

In the salt pool

The day lazily rolled and stopped in the late afternoon. It was full of cars arriving at the parking place in the outskirts of Burgas. People were getting out of them and were setting off on the dusty road. They were crossing the railway line, passing by the mud baths and continuing to the salt pools. In its rusty waters, with the smell of bad eggs, their bodies became weightless, gently bobbing on the surface like rubber dolls. Nearby, beyond the wooden bridge, others were covered head to toe, walking around, waiting for the mud to dry. Its colour was gradually changing from tar to mousey grey. Strange figures, covered with tar and mouse grey stains, were moving back in the direction to the sea, so that, when the mouse gray colour takes over the tar, its waters would wash away all this mud and leave only its effect – soft skin, healthy body and – supposedly - healthy spirit.

Great observation skills were not required in order for one to notice the newcomers. They were squeamishly wrinkling their noses, while they were entering the salt pool and with great difficulty and disgust were spreading the mud on their bodies. Those who were used to the procedures were walking confidently into the thick, sticky substance and energetically pasting it in thick layers on their bodies and faces. The main characters in this story are among the latter but for now they are still drifting along the salt pool and as they are drifting in synchrony, they are nonchalantly chatting.

- It's miraculous this water, miraculous! A whole winter without my back playing me up. That's why I am so consistent and this summer I have told myself again – minimum 15 sessions! – said Zahari.
- Well, let's hope you are right. My back is killing me, man...They say it helps...Let's hope since this pain is hard to bear – sighs Stoian.
- You will see, it will be as if it hasn't been. I told you, I have almost forgotten about my back pain after three summers of procedures – Vasil reassures him.
- Ohh, let's hope, let's hope, man...- Stoian makes a circle around his companions.
- Let's take the chance to enjoy it a bit more. I am hearing they are going to make some a...how do they call it? Spa complex. They will charge an astronomical entrance fee, and only luxury cars will stop here – Zahari is scooping up salt and is starting to scrub his back.
- Even if the fee isn't that high, with my pension...Would someone think about pensioners and leave it fee for us... – there is not much hope in Vasil's voice.
 - Come on! Who'd think, man, no one cares about us. Profit is what matters and with the financial crisis things are getting really bad. They are predicting a heavy winter, shall we survive till next summer at all...- Stoian sighs heavily.
- Well, you have elected the new government, why are you worried – said Vasil, mockingly.
- Come on, elected! It can't make miracles, the new government. And not to forget that they are still cleaning up the mess from when your guys were in power – tosses Zahari.
 - Let's not begin this topic again, man. Yesterday I got a headache from you – Stoian interrupts them.

- And what to talk about then? The financial crises? It's a very cheerful topic indeed... - Vasil doesn't give up.

- Look, look, tut-tut-tut – suddenly Zahari utters.

The other two follow the direction of his look.

The intriguing stranger

Zahari's look is fixed on a young woman with a very white skin and bright blonde short hair shouldering her face. She is wearing a dark blue swimming suit. She is entering the salt pool with a slightly wrinkled nose. Gradually she is getting used to the smell and is sinking into the water, making elegant circles with her hands.

- Where has this mermaid come from?! – exclaims Stoian.

- From the moon – Vasil does not give up the malicious touch – where could she come from?! She must be a tourist.

- She looks like Russian – Zahari guesses.

- Polish – says Vasil confidently.

- Russian! – comes in Stoian, taking Zahari's side.

- Hum, you will lose here. I know the Polish girls. I smell them from distance. Once upon a time I was a door-keeper in Sunny Beach. There were only Polish in the hotel, but one girl was like a jewel.

The other two are listening to him distractedly while observing the girl. She continues to move gracefully and idly. She stops, stretches herself in the water, relaxes and takes the sun in her face.

- Stop staring at the girl as if she is an alien! Listen, I will tell you about my Polish girl.

The love story of a door keeper

She was like a jewel. Blond, blue-eyed like this one here but even prettier. (Exclamations – it's not possible to be prettier, stop exaggerating, man!). Her name was Kachka. Katharina, but everyone called her Kachka. She was around twenty. They had come together, two female friends with two greenhorns. Her friend was having something with one of them, and the other one was his friend so obviously they had set her with him. However she didn't seem to care. Instead as she was passing by the reception, she was giving me sultry looks with those blue eyes like field primroses. And I was looking at her too, smiling faintly. I was looking at her and looking at her... She would get embarrassed and blush and smile to herself, looking down, and would quickly-quickly pass by. She was very sweet, so sweet that I could have crunched her. The greenhorn however started noticing our little flirtation and got nervous. They had been there for three or four days and apparently nothing had happened the way he wanted it. They were staying for overall two weeks. In the fifth night, when I was giving a shift, Kachka came to me, trembling all over and crying and explained in bad Russian that the guy had gotten drunk and jumped on her. I suggested her going to my room. I was working anyway. She hesitated a bit and eventually accepted. When I went back in the morning she was sleeping like a baby bird in my bed. I lay in the other bed and looked at her until she woke up. I said she could stay in my room if she wanted to and she took the offer. That evening she was out with her friends and came back late. I heard her entering but I didn't expect at all what happened! She came to my bed! We didn't fall asleep till the morning. We stayed together till the end of her holidays. The other guy almost died from anger and jealousy. One night he knocked on my door but when I told him some truths about life, he quietened down.

Kachka left in tears, she didn't want to go. She wrote to me. And I wrote back. We sent postcards, pictures. Next summer she came again. I was waiting for her and we spent two more weeks together. Hey, I felt nice with that Kachka...At the end she said – I cannot live without you, let's get married. And I, being young and crazy, heard myself saying – let's do it! She went back to Poland to prepare her parents. I wanted to follow her but the authorities didn't let me go. So we had to postpone our wedding. She didn't come next summer, I met Maria, and that's how my Polish love was over. But I am telling you, I know Polish girls and this one here must be Polish.

The bet

Meanwhile the girl had gone out of the salt pool and had taken the direction to the mud.

- I stayed too long in the salt today, I am going to the mud – said Zahari.
- I have overdone it too – replied Vasil.
- Let's go to the mud.

The three of them paddle-crawled in the water to the pallets in the corner, stepped out and went to the mud. There, from distance, they saw the beautiful stranger. She had taken off her top, in which she differed from all the other women around, and was spreading the mud on her body. Soon her tight breasts were tar too. The view made Zahari, Stoian and Vasil swallow.

They set themselves not far away from her and also started spreading the mud on their bodies.

- I still think she is Russian – said Zahari – They are like this...liberated.

- Shall we bet? – said Vasil, becoming perky.

- Let's do it, for an oblak¹ – said Stoian.

- Who will ask her? – Zahari asked nervously.

- Well, who do you think will, man?! Vasil. He has experience with the Polish girls – snapped back Stoian.

- Well, I will ask her....not a big deal. But let her first wash. I'd better not bother her now.

The girl had covered her whole body and face in mud and was walking towards the beach. Zahari, Vasil and Stoian followed her from distance.

¹ Bulgarian traditional alcoholic cocktail

Mermaid

The beach was covered with waste and plastic bottles, among which here and there, its visitors had stretched their towels. The girl was standing and waiting for the mud to dry completely on her body. About ten or so others were doing the same. She stretched her arms up to the sky and thrust out her chest. She took a deep breath in and started slowly making exercises. Everyone was looking at her - at her lithe young body and the contrast between her shining blond hair and the mud on her face. Stoian, Zahari and Vasil were also silently contemplating – and from time to time exchanging significant looks.

The late sun rays gradually melted the tar colour into a mouse one. The girl finished the exercise cycle and entered the sea. She started washing the mud away; then dived under the waves.

- Did I tell you she is a mermaid? – smiled Stoian faintly– neither Polish nor Russian. Such beauty is not from this world, not at all...

And the three friends entered the sea.

Missed opportunity

They were diligently taking off the mud from their bodies when Stoian exclaimed:

- Ahh, we missed her!

The girl had gone out to the beach and was sunbathing standing. Her skin looked transparent and her golden hair was shining under the sun. The people around were looking at her but she either didn't notice or was so used to receiving attention that wouldn't care.

She wiped her hair with the towel, brushed it back and put on a bright blue short dress. Then she turned back and left.

The three friends exchanged disappointed glances.

- Eh, what a shame, what a shame – Zahari clicked his tongue.

- It's not that bad – said Vasil – tomorrow is a new day. If she has come once, she will come again – and this time there was more hope in his voice.

Expectation

In the late afternoon of the next day the salt pool lovers were gathering again in its rusty waters. Stoian, Zahari and Vasil were there, floating in the water, but this time the breaks in their conversation were longer.

- It was nice at the train station last night. It had been a while without so many people coming – noted Zahari.

- Well, my head became big – murmured Vasil.

- And you, did you manage to sleep afterwards? You didn't feel very well – Zahari turned towards Stoian.

- I slept... for a while, man. Certain thoughts were keeping me awake...

They looked frequently at the place from where one could step into the salt pool.

- We should have done something yesterday – said Zahari finally.

- By the time Vasko got round to it, man – the bird flew away – sighed Stoian.

- If you're so sophisticated, why didn't you go yourself?! – bristled Vasil.

- Well, you are the expert in Polish girls – said Stoian.

- Stop arguing, it was meant to be this way – interrupted Zahari – It's not a big deal. We will still be drinking our oblak tonight even without the Russian girl.

- The Polish – Vasil corrected him.

- Whatever. Obviously we won't find out – sighed Zahari.

And they became silent again, floating in the warm water.

- You're very silent again –said Vasil.

- Certain thoughts keep running in my head...this should be the reason – said Stoian.

- A story came into my mind. About a girl again –said Zahari.

Another summer, another missed opportunity

I was in Varna at the Sea Army Academy. In the summer nights a friend and I slipped away and went to a bar for a beer. It was by the beach. A change from the army life. We were meeting girls, having nice chats, so...One night a girl appeared and she took my breath away. She had a chestnut colour long hair and amazing eyes. They had colour and looked somehow thoughtful. I can still see her even if it was...eheee...forty years ago. I looked at her all the evening but didn't dare to make the move. She was with some friends but she was standing alone, somewhat separated from them. She didn't talk, didn't dance, she was just watching. I dreamt about her all night long. But she didn't appear anymore. Nor did her friends. I asked the barman about them later but he wouldn't know. I waited for her all summer but it was all on vain.

- Is this why you stayed a bachelor, old man? Because of that stranger? – Vasil teased.
- It's hardly probable that that's the reason but I still remember her. I wasn't lucky with women, what to do...
- Well, I will go now – said Stoian.
- Why are you in a hurry, Stoian, it's not even ten o'clock yet – Vasil tried to stop him.
- I'll go to the mud and leave. I feel somehow tired today.
- Will you come to the train station tonight? – asked Zahari.
- I'll see...If I feel better, I'd come.
- Well, let's hope you will be...

Establishing contact

The sun was following its trajectory again, and now the salt pool was full of people.

- How are you today, Stoian? You didn't come last night...- asked Zahari .

- I'm better, Zahari, thanks, much better. I slept enough last night.

- Good you slept so that now you are having enough stamina to lose a bet. Look who is here – he nodded to the salt pool entrance. Vasil suddenly became animated.

Their stranger was standing there.

- We won't wait until she gets into the mud today! Vase, ask her as soon as possible – said Zahari, as he was getting animated too.

- Well, man, you never know who will lose...- said Stoian smiling faintly.

The girl took off her blue dress and entered the water. She let her body into it and started lightly moving her hands as if they were the trembling wings of a big butterfly. She moved around the salt pool this way. Her face was shining. She seemed to be enjoying her movement in the warm reddish water.

- Come on, Vase, move into action! – said Zahari.

The girl had got close to them. It was as if she was lighting up everything around her. The other visitors in the salt pool were also looking at her, some of them quietly whispering. Vassil sighed.

- Well, you are such shrimps! Ok, I'm going. Come on, wish me luck.

He started swimming in the direction of the girl. Stoian and Zahari watched agog. They saw how the girl was startled at first, shaken out of her reverie, but then she smiled in a friendly way, which made her even prettier. Vasil and her had a short talk and he came back wearing an expression of a winner on his face.

- So, tell us, what happened? Is she Polish? – Zahari said, unable to contain himself.

- How impatient you are! Well, and who did the job? Who?!

- Sure, Vase, you're formidable. And how you started talking to her! Come on, stop keeping us in suspense. Tell us what happened – Stoian turned towards him.

- What can I tell you. We have no winner but still I was closer. She's Czech!

- Well, Czech! I should have guessed! – exclaimed Zahari.

- Obviously no one will get a treat but all of us will treat ourselves – said Stoian – And tell us, finally, what happened? What else did you say to each other?

- Well, what – a slight content smile appeared on Vasil's face – Her name is Eva. She's here on holidays.

- And you spoke Russian? – Zahari was looking at him with admiration.

- Well, a bit of Russian, a bit of Czech, you know I worked on the beach once upon a time. Ahoj, mahoj, I manage the Slavonic languages.

- You are stunning, man! – said Stoian with grudging admiration .

End of the holidays

In the following week the three friends continued contemplating Eva's presence from distance. Every day they followed her ritual while talking about their youth and the women they had met and had. One day she didn't come. She didn't appear on the next one either. Nor on the day after. In the fourth morning Vassil concluded profoundly:

- Apparently she has gone.

- Yes, it must be the case, probably her holiday was ten days...- Zahari agreed.

Stoian was in a thoughtful silence.

- You don't have much mood today, why is that? – Zahari asked, gently.

- It's a

peculiar day, man...

- And what's so unusual about it? – Vasil asked, but only this time without his usual bite.

- My wife and I should have had our fortieth anniversary.

- Well, Stoian, what to say, at least you have had those years and you've been happy – said Zahari.

- It is the case, man, we had them. It wasn't always easy, but it was better with her...Five years now since she passed away and as if it was yesterday – sighted Stoian and two tears slipped from the corners of his eyes.

- What can we do, that's life...- Vasil sighed too and looked in the other direction.

- You are coming to the rail station tonight, aren't you? Join us for an oblak in her memory. And so that you don't stay alone – said Zahari, trying to sound casual.

- Yes, yes, I'm coming.

- It seems I am done with the salt pool for this year. I made three weeks this summer. Can leave it till the next one... if only they don't open a spa complex – sighed Vassil.

- And if we'll have survived the crises – said Zahari trying to make it a joke.