

## Try

First thing Tanas called the dealer who had sold the bike to his father and asked to talk to the delivery man. The manager initially freaked that there were problems with the bike not being in perfect condition, but Tanas said it was a personal favor he would like to ask for and the guy put him through. Buying decent gloves would not be a problem, the man assured him, if one knew where to look for. His manager knew who Tanas was without introduction and immediately agree that such a valuable client could borrow his expert for the rest of the afternoon. The dealership was practically closing, no charge of course, he was sure Mr. Tanassov would remember the expertise when he needed any transport and the dealer would be happy to oblige. Tanas picked up the consultant who was more than surprised and drove to a place which he would have missed even if he had stumbled on their broken steps. The two bearded guys who were tending the shop welcomed him as a long lost son and went over their heads to fit him with a pair of leather gloves and a pair of short leather boots. They were outraged that he might think of ever riding a Harley without boots, and his consultant seconded wholeheartedly. It took them ages to agree on a helmet considering the oh's and ah's while the dealer's employee described the Dyna. He should come to show off at his first ride, they pleaded; it was not fair to have such a toy and not to give the others at least to touch the starter key. Of course they would wait for forty-five minutes, what was the question!

The Harley was still in the conference room nobody used. Tanas drove to the office, left the car in the garage, penned a note for Mila that he would be absent for few days, but would check his answering machine. He asked for all the dispatchers to be instructed to help his neighbor in case she called and the expense to be charged on his personal account. Tanas pinned the note with the car keys, stuffed his small amount of luggage in the Dyna's bags and left. He first did two circles in the inner parking lot to get a feel of his new iron horse and found out that he himself was not as rusty as he had thought. Cursing and balancing a bulky black bag on his lap, he rode to the bike attire store.

The three guys were sipping their beer and discussing some intricate ignition details that had not been put right by the manufacturer. The roar of a mighty machine shook them out of the store in a jiffy

'It is better than what Santa rides with his sack, but his bag is cuter!' said one of the vendors.

'Hopefully you are not going around carrying a sac, you know, spoils the image of the big bad bikers!' the second was eying the garbage bag with displeasure.

'Come on guys, you are simply jealous, and I have even pushed this beauty around!' chuckled the dealer's expert.

Tanas motioned him to come closer and handed him the black bag. 'When you delivered it, my former accountant mistook you for my father. Look, he ordered himself a full outfit but never had the chance to wear it. Would you like to have it?'

'It would cost a fortune, I can't afford it at the moment, I am sorry!'

'No, I am not selling it. If you fit in it, it is yours. It is too small for me anyway! Please try it!'

'Listen to the lad, go and change!' nodded one of the vendors.

'You better fit as he is not riding with this around, I am telling you!' ushered the other. 'Now, may I pet it?'

'If you promise to come back, I will even let you make a round.'

'You are serious?'

'He better come back as I want one round also, please!'

Tanas offered him the key. If Harley were a cat, it would have purred under the loving caress he got from the store co-owner. In few minutes he breezed back. The second guy looked at Tanas and muttered, 'What is he doing, riding a tricycle while singing a nursery rhyme? This is a Harley!'

He jumped on the still warm motorcycle and gunned it up for the entire neighborhood to hear it. The biker made a roaring circle and came back at the same time the dealer's man came out of the shop. Elvira Palikareva had not been much off base hanging on him - Tanassov's leather fit him like a glove. For the fun of it he sported a black retro helmet and even had put on the boots. He waved at them imperiously and went to change as he was melting under the heavy jacket. Tanas pulled his wallet.

'How much for the helmet?'

'Forget it; I don't have your size!'

'No, you have his!' He counted the sum, shoved it in the man's hand and jumped on the Harley. He waved at them, adjusted his helmet and rode away.

The uniform-clad man emerged from the store, 'Hey, look, this suit is the best tip I have ever had!'

'You get the helmet also, he paid for it!' said one of the vendors looking at the direction where Tanas had disappeared.

'I did not even say thank you! Is he coming back?' He was looking at two somber faces. 'What happened?'

'I don't know if he is coming back. I hope he will outrun what is following him...' said one.

'There is no such speed that will let you outrun what you carry inside you...' the other man lifted his beer bottle.

After a particular entertaining gathering of old friends - and they were really old, she chuckled - Mrs. Hlebarova came home to find a note on the inside of the door. Tanas' big letters informed that he thought of putting some distance between him and the recent events and was going to be in Vassiliko at his friend Stavros. He left his cell phone number and another one for her to call in case she needed anything. It was his round-a-clock dispatchers' line and they would take care of whatever emergency she may find herself in, the note said. The old woman felt older by a century - he was running instead of fighting and it was not right. She knew he was not a coward - that meant that he was trying to protect the girl from himself. God, the young generation never learned, but may be that was why they needed old meddlers like her. Siran went to put the note on her board and started calling.

By five she had the first set on sheets on her kitchen table. She called Raina and get Valkuda's cell from the girl who was soaking some late afternoon rays at the beach and was pliant as a jelly. Siran got Valkuda on the line in her office. With profusion of excuses she asked for a help to make a nice surprise to Tanas by putting his new sheets on while he was out. She knew Dimitar had a spare key, but it was girls' job, whenever Valkuda could be so kind to come and help the old woman. She was sorry to intrude, she knew it was so close to the marriage, but if Valkuda would have a minute, it was behind the corner.

'Any chance you do have a key of Tanas' place?' Valkuda asked Dimitar few minutes later.

'What, he called to say he had already lost his key? Did I tell you he called me to say he is not coming?'

'No, you did not. His neighbor the old lady downstairs called that his sheets were delivered but he is out of town and she wanted to put them in his apartment.'

'Will she come to pick them up?'

'No, I think it is too hot for her to run around. I will go and get them back, I need to stretch anyway. Have you packed everything we need in Brashlyan? She reminded me maybe we need to bring sheets and towels also.'

'Good idea, go get her the keys and I will do some packing', Dimitar took the keys from the safe and gave them to her. Valkuda rubbed her face and yawned.

'May be we should call it an early night if we are going to travel tomorrow instead of Tuesday?'

'We are supposed to go talk to the director of that gallery on the Central Street, remember she said Sunday night? But it is OK, I may go alone. It is going to be a professional talk only anyway. In fact, I better go, I will be back for supper, say, seven?'

Valkuda nodded and they left together.

The old woman was all smiles and thanks and offered her a glass of lemonade after the suffocating heat outside. Valkuda was seated at the kitchen table and any praise invented for a man was poured on her about Tanas. She was handed a heavy load of pristine white sheets and Mrs. Hlebarova lead her to the attic.

'See, we will put the sheets for him and he will be surprised! He is not used someone to do something for him, poor guy!' The white sheets flew like boat sails over the enormous bed. Mrs. Hlebarova expertly was pulling and pushing, while Valkuda was entrusted with the lesser task of changing pillow covers. She stopped to admire the intricate lace that graced them.

'Very fine work, indeed!' fondly said Mrs. Hlebarova. 'Is your trousseau ready, my dear? Ah, in our days a girl would never marry without her lace sheets, but then the engagements lasted a lot longer than some marriages now. What, I have still my initialed duvet bags, the same two ladies did them, I believe. It is hard to make it both beautiful and comfortable; you will not believe how comfortable they are! Just lie for a minute and try it!' the old lady patted the pillow and almost pushed Valkuda on the bed. Mrs. Hlebarova was

brimming with pride and Valkuda decided to indulge, anyway the bed's owner was nowhere to be seen and would never know if he would even notice. She lay across the bed and put her head on the fluffy pillow. The mattress sank a little but it was so comfortable and she was so tired. She should stand up, one more second, Valkuda thought dazedly.

'I think it is my phone down there, I will be back in a minute!' Mrs. Hlebarova hummed and tiptoed down the stairs. Before Siran reached the kitchen, Valkuda was fast asleep. It was a short dream, where her grandfather was telling her to try harder, as she should see, not look only, and was frowning at her, which he never did in life. Tanas was laying in the grass of a endless meadow and Smerch was eating from his hand a pale green apple the same color as the pearl on her engagement ring. Then Tanas stood up and said 'You know that you can be free any time you like. Marry me!' and she woke up with a start as the door downstairs banged. She hardly had the time to get up and straighten the sheets when Mrs. Hlebarova emerged.

'My goodness, we the old grannies should be watched over! I thought I had talked for a minute or two and look how long I kept you here! Did I tell you the lace was nice@! Look at this double "T", how beautiful it is, if it was not for the symbol that it carries. Still the girls have done such a good job to conceal the form, see how mellow it looks!'

'What symbol?' Valkuda was intrigued despite her better judgment.

'The double cross, my dear, I am talking about the double cross that these two letters represent. It is not easy to carry one cross for an ordinary man, much less the two that Tanas Tanassov granted to his grandson as a legacy. You know, of course, that Saint Francis of Assisi compared the monk's habit to the tau cross, saying that brothers are the living Crucifixes to remind them every day of the sacrifice Franciscans are expected to perform. This is the same letter "tau" that the Saint brothers Cyril and Methody transformed into our "T", so Tanas is doubly crossed, doubly burdened.

It is so sad a story, that of Saint Francis of Assisi! I am sure they don't tell it any more at school, when the Lord called for him from his cross to go and repair His house which He saw was falling into ruins. The poor man thought that God was talking about his church first and went to dispose of his earthly possessions to save the building. He understood later that it was not the money that God had in mind, it was the living things that suffered and he found the right way.

There is a lot of wisdom we are forgetting in our fast modern times, but it does not forget us. I knew your grandfather, he was one of the few who remembered the old ways and cherished them. Yet he was also one of the even less number of people who would dare to challenge these old ways. He was not met with support but he never let it stop him if he knew he was right. Great man, that is what your grandfather was. I know he would have been happy for Tanas to carry his knife, albeit he would have been happier if you gave it to him under other circumstances. But this is the whining of an old woman, I know how pressed you are and you better go see what needs to be done. Is Tanas coming to the wedding, you said?’

‘No, he told me he is not going to witness sacrifices!’ said Valkuda, and added hastily, ‘Probably because of his parents’ marriage, you know, he does not have much trust in the institution!’

‘Doesn’t he? I would not have put it past him, but I doubt. Who knows, he had had a lot going on with him recently. He needed a clear vision, that what he wrote to me. He said something about a friend he was going to in Vassiliko; I thought he was planning to get to Brashlyan from there. Ah, well, you will see. Thank you again for coming, I know your grandfather would have been very proud of you!’

Valkuda passed by the empty portmanteau and looked at her reflection. On her left cheek there was a faint trace of the double "T" from the pillow. She tried to rub it off on the way home.

‘She said Tanas went to some friend at Vassiliko, I had no idea he was going on vacation and leaving Mila to herself just as she started to do fine!’ Valkuda was trying to go through her salad with determination which was proving not to be enough for her coiled insides.

‘Oho, this should be Stavros; you remember I told you, the guy who he met at the madhouse. He did look strange but Tanas said he was absolutely normal. Sure, they were all normal there, just passing by. We drove him to the bus station and the guard was probably thinking what a job he had, sitting between two guys straight from the nuthouse. :The Stavros guy looked pretty normal I would say, if not for that crazy Mickey Mouse T-shirt he wore. He made Tanas repeat the address twice to be sure he would not forget it: Go to Vassiliko and ask for Mad Stavros, very precise instruction, I would say.’ Dimitar could not fathom what his brother had seen in the old man.

Stavros, Valkuda repeated to herself. The Greek name meant "cross". They were getting too many at one place for her liking. She thought about her grandfather’s knife and the only thing that up to now she had

considered its pure decoration. The letter "Tau". Too many crosses were not good sign. The fine hairs on her neck tinged. She was missing something, she knew it.

At the same time a tall man stopped his growling machine in front of a beaten old house overlooking a vineyard and the sea beyond. An old man came from behind the house, smiling.

'Just in time for the ouzo. Get that monster in the shed next to the pen and come to sit at the front porch!'

Tanas had to drive by the table and saw that there are two glasses there beside the pitcher with ice water and the bottle of ouzo, as well as two sets of dishes and two forks.

'Am I interrupting a visit?'

'No, this is for you. Gantcho gives me an advance notice. I had to put him in the pen until he gets used to your iron horse or it may suffer. I will introduce you later to him and his hens' harem. Don't worry, he is not jealous, nor he can fly over the fence,' Stavros was pointing at a giant cock trying to jump over the chicken wire. 'Come, the tchiros is almost done!'