

Gluttony



ITALO CALVINO

Italo Calvino (1923–1985), one of the most prominent twentieth-century Italian novelists and short story writers, came of age during World War II fighting fascism as a participant in the Italian resistance movement. After the war, he wrote several works in a traditional, realist manner, but he soon developed his own distinctive style that incorporated literary elements of fable and fantasy. In novels such as *The Cloven Viscount* (1952), *The Baron in the Trees* (1957), and *The Nonexistent Knight* (1959), Calvino's fantastic plots serve the deeper purpose of exploring perennial questions of how humans should live their lives. His later works, such as *Invisible Cities* (1972) and *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1979), make use of complex narrative structures to investigate the nature of reality and causality.

Theft in a Pastry Shop



hen Dritto got to the place where they were to meet, the others had already been waiting some time. There were two of them, Baby and Uora-Uora. The street was so silent that the ticking of the clocks in the houses could be heard. With two jobs to do, they'd have to hurry to get through them by dawn.

"Come on," said Dritto.

"Where to?" they asked.

But Dritto was never one to explain about any job he was going to do.

"Come on now," he replied. And he walked along in silence, through streets empty as dry rivers, with the moon following them along the tramlines, Dritto ahead, gazing around with those restless yellow eyes of his, his nostrils moving as if they were smelling something peculiar.

Baby was called that because he had a big head like a newborn baby and a stumpy body; also perhaps because of his short hair and pretty little face with its small black mustache. All muscle, he moved so softly he might have been a cat; there was no one like him at climbing up walls and squeezing through openings, and Dritto always had good reason to take him along.

"Will it be a good job, Dritto?" asked Baby.

"If we bring it off," answered Dritto—a reply that didn't mean much.

Meanwhile, by a devious route that only he knew, he had led them around a corner into a yard. The other two soon realized that they were going to work on the back of a shop, and Uora-Uora pushed ahead in case he was left as lookout. It always fell to Uora-Uora to be lookout man; he longed to break into houses, search around, and fill his pockets like the others, but he always found himself standing guard on cold streets, in danger from police patrols, his teeth chattering in the cold, and chain-smoking to calm his nerves. Uora-Uora was an emaciated Sicilian, with a sad mulatto face and wrists jutting out of his sleeves. When on a job he always dressed up in his best, God knows why, complete with hat, tie, and raincoat, and if forced to run for it, he'd snatch up the ends of his raincoat as if spreading wings.

"You're lookout, Uora-Uora," said Dritto, dilating his nostrils. Uora-Uora took off quietly; he knew Dritto and the danger signal of those dilating nostrils, which would move quicker and quicker until they suddenly stopped and he whipped out a revolver.

"There," Dritto said to Baby. He pointed to a little window high off the ground, a piece of cardboard in place of a broken pane.

"You climb up, get in, and open for me," he said. "Be sure not to put on the lights: They'll be seen from outside."

Baby pulled himself up on the smooth wall like a monkey, pushed in the cardboard without a sound, and stuck his head through. It was then that he became aware of the smell; he took a deep breath and up through his nostrils wafted an aroma of freshly baked cakes. It gave him a feeling of shy excitement, of remote tenderness, rather than of actual greed.

Oh, what a lot of cakes there must be in here, he thought. It was years since he had eaten a proper piece of cake, not since before the war perhaps. He decided to

search around till he found them. He jumped down into the darkness, kicked against a telephone, got a broomstick up his trouser leg, and then hit the ground. The smell of cakes was stronger than ever but he couldn't tell where it was coming from.

Yes, there must be a lot of cakes in here, thought Baby.

He reached out a hand, trying to feel his way in the dark, so he could reach the door and open it for Dritto. Quickly he recoiled in horror; he must be face-to-face with some animal, some soft slimy sea thing, perhaps. He stood there with his hand in the air, a hand that had suddenly become damp and sticky, as if covered with leprosy. Between the fingers had sprouted something round and soft, an excrescence, maybe a tumor. He strained his eyes in the dark but could see nothing, not even when he put his hand under his nose. But he could smell, even though he could not see; and he burst out laughing. He realized he had touched a tart and was holding a blob of cream and a crystallized cherry.

At once he began licking the hand, and groping around with the other at the same time. It touched something solid but soft, with a thin covering of fine sugar—a doughnut! Still groping, he popped the whole of it into his mouth and gave a little cry of pleasure on discovering it had jam inside. This really was the most wonderful place; whatever way he stretched out his hand in the dark, it found new kinds of cakes.

Suddenly he became aware of an impatient knocking on a door nearby; it was Dritto waiting to be let in. As Baby moved toward the sound, his hands bumped first into a meringue and then into an almond cake. He opened the door and Dritto's flashlight lit up his little face, its mustache already white with cream.

"It's full of cakes here!" exclaimed Baby, as if the other did not know.

"There isn't time for cakes," said Dritto, pushing him aside. "We've got to hurry." And he went ahead, twisting the beam of his flashlight around in the dark. Everywhere

it touched it lit up rows of shelves, and on the shelves rows of trays, and on the trays rows of cakes of every conceivable shape and color, tarts filled with cream that glittered like candle wax, piles of sugar-coated buns, and castles of almond cakes.

It was then that a terrible worry came over Baby, the worry of not having time to eat all he wanted, of being forced to make his escape before he had sampled all the different kinds of cakes, of having all this land of milk and honey at his disposal for only a few minutes in his whole life. And the more cakes he discovered, the more his anxiety increased, so that every new corner and every fresh view of the shop that was lit up by Dritto's flashlight seemed to be about to shut him off.

He flung himself at the shelves, choking himself with cakes, cramming two or three inside his mouth at a time, without even tasting them; he seemed to be battling with the cakes, as if they were threatening enemies, strange monsters besieging him, a crisp and sticky siege that he must break through by the force of his jaw. The slit halves of the big sugared buns seemed to be opening yellow throats and eyes at him, the cream horns to be blossoming like flowers of carnivorous plants; for a horrible moment Baby had the feeling that it was he who was being devoured by the cakes.

Dritto pulled him by the arm. "The till," he said. "We've got to open the till."

At the same time, as he passed, he stuffed a piece of multicolored spongecake into his mouth, a cherry off a tart and then a brioche—hurriedly, as if anxious not to be distracted from the job at hand. He had switched off his flashlight.

"From outside they could see us clearly," he said.

They had now reached the front of the pastry shop, with its showcases and marble countertops. Through the grilled shutters the lights from the streets entered in streaks; outside they could see strange shadows on the trees and houses.

Now the moment had come to force the till.

"Hold this," said Dritto, handing the flashlight to Baby with the beam pointing downward so that it could not be seen from outside.

But Baby was holding the flashlight with one hand and groping around with the other. He seized an entire plum cake and, while Dritto was busy at the lock with his tools, began chewing it as if it were a loaf of bread. But he soon tired of it and left it half eaten on the marble slab.

"Get away from there! Look what a filthy mess you're making," hissed Dritto through clenched teeth; in spite of his trade he had a strange respect for tidy work. Then he couldn't resist the temptation, either, and stuffed two cakes, the kind that were half sponge and half chocolate, into his mouth, though without interrupting his work.

Baby, meanwhile, in order to have both hands free, had constructed a kind of lampshade from tray cloths and pieces of nougat. He then espied some large cakes with "Happy Birthday" written on them. He circled them, studying the plan of attack; first he reviewed them with a finger and licked off a bit of chocolate cream, then he buried his face inside and began biting them from the middle, one by one.

But he still felt a kind of frenzy, which he did not know how to satisfy; he could not discover any way of enjoying everything completely. Now he was crouching on all fours over a table laden with tarts; he would have liked to lie down in those tarts, cover himself with them, never have to leave them. But five or ten minutes from now it would be all over; for the rest of his life pastry shops would be out of bounds to him again, forever, like when he was a child squashing his nose against the windowpane. If only, at least, he could stay there three or four hours . . .

"Dritto," he exclaimed, "suppose we hide here till dawn, who'll see us?"

"Don't be a fool," said Dritto, who had now succeeded in forcing the till and was searching around among the notes. "We've got to get out of here before the cops show up."

Just at that moment they heard a rap on the window. In the dim moonlight Uora-Uora could be seen knocking on the blind and making signs to them. The two in the shop gave a jump, but Uora-Uora motioned for them to keep calm and for Baby to come out and take his place, so that he could come in. The other two shook their fists and made faces at him and gestured for him to get away from the front of the shop if he didn't want his brains blown out.

Dritto, however, had found only a few thousand lire in the till, and was cursing and blaming Baby for not trying to help him. But Baby seemed beside himself; he was biting into doughnuts, picking at raisins, licking syrups, plastering himself all over and leaving sticky marks on the showcases and counters. He found that he no longer had any desire for cakes—in fact a feeling of nausea was beginning to creep up from the pit of his stomach—but he refused to take it seriously, he simply could not give up yet. And the doughnuts began to turn into soggy pieces of spongecake, the tarts to flypaper, the cakes to asphalt. Now he saw only the corpses of cakes lying putrefying on their marble slabs, or felt them disintegrating like turgid glue inside his stomach.

Dritto, meanwhile, was cursing and swearing at the lock on another till, forgetful of cakes and hunger. Suddenly, from the back of the shop appeared Uora-Uora, swearing in his Sicilian dialect, which was quite unintelligible to either of them.

"The cops?" they asked, already pale.

"Change of guard! Change of guard!" Uora-Uora was croaking in his dialect, trying hard to explain how unjust it was to leave him starving out in the cold while they gorged themselves with cakes inside.

"Go back and keep watch, go and keep watch!" shouted Baby angrily, the nausea from having eaten too much making him feel savage and selfish.

Dritto knew that it was only fair to Uora-Uora to make the change, but he also knew that Baby would not be

convinced so easily, and without someone on guard they couldn't stay. So he pulled out his revolver and pointed it at Uora-Uora.

"Back to your post right now, Uora-Uora," he said.

Desperately, Uora-Uora thought of getting some supplies before leaving, and gathered in his big hands a small pile of little almond cakes with nuts.

"And suppose they catch you with your hands full of cakes, you fool, what'll you tell them?" Dritto swore at him. "Leave them all there and get out."

Uora-Uora burst into tears. Baby felt he hated him. He picked up a cake with "Happy Birthday" written on it and flung it in Uora-Uora's face. Uora-Uora could easily have avoided it, but instead he extended his face to get the full force, then burst out laughing, for his face, hat, and tie were all covered in cream cake. Off he went, licking himself right up to his nose and cheeks.

At last Dritto succeeded in forcing the till and was stuffing into his pocket all the notes he could find, cursing because they stuck to his jammy fingers.

"Come on, Baby, time to go," he said.

But Baby could not leave just like that; this was a feast to be talked over for years to come with his cronies and with Tuscan Mary. Tuscan Mary was Baby's girl friend; she had long smooth legs and a face and body that were almost horselike. Baby liked her because he could curl himself up and wind around her like a cat.

Uora-Uora's second entrance interrupted the course of these thoughts. Dritto quickly pulled out his revolver, but Uora-Uora shouted, "The cops!" and rushed off, flapping the ends of his raincoat. Dritto gathered up the last few notes and was at the door in a couple of leaps, with Baby behind.

Baby was still thinking of Tuscan Mary, and it was then that he remembered he might have taken some cakes for her; he never gave her presents and she might make a scene about it. He went back, snatched up some cream rolls,

thrust them under his shirt, then, quickly realizing that he had chosen the most fragile ones, looked around for some more solid things and stuffed those into his bosom, too. At that moment he saw the shadows of policemen moving on the window, waving their arms and pointing at something at the end of the street; one of them aimed a revolver in that direction and fired.

Baby squatted down behind a counter. The shot did not seem to have hit its target; now they were making angry gestures and peering inside the shop. Shortly afterward he heard them finding the little door open, and then coming in. Now the shop was teeming with armed policemen. Baby remained crouching there, but meanwhile he found some candied fruit within arm's reach and chewed at slivers of citron and bergamot to calm his nerves.

The police had now discovered the theft and also found the remains of half-eaten cakes on the shelves. And so, distractedly, they, too, began to nibble little cakes that were lying about—taking care, though, to leave the traces of the thieves. After a few moments, becoming more enthusiastic in their search for evidence, they were all eating away heartily.

Baby was chewing, but the others were chewing even more loudly and drowned out the sound. All of a sudden he felt a thick liquid oozing up from between his skin and his shirt, and a mounting nausea from his stomach. He was so dizzy with candied fruit that it was some time before he realized that the way to the door was free. Later the police described how they had seen a monkey, its nose plastered with cream, swing across the shop, overturning trays and tarts; and how, by the time that they had recovered from their amazement and cleared the tarts from under their feet, he had escaped.

When Baby got to Tuscan Mary's and opened his shirt, he found his whole chest covered with a strange sticky paste. And they stayed till morning, he and she, lying on the bed, licking and picking at each other till they had finished the last crumb of cake and blob of cream.

QUESTIONS

1. Why was it never Dritto's way "to explain about any job he was going to do"? (229)
2. Why is Uora-Uora always made to be the lookout?
3. What accounts for Baby's first response to the smell of freshly baked cakes as "a feeling of shy excitement, of remote tenderness, rather than of actual greed"? (230)
4. Why does Baby eventually have the feeling that "it was he who was being devoured by the cakes"? (232)
5. Why does Calvino use animal similes to describe Baby and Tuscan Mary ("horselike," "like a cat")? (235)
6. Why aren't Dritto and the policemen able to resist eating the pastries, even though doing so jeopardizes their work?
7. What is the significance of the story's shift of scene from the pastry shop to Tuscan Mary's bedroom? What does it mean that Baby and Tuscan Mary lick each other clean?

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Is Baby's eventual inability to "discover any way of enjoying everything completely" a characteristic of gluttony?
2. Is gluttony an indiscriminate desire to consume food, regardless of whether the experience of eating it is enjoyable?
3. Does Baby's feeling "savage and selfish" as a result of his overconsumption of pastries suggest the dangers of gluttony?