

The Count

by Martha Patterson

“The Count,” as we called him, was an old man—he must have been in his 80s—who came into the café, where I was a waitress, every day. He was rather mysterious, had a Slavic accent, and we thought he must be descended from Russian nobility. We imagined he’d had a wild life when he was young because he was kind of eccentric. He always wore a black top coat and used to laugh to himself, alone, as he drank cappuccinos.

I think all of us who worked there felt a little protective of him. He laughed so much to himself at the café that it sometimes irritated other customers. One day a very annoyed woman who had bought coffee asked me if she was expected to share a table with “that strange man.”

“It’s a café,” I said defensively. “If it’s crowded here, yes, you have to share.”

My boyfriend, who worked as a waiter in the restaurant upstairs from the café, would come down for coffee during free moments and sit opposite The Count, laughing in synchronicity with the old man as he sat at the next table. My boyfriend had a soft spot for the weird and strange people of this world.

The Count apparently had a crush on Candy, the wife of the restaurant owner—she managed the café—because he asked for her every day when she came in to work. Sometimes when she happened to be there, she’d sit with him, with a cup of espresso, and talk to him. He did speak English, not well, but well enough to converse with Candy.

I often wondered what, exactly, they had to talk about. Candy was in her 30s, an attractive brunette with a full figure, and she’d married the Armenian owner of the restaurant upstairs, probably thinking such an act would lead to a comfortable life. I suppose it did—after all, they had a

home together in Marin, north of San Francisco, and, although she hadn't had kids yet, she seemed happy.

The Count loved her. She probably seemed charming and glamorous to him, running the café.

But one day the police arrived—two of them—and asked about an elderly Russian man they'd discovered who hung out at the place. It appeared he'd shoplifted merchandise from a sneaker store—sneakers! We, those of us who worked at the café, couldn't imagine The Count even *wearing* sneakers—he'd always worn polished brown leather oxfords. But the police were investigating and wondered if he'd ever stolen from *us*.

Candy was there, in the café that afternoon.

"Never!" she said, "He'd never steal. And to think he'd want to steal sneakers!" She scoffed and asked the police, who were actually quite polite and nice, if they wanted coffee. They declined, since they were working and not supposed to be taking it easy.

Just then, The Count came into the café for his daily cappuccino. He smiled at Candy and gave her his order. She quickly fixed his drink while the two police officers, who were still hanging around, hemmed and hawed. And I looked down at The Count's feet and, believe it or not, he was wearing sneakers! Black ones with red laces—they looked fashionable and trendy with his Russian top coat—and I was suddenly struck by the thought that maybe he *had* stolen them!

I don't know if Candy noticed The Count's sneakers, but the two policemen definitely did.

"Where did you get those shoes?" said one of them to The Count, peering at the old man's feet.

"My shoes?" The Count acted perplexed. "My nephew gave them to me for Christmas."

"Who is your nephew?" asked the other police officer.

"His name is Boris. He's young—in his 40s. He works at a shoe store."

Candy handed The Count his cappuccino and took his money—only a few dollars—graciously. She was puzzled by this exchange between the police and The Count.

Just then my boyfriend came down the stairs from the restaurant above us. He was on his fifteen-minute break and wanted coffee. The Count had seated himself at one of the little, mosaic-tiled tables, and my boyfriend sat near him, smiling, as he always got a “charge” out of The Count’s laughing to himself.

Candy asked the policemen to leave, since they were making the other café guests nervous, and the police did make their way out the exit. My boyfriend unexpectedly looked at The Count’s feet, not knowing what had just happened, and said to him, “Fancy shoes! Wow! Where did you get *those*?”

The Count peered at my boyfriend through his silver-rimmed spectacles and said, “My nephew gave me these sneakers for Christmas.”

“People re-sell shoes like those for \$300,” answered my boyfriend. “I’ve heard that famous athletes wear them.”

“What’s an athlete?” asked The Count. His English wasn’t terrible, but he didn’t know some common American words.

“A sports star. Someone who’s good at basketball,” answered my boyfriend, drinking his coffee. He turned to Candy. “But why were the police just here?”

“It was nothing,” she said, approaching him with a refill of his coffee. “Big deal about bullshit.”

The Count smiled at Candy and laughed to himself. My boyfriend, watching him, laughed too.

“It’s nice,” said The Count softly, “when you get something for free.”

“Well, the sneakers were a gift,” said my boyfriend to him. “Of course they were free.”

“That’s not what I meant,” answered The Count, looking mischievous. “I stole them.”

Candy’s jaw dropped.

“In some countries, one might get his hand chopped off for that,” said The Count. “But in America people understand.” He laughed to himself, long and hard, so much so that I thought he was going to topple off of his metal chair.

