

THE POLICEMAN WHO BECAME A SAINT
by Ivan Dimitrov

translated from the Bulgarian by Angela Rodel

N. is a writer and is just finishing his first detective novel. Until now, he has always written books that cannot be fitted into a particular genre and thus fall into the category of "literary fiction." This time is no exception. The book is a whodunit, but is more than your usual crime novel: at once funny and serious, wordy and laconic. The main character, as is typical of N., is a writer who is suffering from writer's block while trying to finish his first detective novel and who turns out to be mixed up in a cop's murder, which he perhaps committed, perhaps not. In any case, we don't find out until the final sentence, where N. casually drops the solution to the mystery.

N. is sure that he will finally make a big splash. He is not an unknown writer, yet nor is he famous. His books have always sold well, but have never provoked a true "boom" in the bookstores. Until now he has always been a good writer who is just missing that little something that would get him into the club of "great writers," but this time he is sure that he has crossed that line and will take up his rightful place among the living classics.

Anticipating impending fame, N. is completing his fifteenth edit of the novel with the working title *The Literary Psychopath*, which he will soon change, so as not to give away the denouement. He has already prepared a list of twenty or so titles and the only thing he needs to do now is choose one of them. Before that, however, he wants to finish with the edits, to reach that cherished moment when the manuscript is ready to be transformed into a book. Only then, N. thinks to himself, will I be able to give my novel a fitting title.

N. is trying not to hurry, but he is working more than usual. He tries to slow his pace, he has taken things too fast in the past and would like to avoid rushing. Despite everything, the editing takes him only half as much time as usual. For this reason he feels obliged to continue editing. Instead of the usual ten times, he continues on for an eleventh, twelfth, thirteenth round...

The fifteenth edit will be the last, he tells himself, going over the novel yet again. Shortly before he reaches the end, a detail he hadn't noticed until now jumps out at him. The character of the policeman, exceptionally important for the action, is not sufficiently realistic.

N. reads the novel again from beginning to end. Then he rereads it once more and once more after that. Without a doubt, the character of the cop is wrong. It's not bad. N. would even call him a strong character, but definitely wrong in the little details, which, in N.'s opinion, are

the most important element in creating a character. They and nothing else are precisely what create the illusion that the character is alive.

N. gradually reaches the conclusion that the character of the policeman is what will trip up the novel, which will allow prizes to elude his grasp, which will cause the door to the club of "great writers" to again be slammed in his face. He cannot afford this and over the course of two weeks he racks his brains, trying to improve the character of the cop. He sits down to edit it dozens of times and every draft is worse than the original version. N. is driven to a state of total despair, to the desire to rip to shreds the printed version upon which he has made his edits in blue pen, and to the repeated mental image of him smashing his laptop against the wall.

These thoughts disappear from his head when he discovers the solution to his problem. It is so simple! How could he not have thought of it until now! Instead of racking his brains, he could have already edited the character of the cop, if only he had thought of it sooner. The only thing he has to do is a little field research.

N. calls up a few friends looking for help and soon figures out who to turn to for assistance. Thanks to friendly favours and the sympathy of certain people, he will be able to shadow a local policeman for an evening.

Here we cut to the local precinct, where the police chief has just informed Officer Z. that a civilian will trail him for a night. Z. is indignant. He doesn't like this game in the least. What if something were to happen to the civvy, he would be responsible, right? Z. takes the liberty of cussing out his unknown companion. What the hell is this faggot thinking, he says, that some fucking loser can just show up on my shift and I'll drag him around with me all night like some limp dick? No, tell him it ain't gonna happen or assign him to someone else. Or tell him to go pull a shift with that fucking hooker, his mother! The police chief is unmoved, he informs Z. that it's a done deal and there is no getting out of it. By the way, do you know what this civilian is? the chief asks. I don't know anything else about him besides the fact that he's a faggot! Z. replies. Quit insulting the man, he's a writer who is trying to finish his novel, the police chief smiles. And how can I help him with that? Should I jerk him off? Z. asks caustically. No, he wants to spend a shift with you, because there's a cop in his novel. What, he takes me for some shitty-ass literary figure? Z. roars and slams the door.

The following afternoon, N. appears at the precinct, where the chief introduces him to Z., who at the beginning of the meeting is just as acrimonious as he had been the previous day. You can see for yourself what cops are, N.... Regular people. Maybe this will help you, the

chief says to N. and wishes him a pleasant day, at which point the two of them head out to the squad car.

In principle, I have a partner, but thanks to you, asswipe, tonight I'm by myself, Z. fumes. For a certain period of time he continues insulting N. In his fury, Z. tells him dirty jokes about cops, and when his repertoire of cop jokes is exhausted, he continues with regular dirty jokes. N. remains calm and imperturbably takes notes in his little black notebook. This infuriates Z. all the more.

Little by little Z.'s anger passes and he resigns himself to the situation. The sun is setting, and he begins to wonder just what kind of novel N. is writing. He would like to ask, but thinks it would be inappropriate given the insulting tirade and the dirty jokes. Z. wonders what impression N. will have of cops, how he will portray them in his book and only now realizes that while the writer is with him, he is not simply a cop, but a composite image of all of his colleagues. Z. is suddenly burdened by a feeling of responsibility that is new to him.

Z.'s speech changes. To his own surprise, he discovers that he is avoiding the vulgar words that pepper his vocabulary. He could never be accused of expressing himself eloquently, that isn't in his nature, but if nothing else, at least he's doing it properly. But it is not only his speech which changes, but the topics of conversation as well. At first, he, just like everyday, expresses his resentment against the potholes, the irresponsible drivers and their failure to obey traffic laws, against the increase in crime and petty hooliganism, against the lack of civic consciousness and a whole slew of such nonsense. But then events bubble up in his memory, which he pours out in front of the writer. His memories and those of other police officers. Heroics performed during police operations. Unforeseen deaths. The loss of partners. Events that are small and prosaic in principle, yet filled with humanity. Sometimes the police mask slips off in the stories and the police turn into ordinary people who experience ordinary things: divorces, loss of loved ones, unexpected romances, days where nothing seems to go right. In other cases, the police mask and the person become one and he describes taking the profession home. The cop as son. The cop as husband. The cop as father. Or the cop runs up against reality. Against how hard it is to be a cop in this country, at this time, in this life.

This is everything N. has dreamed about. His blue pen moves terribly slowly over the notebook. He tosses it away, pulls a digital recorder, which he presciently took with him, out of his leather shoulder bag, and turns it on without asking permission, after which he picks up the notebook and continues writing, so as to keep the policeman's focus on the notebook and not on the recorder.

N. thinks they'll spend the whole night like this and is satisfied. These stories will help him finish his novel no problem and then he'll only have to wait for the fame to arrive with its publication. Then, at 4 a.m. the police radio informs Z. of a suicide attempt in the region.

Z. turns on the siren and heads to the location of the incident at lightning speed, as if he has completely forgotten about N.'s presence in the squad car.

Through the deserted morning streets, they quickly reach the three-storey house, onto whose roof has climbed a husky and visibly inebriated man around the age of thirty, who is waving a pistol around and screaming that if his best friend doesn't show up, he'll jump. Z. is the first police officer to arrive. The fire department has also been called, but they won't come for another twenty minutes. Z. finds out that the Alert Shot Bar is located in the building from the bawling female bartender, who has just closed up the place for the night. Z. promises her that he will not allow the man, whose name is D., to get hurt. Most of these cases, Z. comforts her, are just drunken nonsense. Your friend doesn't really want to jump. It's one of those stories you forget as soon as you wake up in the morning.

Z. talks to D. or rather shouts with him. He tries to convince him that there is no point in jumping and begs him to come down. D. hurls roof tiles at him and keeps waving the pistol around. This continues for ten minutes or so until N., who had remained in the squad car, goes over to Z and quietly asks him whether this is the standard procedure.

Thus Z. is reminded of N.'s presence and of the fact that at the moment he is a composite image of all police officers. In our profession, there are no standard procedures, he tells N. and asks the weeping bartender how to get up on the roof and rushes into the house.

N. is riled up. He never imaged that he would find himself in the middle of a police operation, especially one that would pose no risk to N. himself. Being at a shoot-out would be another kettle of fish entirely, now wouldn't it? But this is something unimportant. Drunken nonsense. Some boozer, who will get down off the roof any minute now. And despite that, the situation is real, a human life hangs by a thread. Perhaps N. has dreamed his whole life of experiencing something like this.

Three minutes later Z.'s voice can be heard from a window beneath the roof, saying that he's going to come up there. I'm coming up there with you, he tells D., don't shoot. I'm not armed. He reaches out and grabs a beam and hoists himself up. D. threatens him, raises the gun and fires into the air. Z. has already crawled up onto the roof. D. aims the pistol at him. It's a gas pistol, you can't kill me with that, Z. says, apparently having reached this conclusion from the sound of the shot. Yeah, but I can stun you and then you'll fall, D. replies. His finger trembles on the trigger.

For ten long minutes Z. speaks exceptionally calmly, logically, reasonably. He manages to convince D. that his actions make no sense, D. tosses the pistol down onto the tiles and it clatters metallically in the gutter. Good, Z. says, now I'll come over to you, I'll take you and the two of us will climb down together. D. bursts out crying. He didn't mean to do it, he says. Just keep calm so nothing goes wrong, Z. says and takes a step forward.

But something goes wrong.

Z. slips, slides down, falls and dies on the spot.

N. is frozen. He asks himself whether he shouldn't check Z.'s pulse, but he can't budge from the spot. The bartender hurls herself on N., embraces him and starts bawling three times harder. N.'s eyes fill with tears, which in any case do not manage to roll down his cheeks.

The firemen arrive at the scene. D. begs someone to help him get down off the roof. N. suggests using the fire engine's ladder, but they explain that it won't reach the roof. Two firemen climb onto the roof after carefully securing themselves with ropes, and bring down the snivelling D.. The policemen from the second patrol car, which arrived right after the fire truck, arrest him, shove him into the squad car and take off to the police station. The fireman who seems to be the brigade commander asks N. to explain what happened. In a quivering voice, N. recounts the events from the moment when they drove up to the building to the moment of Z.'s death. While telling this story, two paramedics and a doctor carry Z.'s body on a stretcher to an ambulance. So you're trying to say that he went up there of his own accord? the fire chief asks, astonished. That's against all the rules. N. repeats Z.'s words that sometimes standard procedures aren't followed. Yes, replies the fire chief, and you can see for yourself in which cases!

A month later, N. finishes his novel and six months later it comes out under the title *The Policeman Who Became a Saint*. The book immediately grabs a top slot on the bestseller lists and eight months later wins the biggest prize for a novel in Bulgaria. Critics can't stop praising the novel and especially its incredible description of the police officer and his craft, while policemen who have read the book claim that it is pure nonsense and that the cop in the novel has nothing to do with reality.