

DUMITRU TSEPENEAG

The Specialist

I live in a quiet area near the edge of town, in a traditional house that is not too cramped but very old. It belongs to a distant relative, who rents a room out to me beside the kitchen; it used to be a maid's room and, more recently, was just kept spare. It's small, damp, and full of spiders. But I like it—perhaps because it looks onto a deep garden with plenty of shade. True, the part you can see from my room is more of a walnut grove, since the flowerbeds appear only at the first windows. I forgot to say that the rooms are strung out in a line like railway compartments, which makes the house seem very long. Seen from the street, the garden is a verdant corridor, with flowers up to the middle and real forest at the back. The walls, including the stone one that separates us from the neighbors' yard, are covered with ivy. That's obviously why it's so damp in my room. Only one thing I find hard to bear: the smell of burnt fat from the kitchen. I always leave the house in the morning while lunch is being prepared, but the smell lingers well into the afternoon, especially in winter when you can't keep the window open for long. A week ago they began preparing for their daughter's big wedding feast. They got a chef to come from a restaurant, and the wood-burning stove never stopped smoking for a couple of days. Cleaver blows, squeaking meat-grinder, thudding pestle and mortar, sizzling roasts—there was no end to the racket. And as for the smells . . . This wouldn't have mattered if I'd been able to go out as usual, but unfortunately my shoes were at the cobbler's and no amount of pleading could get him to repair them in less than two days. I sat on the bed with the window wide open, duvet, blanket, and two pillows squeezed tight around my ears. I was choking, and stifling from the heat. At nightfall I crept into the garden and came back with an armful of roses and lilies. I hoped their scent would subdue the

other odors. I spread them around everywhere: on the bed, over the floor, on the table. I don't know what made me stumble over the suitcase where I kept my clothes. I lost balance, and only by supporting myself against the wall did I manage to stay on my feet. Quite a large piece of plaster fell and broke up, leaving a dark-colored patch behind on the wall. This was not too much of an eyesore, because a large part of the damp-eaten wall already looked like the map of an unexplored continent. That evening I didn't pay much attention to it. I swept up the bits of plaster on the floor and went to bed.

The next morning, the preparations for the feast were as intense as ever. The lady of the house constantly pestered a girl who was meant to be helping her. The noise they made irritated the specialist in the culinary arts, who said that he couldn't work in such conditions; the time had come to make the cake and he needed to concentrate. He spoke with the authority of a real specialist, so the women felt intimidated and stopped talking. My eyes fell on the spot where the new patch had appeared. It was a little above the bedpost—what a strange old-fashioned bed I have!—and it seemed to have grown. In fact, what attracted my attention was something else, hard to explain. I don't remember exactly what it had looked like the previous evening, but it now had a dark-violet hue, visible only at certain moments. The rest of the time it was black and—even stranger—perfectly round. Despite the lilies, a smell of garlic penetrated the room. The voices on the other side became harsh again; the mistress wasn't at all pleased with her servant's work. I stretched out wearily on the bed. I really wished I knew what the chef looked like. Such men should be fat, greasy, good-humored—in short, comforting. With some difficulty I raised myself on an elbow to shut the window. In the garden, a light breeze was rustling the walnut leaves. Of course, the *mititei*¹ sausages and the roasts must be cooked just before the meal. “You see, madam,” the specialist explained, “the key to good *mititei* is how much you use of each . . .” To be frank, I like *mititei* too. The chef's full, winning voice made my mouth water. I stuck my nose into the petals of a rose and swallowed hard. Then I finally took the plunge. I opened the kitchen door and signaled to the maid. I must have looked unwell. Pitying me, the mistress asked in a gentle voice whether I had eaten anything. Sure I had. But I'd like the maid to pay a quick call

on the cobbler; how much longer am I supposed to stay here in my socks! I slammed the door shut out of pique. To tell the truth, I'd mainly opened it to catch a glimpse of the specialist in the culinary arts, vaguely hoping that the mistress wouldn't be there. But the chef had just then taken a break and gone off somewhere. My eyes fell again on the patch. It now shone more brightly, with a greenish luster. Feeling puzzled, I touched it with my fingertips, then shrugged and climbed into bed. I simply couldn't get to sleep. But I must have been dozing a little when the maid came in. She'd brought me some food, so I could hardly shout at her for waking me up. I turned over and asked her about the cobbler. Of course, he hadn't even started on my shoes.

"He told me you'll have to be patient. They'll be ready tomorrow."

The maid smelled terribly of sweat. She looked idiotically at the rumpled bed, the filthy bedding, the lifeless flowers on the floor. She didn't see the patch. Or maybe she did but thought nothing of it. Anyway, why was she smiling at me so stupidly? I asked her:

"So where's the chef gone?"

"He went out, but he's back now."

That was all she knew.

"Does he have a mustache?"

She looked at me and laughed. I think she's taken a liking to me. She'd brought me a slice of roast with a green pepper. But she got on my nerves. I sat there in my socks, not knowing what to say. I felt relieved when she left. I looked at the patch again and began to study it closely. Its perfect roundness frightened me. And it was no larger than the lens of a spyglass. A spider came down to its level, then hurried back to the web it had spun in a corner.

Towards evening the rumpus in the kitchen died down. The only sound was of the specialist sharpening his knives. The wedding was scheduled for the next day. Feeling a little better, I threw away the flowers and managed to sleep for two or three hours. My head was clear. A cool, perfumed breath of wind entered from outside. I jumped out of bed and began hunting for my shoes.

Then the specialist came in.

The door opened slowly, with a squeak. The man who appeared in the room was short, thin and red-haired; he was wearing clothes that were too

big for him. He looked at me gravely and, it being quite dark, flicked the light switch to the right of the door, as if he already knew exactly where it was. Something told me it was he, the specialist. But I immediately asked:

“What do you want? Who are you?”

His thick nose glistened beneath the light bulb. He had a long, lean, bony face; little eyes almost hidden behind the narrow slits of his eyelids. He pointed at the patch and asked me in a professional tone:

“Has that been here a long time?”

I said it had appeared the day before, just as it had been getting dark. He took a quick look around. I was a little ashamed of the untidiness in the room, and of the leftover meat I’d dropped on the table. I asked him again who he was. He gave a bored shrug and sat down on the bed. His feet didn’t even reach the floor.

“The room’s got a lot of damp.”

“Yes . . .”

“And what’s through there?”

I thought he was talking about the garden.

“No, I meant on the other side of the wall.”

“Ah! It’s the room where they do the washing. That’s why it’s damp.”

He smiled, showing his toothless gums. He swung his legs—now one, now the other, now both together.

I’d never have thought a specialist would look like that.

Now I understood the maid’s contemptuous tone.

“Are you really the specialist?”

No answer. He bent his head to one side, then said:

“Okay, let’s get started.”

There was something bossy in the way he’d said it. I jumped up from the bed, treading on his little shoes. He took a knife and a scraper out of his pocket. He showed them to me, his movements solemn, then began to examine the patch more attentively. It had a violet sheen again. It was beautiful. He gave me another look and got down to work, muttering something under his breath. First, using the knife, he smoothed the wall all around. Then, holding the scraper in both hands, he began scraping the patch itself. He worked slowly, jaws tightly

clenched. I watched his rhythmic movements with admiration from my perch on the bed. Now and again he stopped, took a deep breath, inspected the wall close up as if he was nearsighted, and started to scrape again.

More than an hour passed, without any result. I don't know what I was expecting to happen. He didn't say a word. Sweat poured off his forehead, and the veins in his temples seemed about to burst. Later in the day, when I was idly looking around, bored and sleepy, he uttered a little cry of triumph. The patch was turning red over a large part of its surface. The specialist ran his hand through his hair and wiped his brow with a handkerchief. He looked up at me with a start, as if he had only just noticed I was there. Then, as if issuing an order:

“Come and do some yourself!”

I eagerly took the scraper from him and bent over to work on the patch. My movements were faster than his, but it was obvious that I didn't know how to scrape properly. The tool gave out high-pitched squeaks, as if I were scraping a sheet of glass. He tried to encourage me:

“Come on, it's always like that at first. Hold it straighter. That's right.”

I was putting all my strength into it. The raw-meat red bored through my eye. After another hour, the patch had lost so much of its color that it was a pale pink.

“Let me have it now,” he said.

He worked the scraper as precisely and regularly as before. As the patch lost its color, the specialist looked more and more violet. He scraped away happily, even began to whistle. A change took place in me too. I was no longer at all sleepy—in fact, I was quite excited. I leaned over, looking at him and running my cheek against his russet locks. The patch had taken on a whitish hue. It looked like a window pane covered with wash. The specialist turned his head to me, eyes gleaming. My heart was racing—but still I couldn't imagine what was about to happen. That screeching of blade on glass, that grinding sound that had previously made me shiver . . . The patch gradually became brighter. The little man's weary hand, veins bulging, kept up the same rhythm. A final screech of the knife, then another cry of joy. The specialist moved sideways and shouted to me:

“Get a look at this!”

I was trembling as I groped my way along the wall like a blind man. I pressed my cheek to it, then my forehead, and finally my eyelids. I couldn't see anything. I was too close, too excited. I swung round, gaping in confusion. The specialist, on the bed, had covered his face with his rough red hands. Maybe he was crying. When he looked at me, his face was flushed, his eyes fixed and staring.

“Did you see?”

He didn't wait for an answer. His voice suddenly weakened, almost to a whisper.

“I don't have the right. I find out where it appears, I scrape and I scratch, I clean it . . . But I don't have the right.”

He ran his hand wearily through his hair. I didn't understand a thing.

“Are you the specialist?”

He nodded, looking at me bitterly. He was so small and sad there, on the edge of the bed.

“Now . . . I must be going.”

His steps were hesitant. He picked up his tools and put them in his pocket. He pressed gently on the door handle, looked again at the wall, then swung the door open and disappeared.

After he left, I tried hard to push the bed so that my head would be just below the magic spyglass.

Translated by Patrick Camiller

NOTES

1 Traditional Romanian food of grilled minced meat, usually made from some combination of pork and beef.