

Butter on his head

This story, entitled *Butter on his Head*, by Hayley Liversidge was an entry in the BCSA's 2021 writing competition. Hayley is an independent writer who lives on Teesside. Having completed a creative writing course she has had articles published in the local community newspapers, *Woman Alive* magazine and *MIMazine*. Her short stories have been shortlisted in *Writing Magazine* competitions and in the annual *Crossing The Tees* short story competition. Her latest crime story was published in the anthology, *A Grave Diagnosis*. Most recently her work has appeared in the collection of stories, *When This Is All Over*.

It was what his brother hadn't said that was worrying. That of course and the fact that he had vanished. They'd moved from Czechoslovakia to the UK 5 years ago and loved it. So why disappear now?

Jozef Bartos picked up the phone to call the police. Dominik had been missing for 72 hours. His twin, gone without a trace saying nothing to anyone. Dominik just wasn't like that. They thought alike, spoke alike, often knew exactly what the other was thinking. Not this time. Why hadn't he confided in him? That's what hurt the most. Somehow he was convinced his twin was still alive, only he hadn't a clue as to what was going on. To tell the truth he couldn't imagine life without Dominik, didn't want to imagine the worst case scenario. Yet it was a mystery, one he didn't like at all.

Everybody joked that Dominik had butter on his head in the true Czech sense of the word. He never kept secrets. Well that was wrong for a start. Things just didn't make sense, even during the recent lockdowns Dominik had always been a cheerful young man. A strong, competent worker he earned a good salary as a warehouse manager. Business was booming with the surge in online ordering due to Covid 19. He loved the work and thrived under pressure.

Jozef scratched his head and put the phone down before anyone picked up the call. Was it a coincidence that Dominik happened to have booked time off work that week? Surely any investigating officer would think it was a case of him going away on the sly now restrictions were being lifted a little. Perhaps he was staying with a friend for a few nights. Only he didn't want his twin to know. Jozef smiled, since a young boy he'd been the one to follow the rules. Dominik always did what he pleased.

However, there was that strange episode a few days ago. Jozef shivered at the thought. Could there be a connection? He'd dropped in to see Dominik and enjoy some Becherovka, sat in the garden. They both loved that taste of cinnamon and ginger with a hint of menthol, dark honey and liquorice. It was cold and damp, typical British weather, but everything was fine.

"You must fill in your EU settlement papers," he said, banging the glass down on the green plastic garden table. "Thirtieth June's deadline day. You're planning to stay, are you not?"

Dominik had smiled and poured him another drink. "Don't worry, it's all in hand."

"I know you," Jozef grunted. "You leave everything to the last minute, everything."

"It's my problem, not yours."

That's when it happened. A knock at the door. Dominik hurried away to see who it was. Jozef followed out of habit. Sat on the

white door step was a small brown package. Nobody was in sight. Surely some delivery driver had just dropped it off and left? Heck, loads of things were being ordered online because of the pandemic. It was Dominik's reaction that was so strange, so out of character. "Don't touch it!" he yelled.

Within seconds he'd disappeared and came back wearing blue nitrile gloves. He was carrying two heavy duty garden bags, one inside the other for double wrapping. Carefully he picked up the package put it inside the garden bags, tied it up and put it in the wheelie bin. "The dustmen come tomorrow," he said, stripping off his gloves and throwing them away.

He wouldn't explain why, no matter how much Jozef pestered for an answer. "Just trust me, OK," was all he said.

Dominik must be in some sort of trouble, Jozef thought, whatever it was, it was serious. Images of the explosion at the ammunition factory in Czechoslovakia in 2014 kept running through his head. That and the link with the story of Sergei Skripal the Russian spy and the nerve agent poisoning in Salisbury. The package, surely Dominik didn't think it was contaminated in that way? Yet why refuse to even touch it? Why the need to dispose of this parcel so carefully? Put it this way – he, Jozef, would not be touching that wheelie bin. Even after it had been emptied.

What was Dominik up to? He couldn't be some sort of spy, impossible. Yet could his twin brother have led a double life without him knowing? It fit the facts, why else would he disappear? Why else was he not worried about filling out the EU resettlement form? No, there must be some other explanation, but what?

They had few enemies in England, most people were kind, but not all. One person in particular sprang to mind, Robson. He drank so much he smelt of hops mixed with sweat and smoke. It was him who had thrown paint stripper over the car one night. Jozef was sure of it. All because of a case of mistaken identity, causing a row on social media. He was convinced they'd slashed his tyres in spite. They hadn't of course, but getting a stubborn man like that to see sense was as impossible as expecting a whale to run a marathon.

OK, they couldn't resist rearranging the flower pots in Robson's garden when he was out one occasion, but that was just a joke. Nothing was damaged, just rearranged, in the shape of a P for prat. Robson was very pro-Brexit, didn't go for Europeans at all. That made things difficult for a start. His sister Mary however was a different matter, a sweet little thing who looked for the good in everyone. How they could be related remained a mystery. Brother and sister yet as different as manure and honey.

No, even Robson wasn't stupid enough to



do anything to Dominik. Was he? Another mystery, why had Dominik seemed so happy of late? He'd been going out most evenings. Who'd he been meeting? If he, Jozef hadn't wanted to give his brother privacy he would have followed Dominik one night to find out what was going on.

Jozef scratched his head and put the kettle onto boil. Right now he needed the bitter taste and comforting aroma of coffee to help him think. Three more days, he thought. If I haven't heard from him by then, it's time to bring the police in. He's not answering phone calls or texts.

Three days later, still no sign of Dominik. Time for action. Jozef stood in the hall and reached for his mobile. The letter box clicked open and two letters flew onto the floor. One

was a white envelope, the address handwritten in neat print. Jozef tore the letter open. He knew that writing anywhere.

"Sorry for not being in touch. Problems with Internet access etc. Meet me in Staithes at The Cod And Lobster, 12pm, Saturday. Make sure you're on your own."

Jozef frowned. What was wrong with the phone? Why hadn't he rung? Staithes was two hours drive away. What was he doing there? Why this strange request to ensure he was on his own? Was Dominik in hiding? If so from who? None of it made any sense. What was going on? One thing for sure, he was going to find out.

By 11.30am the following day Jozef had parked his flame-red Ford Fiesta in the local car park close to Staithes up on the cliff. It was a small place with grass parking. A white transit van and an old Nissan Micra occupied

the circular silver table and stared out at the sea. The brown water lapped gently against the harbour wall. All seemed so restful, yet it was a tenuous peace, one that could be destroyed in seconds. What if this was a trap?

He shook his head, enough of that thinking. All he wanted to know was that his brother was safe and well. Surely nobody would try anything in broad daylight. After all he knew nothing.

12.05pm still no sign of Dominik. Jozef tapped his fingers on the table. A waitress wearing the obligatory mask came out with a pad. "What can I get you?" She asked with a smile.

"Nothing yet, thank you. I'm waiting for someone."

"OK, I'll be back shortly." She disappeared back inside the pub.

Jozef looked warily around. Yet all seemed

Jozef took a gulp of his drink, enjoying the brief sensation of frothy coffee swirling round his mouth. "Now," he said, banging the mug down on the table. "What's happened? I was crazy with worry about you. You disappear, no note, no nothing. What if you were dead? I'm your twin, you told me nothing. Don't you trust me? I'd have done anything to help."

Dominik hesitated, turning a beautiful shade of red. "Sorry bratr, I didn't want you involved. It didn't seem right."

Jozef grunted and lowered his voice. "Now tell me. Why the secrecy? You're not some sort of spy are you?"

Dominik laughed. "Whatever made you think that?"

Jozef frowned, sometimes his brother could be really irritating. "The way you wouldn't touch that package, remember, the blue nitrile gloves, putting it in a double bag. You were treating it as if it could some form of nerve agent. Remember Sergei Skripal?"

Dominik's lips twitched. "OK, that was me being a little cautious. I hadn't ordered anything online and thought it might be Robson. He was recovering from Covid. I thought he might have sent me a package he'd spat on to infect me for spite."

"Why didn't you say so at the time when I asked you?"

"It's all a bit difficult really."

Jozef banged his hand on the table. "Why? What reason have you given him to do something like that?"

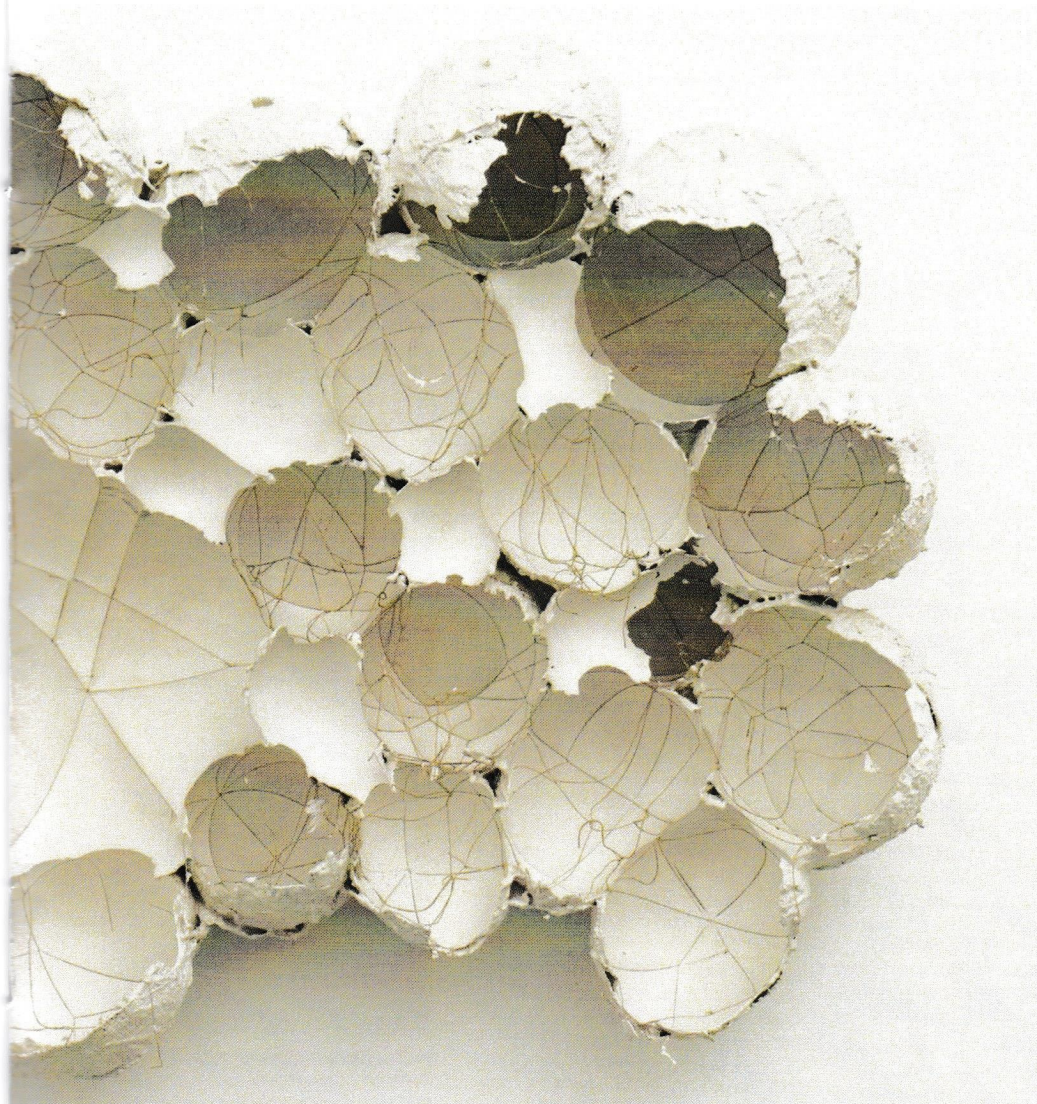
Dominik smiled. "I was dating Mary. You know his over the top, fanatical views on Brexit and foreigners. We've all heard him sounding off about them. What would he do if he found out his sister was going out with an EU national? He's already stooped to using paint stripper. We thought it best to disappear totally for a while. Robson thinks Mary's gone on holiday with a friend."

Jozef frowned. "I don't blame you fancying Mary, she is a lovely girl. Are you still courting her? How are you going to deal with Robson?"

Dominik stared down at his drink. "Robson has no say in the matter. It's done now. No I'm not still going out with Mary."

"I'm sorry," spluttered Jozef.

"No need to be," Dominik said smiling. "She's my wife now."



two spaces, otherwise the place was empty. A couple of sea gulls flew past screeching, diving and swooping in the deep blue sky. He could taste the salty sea on his lips and smell the aroma of seaweed percolating through the air.

Staithes, a small sleepy fishing town, very popular with tourists in summer. What's he doing here, thought Jozef rubbing his hands. It's freezing.

By the time he had walked through the winding, cobbled high street and navigated himself to the quayside it was 11.55am. Just one couple sat outside The Cod and Lobster hugging their hot drinks in their hands as they chatted.

Pity you couldn't sit indoors yet. Jozef sat down on one of the yellow seats, leaned on

quiet. The couple got up and left. He was on his own.

Suddenly someone gripped his shoulder from behind. Who was it? He swung round to face the person, hand balled into a fist.

"You really mustn't let people creep up on you like that, bratr."

Jozef jumped up. "Dominik," he said, hugging his brother in total disregard for social distancing rules. "Where have you been? First let me give you a good kick for disappearing."

Dominik grinned. "I've got someone for you to meet in a while. First some coffee on me."

They sat down at the table. The waitress brought their drinks, two steaming lattes in long glass mugs.

The image on this page (*Untitled*, 1985) is of a sculpture by Slovak artist Maria Bartuszová. An exhibition of her work is scheduled for the Tate Modern later this year.

Born in Prague in 1936 and dying in 1996, Bartuszová worked for over thirty years in Košice. She was married to the sculptor Juraj Bartus and exhibited her work mostly in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Most of her sculptures are made of plaster, lending her work a delicacy and impermanence. Her work is often tentative, unfinished and transitory in nature.

Originally scheduled for 2020, the exhibition will be shown from September 2022 to April 2023.