much, and only occasionally complained. When he did, he used to say he was a qualified master pastry cook, and didn't like simply pushing frozen pastries into the convection ovens. He missed his old patisserie, which had been a real one. All the same, it was a way of getting by. The newsagent nodded and asked no more questions. But the baker could not have told him about his nine years in prison anyway, he couldn't have explained the grey days, the waiting, the loneliness and all the rest of it there.

Every morning the baker went out delivering rolls, because the bake shop on its own didn't bring in enough money. He went to a great many addresses, and it took him over two hours to deliver to them all. Most of his customers were still asleep, and he left the paper bags of rolls outside their apartments. Once he had a customer in a block, others would join the first after a while, because the rolls were still warm when he brought them into the front hall of the building, and they smelled good.

One building, where he had eight customers, was on Savignyplatz. He had the key to the entrance. He took the lift up to the very top every morning and then came down the stairs, carrying the paper bags. A Japanese girl lived on

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the second floor. She had black hair and black eyes, and she was very slim. The baker sometimes saw her coming home from the College of Music. She would be carrying a little case containing her violin, and her lips were dark red. When the baker was sitting outside his shop, she nodded to him or wished him good day, and she was always smiling. Once a week she came into the shop to pay for the rolls that he left outside her door in the mornings. Then they would exchange a couple of remarks, about her music studies, or the strike on the suburban railway, or the weather. He couldn't pronounce her surname, so she told him just to call her Sakura; it was easier for Germans to say her first name. The baker fell in love with her.

Every evening he wondered how to tell her so, and finally he thought of a way to do it. He was a master pastry cook; he had won prizes for the cakes he made.

Next morning the baker began. He cleared up his kitchen and put everything out ready. It was going to be a five-tiered gâteau, nothing like the normal cakes you could buy anywhere. He began with the pillars to stand between the tiers. He made them out of a hard mixture of icing sugar, egg white, lemon and rosewater, but inside they consisted of almost liquid fondant. He worked on the icing for almost a week, testing, throwing out the dud attempts, experimenting with colours made from different liqueurs, until the result was light and almost transparent. The baker made the five tiers in different degrees of colour and sweetness. From the bottom to the top, they were Morello cherry, redcurrant, sweet cherry, orange and mandarin. Each layer was in four large sections and one smaller one, and he arranged them in a staggered pattern so that, seen from the top, they opened

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out like a flower. He worked long and hard, and when he had finished he was tired and happy.

He slept poorly that night, and he was restless in the morning when he packed the gâteau in a wooden box with his baker's knife and his best cake forks. When he rang Sakura's doorbell, he was rather out of breath. He didn't know what he was going to say to her when she came to the door. The man who opened it wore nothing but his underpants. He had hair on his chest, and a gold chain round his neck with a panther pendant on it. The man propped one hand on the door frame and asked the baker what he wanted. Looking under his arm, the baker could see into the apartment, which had only one room, and he heard the shower running. The baker stared at the panther on the man's chest. He saw its tiny jade eyes, and the ring from which the panther would always hang, and suddenly he was sorry for the panther. In prison they used to say that nothing would ever change, and the baker found himself thinking of that now.

The baker carried the wooden box downstairs and sat on a stone bench in the inner courtyard of the building. He opened the lid. A beautiful gâteau, he thought. It shone orange and shades of red in the winter sunlight. He looked at it for a while, and then broke a small piece off the top layer with his fingers. It tasted wonderful.

This is the best gâteau I can make, he said to himself under his breath. He ate another piece. And then another. He sat on the bench for two hours, and at the end of that time he had eaten the whole gâteau. Finally he picked up the baking tray on which it had been standing and licked off what was left of the icing, packed up the knife and the cake-

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forks again, and threw the box into the dustbin.

That afternoon the baker met the newsagent outside his shop. The baker was no longer wearing his white apron, but a winter jacket with a red collar, and he had closed the shop. It was cold on the wooden chairs. The baker brought out two cups on a small tray. He placed the tray on the middle chair. It wobbled, and coffee slopped over the rims of the cups. The baker sat down, put his hands on his thighs and breathed out noisily. He was smiling.

‘This is our last coffee together,’ he said. Then he jerked his thumb at the shop behind him, without turning to look at it. ‘I’m going to sell all this. The bake shop and my furniture and the car.’

‘What are you going to do?’ asked the newsagent.

‘I’m going to Japan,’ said the baker, waiting a moment because he wanted to see the newsagent’s reaction. ‘I’m going to open a patisserie in Tokyo. Thirty-five million people live in Tokyo. The Japanese love eating cakes and pastries, you know. I read that in the newspaper once. They’re particularly fond of Black Forest cherry gateau. I make a very good Black Forest cherry gateau.’

‘I’m sure it’s good,’ said the newsagent.

‘With a Black Forest cherry gateau, it all depends on the cherry brandy you use. It has to be a really good one, and only the one they distil from dark Black Forest cherries will do. But you need both the fruit brandy and the juice of the Morello cherries. You must be generous with all the ingredients – that’s the whole secret of it.’

They drank their coffee from the cups with the company logo on them. The baker leaned forward so as not to spill any on his shirt.

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'You must come and see me there. I'll call you when the patisserie is up and running, and then you must come over.'

The newsagent nodded. The baker wiped his hands on his trousers.

'Japanese women like fat men,' he said rather more quietly, not looking at the newsagent now. 'Sumo wrestlers are like pop stars there . . . and maybe my son will come to Japan too some time, when he can make his own decisions.'

When the baker was lying in bed that evening, he thought of Sakura again. After a while he fell asleep and dreamed of the Japanese in Tokyo eating his Black Forest cherry gateau, and when he woke up he wasn't thinking of Sakura any more. He took the chain with the panther pendant off the bedside table; he had cleaned off the blood and bits of skin, and now he looked at it for a long time. Everything flows into everything else, he thought, although he didn't know where that idea came from. Then he closed his eyes, and through his open bedroom window he heard the ice-cold rain falling.