

# *The Town Drunk*

*Presents*

## **Panko**

*Zdravka Evtimova*

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“Don’t waste time,” my friend Dara called me on my mobile. “Come to my place quickly! I’ll treat you to a piece of Panko as soon as you arrive.”

I hesitated. The day before, my husband had bought a big knife and said he’d use it to slash my throat. I wasn’t too impressed, to be honest with you. Let me first explain the way the whole picture looked.

Panko was a twenty-year-old donkey whose proud proprietor was Dara’s father, Uncle Pesho. The man prepared his cart, then took Panko to steal tiles, scrap iron, sawdust, and everything else he could lay his hands on in these parts. To cut a long story short, it was Uncle Pesho himself who turned Panko into minced meat and subsequently into sausages.

He was stealing scrap iron one day when Panko fell on his belly and started hiccuping and sighing. Then suddenly the animal’s back stopped twitching.

“Why are you doing this to me, man?” Uncle Pesho said to his beast. “Who shall I steal with now? My wife is an old rail like the rusty ones at the railway station. My daughter will never get married because no one wants her. Those two geese are so lazy they’d rather kick the bucket than do a stroke of work. Tell me, Panko, didn’t I give you a chunk of my bread all the time? I did! So don’t die, man. Are you leaving me with the slothful female pair, with the old one and the young one? Are you? You can’t die now!”

But Panko kicked weakly and stuck out his tongue at his master. Uncle Pesho was in a quandary. A donkey that weighed more than two hundred pounds should not meet his maker like that. Imagine more than two hundred pounds of edible meat dying under your nose while the refrigerator in your house was as empty as your pocket.

I didn’t know if Uncle Pesho slit Panko’s throat before or after the beast died. As far as I knew, he’d rather cut Dara’s throat. I’d often hear him say: “That hen just gapes at the TV all day long. And why you think she does that—to learn something useful like making money? No, sir, not at all. She watches those stupid series and cries her eyes out. When her classmates come

back from Italy or Spain, they all visit her and don't leave her room for a week. At the end of the day none of them marries her. And her classmates are damned right, if you ask me."

In my opinion, Panko died most respectably before he and his master stole the scrap iron, then Uncle Pesho cut his dead throat with his penknife. Dara told me he buried Panko's ears not far from the Struma River. Whenever Aunt Dena, his wife, picked a quarrel with him, he went to Panko's buried ears, drank beer and mourned. Even his competitors, the other thieves with carts, went and cried for the buried ears. They all remembered the way they had gotten drunk with Uncle Pesho.

What I saw with my own eyes, though, were forty-two sausages hanging under the eaves of Uncle Pesho's house. The man himself sat in a shabby armchair, a bottle of beer in his hand, unable to steal any more, tears in his eyes. He chewed at a piece of sausage, swilled down beer, and wept for Panko.

"Come quickly, you sleeping saucepan!" Dara called me on my mobile once again. "Hurry up. There's almost nothing left of Panko."

I believed her. There was hardly anything left of Panko, and I knew why: Dara had tried one of the sausages.

"It was like gnawing on a paving stone," she told me later, and I was sure that was true. Panko was a very old donkey, may he rest in peace. After she tried the sausage, something unbelievable occurred. She met a guy by the name of Dancho. He was not one of her "classmates," who went to Italy and Spain and stayed in Bulgaria for no more than a week. He was a Bulgarian, every inch of him, and he had never traveled far from his native village of Kralev. On account of that he didn't know anything about Dara's classmates or her inordinate love for the TV series.

"You are magnificent," he told her as they sat in one of our town's many cafés. "I am so happy!"

An hour later he said he wanted to introduce Dara to his mother. Dancho was thirty-one, and Dara was, too, so they'd make a good couple, he said. Dara got scared and blinked her eyes uncontrollably, unbelieving. She'd been assured she was magnificent before, but never for more than a week. Then the guys vanished. She dubbed them her "classmates" for the sake of convenience, though most of them were either ten years older or ten years younger than she. Plus or minus ten years didn't make a difference to Dara; the guy remained her "classmate," and that meant that at the end of the week he collected all his shirts and socks and beat it for Italy or Spain.

Dancho, however, did something different. He paid a visit to Uncle Pesho and told him, "Dara is absolutely magnificent. She is more magnificent than any woman in my village, or even in the capital of Bulgaria. So, if you don't mind, I'd like to marry her."

That statement rendered Dara speechless. Her classmates had said before, "We'll get married

someday,” but how could that festive event become a reality with the bride in Pernik, Bulgaria, and the bridegroom dillydallying in Madrid? Hardly possible at all.

Another friend of mine, Maria, tried Panko’s sausages, even though she loathed donkeys. You wouldn’t believe what happened. On the following day she met a guy, Genady by name, on the train to Sofia. She was thirty-four and he was thirty-two. Maria worked for the National Steel Industry Trust in an old factory, so she could never trim her nails the way she liked. She, too, had a few “classmates,” but considerably fewer than Dara, maybe because Dara was slim and tall while Maria rolled in her own lard. No matter what, that Genady guy from the train told her, “You are absolutely magnificent! I am thinner than my own shirt, but you are just what I’ve imagined a woman should be. I’d like to introduce you to my mother. I want to marry you.”

And that was not the end of Panko’s story.

Aunt Dena, Uncle Pesho’s wife, a quiet and perfectly normal fat woman, tried Panko’s sausages as well. The following day she was accosted by a funny sort of bloke as she sold stockings and T-shirts from her stall in the marketplace in Pernik. The guy had a shaggy, disheveled beard and looked as strong as Uncle Pesho’s bull. He told Aunt Dena, “You look magnificent to me,” bought her a vanilla ice cream, and in the afternoon he went to visit her at her house.

That’s when Uncle Pesho grabbed the same penknife with which he’d allegedly slaughtered Panko and rushed to slit the guy’s throat. Unfortunately, the intruder was stronger than that bull in Pesho’s pen. He bandied words with Uncle Pesho, and the two men got into a fight. Aunt Dena watched them, grinning radiantly over the pot of vegetable soup that simmered on her kitchen stove. You can guess what Dara did next. She started selling Panko’s sausages at the price of 50 Euro a slice. If somebody expected that the price would discourage the ladies of Pernik, I’d tell him he’d never met a lady from Pernik in his life. Dara’s house thronged with women, and they were not only thirty-year-old beauties. There were seventeen-year-old girls, fifty-year-old ladies, sixty-year-old matrons, and grandmothers with walking sticks. I noticed a girl from the elementary school with a 50 Euro bill in her hand.

Then Dara called me on my mobile for a third time. “Hey, sleeping saucer!” she said. “You’ve got to get moving. Soon there will be nothing left of Panko, and you’ll rot like an apple in a pantry.”

Dara was my next-door neighbor as well as my friend, and she could hear every quarrel my husband Tosho and I had. We argued over money and a host of other issues. He had told me that he liked the waitress at a local eatery, so I’d better watch out for him. He’d also said he was sick and tired of me. He implied he could at any minute beat it for Spain, but at the same time he warned me that he’d bought a knife to do me in if I tried one of Panko’s sausages.

Uncle Pesho’s competitors, who all owned old donkeys, took their beasts to the same locale near the Struma River and cut the animals’ throats. They even borrowed Uncle Pesho’s penknife, paying him 8 Euro an hour. None of them had a beast of burden anymore, so the scrap iron and the tiles remained unattended. The sausages from their donkeys failed to bring anyone saying to a girl, “You are magnificent.”

“You silly saucepan,” Dara scolded me on my mobile. “I’m saving one piece of Panko especially for you. Your husband is as lazy as Panko’s buried ears, and he’s got a roving eye. He doesn’t have two pennies to rub together, does he? Don’t waste time. Come quickly and eat that sausage. Take my word for it, Tosho doesn’t care for you. Why should you put up with him?”

“Okay,” I said. “I’m coming.”

Before I set out for Dara’s place, I threw the knife my husband had bought into the Struma River. I had hardly taken a couple of steps away when I saw Tosho. Since he no longer had the knife, he’d grabbed an axe instead.

“If you go and eat that sausage, I’ll cut your head off here and now!” he said.

“Oh, will you?” I said. “I’m curious how you’ll do that. Even if I remained headless, I’d still go and eat that sausage.”

“All right, all right!” Tosho hurled the axe on the ground. “You are magnificent!” he shouted. “You are the only magnificent woman among all women I know. I’m telling you the honest truth, so you don’t have to go and eat that damned sausage. Let me be cold and dead like Panko if I’m lying to you!”

Uncle Pesho and his competitors, who didn’t have donkeys anymore, laughed as they drank brandy together in the café across from our house.

“Hey, Tosho!” they yelled. “Why are you telling her she’s magnificent? Don’t you have eyes in your head, man?”

But my Tosho, he didn’t hear them, as he was trying to grab my hand. I drew away in fear; I never knew what was on that man’s mind. At long last, though, he caught my hand and kissed it.

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**Zdravka Evtimova** was born in Bulgaria. She is the author of three short story collections: *Bitter Sky* (Skrev Press UK, 2003), *Somebody Else* (MAG Press USA, 2004), and *Miss Daniella* (Skrev Press UK, 2007). Her novel *God of Traitors* was published by Books for a Buck, USA in 2006.

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