

THE MYSTERY OF THE LOST SUITCASE...

It was a cold winter morning. The snow was falling heavily at the train station in Feres. "European Express", the gaud of European railways, which was crossing all of Europe, it had already appeared on the horizon. When it stopped, the one and only passenger got on the train very fast to snuggle in to the warmth of the train. Big snowflakes had already covered his long black woolen coat. He hurriedly took off his black hat, he leaned down his leather suitcase and he proceeded to the aisle looking for his seat.

It was Odysseus/ Ulysses Petrovich, the Great head chef of the emperor of Austria. During the last week he was looking all over Greece the basic ingredients of his secret recipes that only he knew. Precious saffron from the mountainous Kozani, fine olive oil from Makri, sesame of Thracian land, minimum sample of beef from herds in the Evros River Delta. All ingredients were absolutely safe in his leather suitcase. His recipes for the Emperor's Christmas table were based on them. His majesty knew how to appreciate rare and fine flavors, which meant that he would recognize his cooking art and his immediate promotion to Imperial Top Chef.

Ulysses settled in the comfortable train compartment with red leather seats. He looked out the window. The snow was still falling. He pulled out of his pocket almonds, walnuts and combined them with dried figs and prunes. «What a great combination for the sweet of the Christmas table!» he thought and he dreamed of the Emperor's approval. He had spent hours immersed in his thoughts. His eyelids were heavy. The train had already crossed the Serbian border. It would cross the country all night and the next morning it would enter Croatia. He fell asleep sweetly, while a smile painted his face. Oh yes, that, Ulysses /Odysseus Petrovich would become the Imperial Top Chef, thanks to his unique Christmas dinner recipe and thanks to his unique materials he had so long collected. He fell asleep comfortably, while the train was running at speed on the rails.

The next morning, the first rays of the sun awakened Odysseus Petrovich. He stretched out his hands, made his hair, straightened his jacket and got up.

Suddenly, his face was pale, his drooping eyes opened wide and a expression of horror was painted on his face.

His leather suitcase had disappeared ...

All distraught, he searched the train cabin and suddenly found a secret letter. With trembling hands, he opened the letter. The letter stated that he would get out of the train when he stepped onto platform 13 and that everything would become clear to him. Odysseus was superstitious, afraid because number 13 is an unlucky number. The train finally got on platform 13, and Odysseus gathered his courage and left the train. On his way out, he was attracted by the old wooden case that had his name printed in large letters. All elated, he ran to the casket and opened it. His gaze was

focused on a bottomless black hole. A clumsy boy pushed him and Odysseus fell into a black hole, suddenly ending up at Rastoke Restaurant. He was greeted by a mysterious woman, dressed in black with blue eyes that stood out in the darkness. Their eyes met and the woman suddenly disappeared, with only a small letter left. He opened the letter and it contained an address that no one else should have known except him. The first high-speed train headed to a specific address. After a long ride, Odysseus came to a certain address. He was standing in front of a large white abandoned restaurant and into which he had entered. At the entrance to the restaurant, he saw a mysterious woman and approached her, without a word she took him by the hand and led her into the kitchen, which was like new. Odysseus only followed the mysterious woman. She brought him to the elements she had opened. It contained a message that said "*Mix all these ingredients and the Emperor will remain eternally young.*"

ITALY

"Young, young, young, eternally young...". Those were the thoughts in Ulysses's mind. He was about to start cooking when a loud noise woke him up abruptly. Mr. Ulysses opened his eyes in fear, but immediately after exhaled relieved: it had been all a nightmare, an awful nightmare!!! He was still on the train, all sweaty and pale as the cold winter sky. What could have been that terrible noise? He looked at his luggage on the floor and quickly stood up, worried that any of his precious ingredients could have been damaged. He was checking the luggage when a train officer approached him: "Is everything all right, Sir? You were screaming in your sleep!", "Yes, I am fine, my luggage fell but it looks like nothing broke".

Ulysses said while pressing it to his chest. He did not have time to catch his breath though because the train manager announced that they were approaching the terminal station, where all passengers had to leave the train. Only in that moment, Ulysses realized they had crossed Austria while he was sleeping and that they were now in Italy, in Naples precisely. Terrified to be so far from the Emperor for whom he was supposed to cook in less than two days, he ran to the ticket office hoping to find a train that would have brought him back to Austria immediately. However, he was told that no trains were directed there until several hours. Anxious and tired, Ulysses walked out of the station looking for something to eat and pleasantly found that the winter was warmed by a bright sun. Since he was in Naples he decided to try one of its famous pizzas. After he was full and refreshed, he bought some tomato and mozzarella in a nearby shop. Then, he headed back to the station, where he eventually

heard his train being announced by the speaker. He promptly jumped in and started the long travel to Austria, where he was supposed to arrive in the first place. In the seat in front of Ulysses there was a boy with a mischievous look, who reminded him of his recent nightmare. The words were still echoing in his mind “Young, young, the emperor will always be young”. In an effort to relax, he started chatting with the boy and curiously asked: “Have you ever heard of a kind of food that keeps people young and fit in Italy?”. The boy was from Emilia Romagna, a region in northern Italy and without hesitating he answered: “Of course, the Parmigiano Reggiano!”. After that revelation, Ulysses decided to make another stop in his long travel. He went to a dairy farm in Emilia to buy what it appeared now the most important of his ingredients, the Parmigiano. Satisfied he looked at his luggage now equipped with what he needed to make a perfect meal for the Emperor. He was more and more convinced that that dream had blessed him, but he couldn't stop thinking that the adventure he had was more than a little mysterious. Those thoughts did not last long, though, since he was exhausted and soon fell asleep. Ulysses woke up a few miles from his final stop. He headed to the palace where he was immediately herded to the kitchen by an efficient servant. He was overwhelmed by emotions. The time to cook had come: he resolutely lifted the luggage on the kitchen table and opened it.....

LITHUANIA

And he looked at the suitcase in shock. Turns out that in the suitcase there were potatoes, ground meat, salt and pepper, bacon and sour cream. All the fancy ingredients have vanished. Turns out the suitcase was switched with another one. After the shock had passed, he tried to remember the recipe. He decided he was going to look for the suitcase. But when he went to search for it, he opened the old wagon door and there were no people inside - only luggage and old stuff. Mr. Ulysses looked in the luggage, but found nothing. So he passed on to the next wagon and knocked on the door to see if there was anyone inside of it. And then a moment later an old, hardly walking lady opened the rusty door with a smile because she hadn't had any visitors in a long time. Not even the train personnel. After Ulysses said hello, the

woman invited him into her garden – smelling wagon where she grew plants and vegetables including potatoes, onions & peppers.

-Would you like to have lunch with me, young man? – asked the lady.

And at that time Ulysses realized that he was getting hungry so he sweetly agreed to her offer of eating lunch together.

They sat down and then the woman asked if he knew about this Lithuanian traditional food called “Cepelinai”. Ulysses was confused. The woman brought him the food onto the table together with some green herb tea. The smell was amazing and he couldn’t resist and started eating. The flavor was incredible. The taste, the beautiful shape mesmerized him. After he ate he asked the woman for a recipe. She wrote it down on a yellow paper. With it, she gave a little bag with her own fresh onions.

Odysseus Ulysses Petrovich was saved. He returned to the kitchen to make the great potato and meat dish. He minced the potatoes and ground meat, seasoned the meat, chopped the onions... Everything was going well. He made balls with the meat and wrapped it with potatoes. Then after the water in the pot started boiling, he put everything in. Later he added oil into a pan and fried the ham with onions. They were served with sour cream on top of the dish.

Finally the time has come to serve it to the emperor. As he was walking to the fanciest dining hall he had even seen, he could even hear his own heartbeat. Everyone was so impatient. The chef had been known all around the world – it was curious to know how his masterpiece tasted. The emperor took a bite. Suddenly his hair started going grey and his skin wrinkled. “Ulysses! You will pay for this!” he shouted before running away. Behind him showed up his son, who was in the line to take his place...

POLAND

Terrified Odysseus Ulysses Petrovich suddenly understood what happened. Someone must have changed the ingredients of the recipe. Obviously it must have been the emperor’s son. He started to run away because the king’s army chased him. The body guard stood in front of him and blocked the main door. The only way to get out was the window. The man quickly ran up to it and jumped out. Fortunately it wasn’t high. Ulysses fell down into the garden and swallowed a magic strawberry to be invisible. He came to the station and met the Lithuanian old lady.

‘Why did you lie to me?’ – He asked her with angry voice.

‘It wasn’t my fault, king’s son forced me to do this.’ She replied contritely. ‘But I know how to solve the problem. There is a special flower in Polish Tatry Mountains. It is called mountain buttercup. If you make a dessert containing the flower petal, the emperor will be young again. But remember! It is guarded by a friendly sphinx.’ She added to this statement and disappeared because she ate a magic strawberry. The only thing he could hear was her ominous laugh. Desperate Odysseus Ulysses Petrovich took a train to Poland.

When he finally arrived in Zakopane – the winter capital city of Poland. He immediately set off for the mountains. After climbing for the whole day he sat down to relax. When he lifted his head he couldn’t believe his eyes, he saw a big clearing, which was covered by the unique flowers. Not hesitating at all, he started to run towards the plants. The nightmare was going to finish soon. Suddenly a strong Sphinx appeared in front of him. The man could smell his awful breath. The creature’s big sharp claws lifted him up.

‘Hello.’ Sphinx said cheerfully showing his yellow teeth.

‘Hi.’ Ulysses replied hesitantly.

‘Don’t be scared.’ Sphinx said ‘I do not bite. If you want to get this flower you must answer my puzzle.’ Sphinx added with a smile.

‘Ok.’

‘What is an animal that can make sounds? It walks on four limbs in the morning, on two limbs in the afternoon and on three limbs in the evening?’ Sphinx asked.

‘Let me think, it’s not an easy question. Hmm... but it’s not so difficult. Is it a human?’

‘Finally somebody discovered the correct answer. One more thing before you get a flower. Please tell me your story?’

Odysseus Ulysses Petrovich and the Sphinx made friends. In the evening he took a magic petal and caught a carriage.

‘To the railway station, please’ – Said Ulysses, sitting in a comfortable seat and admiring stunning views of the mountains.

‘Are you sure?’ The driver asked and turned back. So did the driver’s assistant.

Odysseus couldn’t say a thing because the driver was the Lithuanian old lady and her assistant was the king’s son...

ROMANIA

His first move was to pinch one cheek, was he dreaming again? The only thing that he felt was pain, pain on the cheek and pain in his soul for the cruel reality.

The king's son must have read his thoughts as he spoke in a gentle voice:

“Odysseus Ulysses Petrovich, did you think that I wanted to kill my own father?”

“I don't know what to think, anymore!”, replied Petrovich. Then, the king's son continued: “I only used a little magic, my father is safe and sound, I only want for him the best Chef ever... That's why, relentless traveler, you will have to go to the far Măgura, a nice village in Romania, where you will look for the local restaurant having the same name.”

Strangely enough, the man became silent and he refused to utter a word of explanation regarding the next visit, despite Odysseus's insistence. As the British say “Loose lips sink ships”, our hero headed for Buzău, the nearest city close to Măgura. Again trains, long stops, borders, thoughts running faster than the train, fueled by hopes, and, finally, the little city located on the river bank with the same name. Another trip, shorter though, and there he was, a stranger in a nice village guarder by green hills and inhabited by kind, smiling and helpful people. Quickly, he found the restaurant and went to the kitchen to ask for the local chef.

“What's the matter?” asked he.

“Honestly, I don't know.” answered the bewildered Ulysses.

“Then, try to tell me the whole story and maybe we can figure it out.” said the local chef. Ulysses told him everything he had been through. Romanians are patient and good listeners. After a short period of silence, the local chef said that he had been sent there for a new recipe which was unique in the world and had miraculous powers. “The dish is part of our national tradition and whoever eats it for the first time becomes younger and if he or she is a bad person, after this meal they will be kind and loving with not a single evil thought in mind”. “Then why did the king’s son sent me here?” Petrovich wondered.

“Because he and the old lady are going to steal the recipe from you and use it as they like and they couldn’t have taken it themselves because I’ve known them for a long time”. ”Anyway, here is the recipe of the beans with pork ” continued the kind and helpful chef, and he taught the young royal chef everything he knew regarding the Romanian national dish.

“One more question...” dared Petrovich to add, “How can I avoid being caught and killed?”

“This is simple,”answered the local chef with a mysterious smile. “Go to our sculpture camp in the open, which is close, find a stone sculpture which symbolizes the sun, show the recipe to it three times, say GO NOW and you will travel in seconds through this time gate to your king’s palace.”

When Odysseus found himself in front of the palace, he couldn’t believe his eyes. He cooked the magic dish, gave it to the king and asked him to invite his son and the old lady to lunch if he liked the food. The king was enthralled by the new taste and invited the two swindlers to have lunch, which they could not

refuse. The new Imperial Top Chef served them with a large smile and withdrew respectfully.

THE END