

## **The Talk of the Town and the Village**

On Sunday he cut some early flowers from the garden and passed by the cemetery on the way to the monastery. The weather was turning cooler, there were few clouds above the mountain and he hiked the short path faster. Mother Ephrosinia was waiting for him at the door as the monastery had a sweeping view over the path. They sat inside the "guest room" - a big, light space from where the sea and the village were visible like on the palm of one's hand. Konstantin was surprised that she was not as old as he thought; the nun was in her late fifties to the most while the three other nuns were well into their seventies if not older. The monastery was far from the beaten path, not a tourist attraction due to the hard way to get there and the common idea in Sofia would be that it was seeing its last days. Konstantin found that hard to believe - the building looked in excellent condition, the cobblestones of the yard would carry for another millennium without repair, the roofs of the church and the main building were red clay and the wooden balconies were blackened by the time but nothing was sagging or screeching. Mother Superior chuckled as if she had read his thoughts.

'You are right, it looks nice and it is due to a very generous donation not so long ago, although not during the time I am here. The roof was redone in 1948, the wood two years later with the money from Mitzi's husband although it is not widely known. He had left us some provisions also and I wanted to ask you what you think will be the best policy with them. I was thinking to come when you were here after Christmas, but Sister Martha fell ill with a cold and you were here just for few days, I missed you then. Auntie Elka was urging me to call you or send an e-mail. But it is not an urgent question so...'

'I will be glad to help,' said Konstantin. 'Would you mind telling me how much funds are involved?'

Mother Superior did not mind. Because she was a wise woman, she had a glass of water ready when Konstantin coughed at the amount. Iossif had left the monastery a significant amount in gold as well as few antique jewels that could fetch a hefty price, and the nuns had been very prudent with the money during the decades after his death. The only expenses on the monastery books were to buy the land of the people who had left Brashlyan forever and few small interest-free loans that had been returned to the last penny. What

had left the young banker completely smitten was that the loans were given without collateral and two of them had been to Muslim families from the nearby village. He thought that the monastery had beaten the bank experts in their policy and honestly told so to Mother Superior. She clapped her hands and he added that his stay would be longer that time and if she needed more profound auditing, he would sit with her one day and go through the books together. Sister Maria came and brought them a glass of lemonade each and asked if the young man will stay for lunch. Konstantin was so surprised to be addressed as a "young man" that lost his speech for a second and Mother Ephrosinia accepted the offer for him. At the table with the elderly ladies he found himself offering to do some chores that required strength and was gratefully invited to cut grass, bring wood and other appropriate pastimes whenever he could spare an hour. As the afternoon was his for the taking, he spent it learning from Sister Anastassia the very important art of cutting grass the ecological way - with a scythe. His parents would be proud of him, he thought, he managed not to laugh one single time looking at the thin woman in black with the scythe going like a wildfire through the grass of the small monastery cemetery. The nun told him that the sisters cared for several goats and sheep, as well as a pen with lots of hens and ducks, so they made a point of preparing as much hay as they could and started it as early as the weather and their health would allow them. They cut the grass from the nearby meadow as well and the elderly lady brought him to the monastery to wash. He was caught by Sister Maria who was evidently in charge of the kitchen and no amount of efforts would convince her that he would go without some food. He was put at a table in the yard, brought a piece of homemade cheese, half a loaf of bread and a jug on fresh milk. He had earned it, she said and left him alone to tend to the stock. When she came back he was draining the last drops of his drink and swallowed his last morsel to say it had been divine.

'Nice choice of words, sonny!' chuckled the old woman before locking the heavy gates behind him.

Konstantin staggered home; he thought he was really out of form if an afternoon of scythe wielding would make him sleepy just after sunset. He struggle to stay awake to read his e-mails and was surprised by one from Dimitar. He was describing his grandfather's funeral and his father and brother's threats and Valkuda's idea to hide him somewhere for a few weeks. It would be nice to have a company, Konstantin was suddenly alert. He typed back an invitation - Brashlyan was the best place to do it, there was not a living soul

connected to Tanassovs and even the bus was once a week. The villagers knew each other and there was no chance that an intruder would come unseen if he ever found the road at all. The house was sprawling, there was food for an army and if Dimitar brought his tools he could even work to his heart content. All Dimitar had to do was to show at the bus station on Tuesday night and Konstantin would pick him up, they would ride together. An hour later the response came and it was positive. It would not be so lonely, the young man thought, he had one more day to go and on Tuesday he was going to Bourgas anyway.

Monday morning held some promise of rain but the swift wind tore the clouds and Konstantin had to water the garden all by himself, then pull the grass and the bad herbs that were trying to sneak in his gran's orderly kingdom. He went to see Father Ivan around ten and had a long discussion with him about what an able-bodied man could do to help the more feeble villagers. Several houses needed repairs after the snow storms, most of the households were finishing their wood supplies as the winter had been long and cold, same was valid for the monastery, a tractor should be hired to plow the common pasture and at least ten kilos of sweet clover seeds had to be planted there, the village cemetery needed a cut and the library would benefit from a roof check as the ice in winter had moved some of the gutters. A program was drawn, some money had been budgeted and before he knew, Konstantin was at the cemetery with a scythe in hand. When he finished the job and reported to Father Ivan, he was too tired to ask why he had been saddled with all the work. He went home to read his e-mails and the news. He answered only Dimitar's e-mail that he did not need to bring a thing except his razor and toothbrush and some sturdy jeans as he would find him a scythe at the place and went to bed to get up early enough to water the garden before the bus.

Old tin box on four wheels was what came as a inter-village transport, the driver a burly unshaven man who spent the time from Brashlyan to the main road complaining to his passengers' group of one about the abhorrent road that he was supposed to cover every week and if Konstantin had not have to hold tightly to his seat he would have nodded his agreement. The so-called bus was a proof that there is life after death, as it was impossible to wear it to that condition since the vehicle had been put to exploitation. However despite the fumes and black smoke they reached Tsarevo on schedule and the passenger asked if the

driver needed something from Bourgas, as he would be driving with him back in the evening. Well, if he had been so nice to ask and if he would not be very shy would he not bring some magazines, of that type that, you know, well, they were not sold in prim Tsarevo as it was a small town anyway. Konstantin grinned and the bus to Bourgas arrived at his feet.

Peter Popov had been dealing with the village of Brashlyan for ages and knew its properties like the palm of his own hand. He had prepared the transfer, registered the two wills and declared Konstantin the only owner of the house and the surrounding areas. Konstantin was up for another surprise. He was informed that he was the second largest landlord after the monastery and a lot of his land was bordering their land or the national park. Along the years his grandparents had bought out several neighbors up front and had the right of first refusal on several other places. He was given a key to a safe in the local bank and instructed to visit it immediately then to return after lunch.

There had been no need for the request to return, he would have run back even skipping the food. The safe contained gold and a lot more than could be expected from the lifestyle that his grandparents had always displayed. It also contained a thick notebook, more of a register of sort, and a quick perusal did not give Konstantin any idea of its contents - it contained dates of births and deaths, marriages, arrivals and departures, purchases, some comments, some stories, some homeopathic remedies, chronological at a glance, but he needed time to read more. He spent his lunch hour copying it at a local shop and returned the original to the safe before going back to Popov's office. The elder notary had let his secretary have some time off and was waiting for him with a bottle of pop and some cookies. His relaxed posture led the banker to the reasonable conclusion that Popov was well aware of the safe's content and was expecting his questions. He decided to surprise him.

'Are these the walnut cookies the local bakery is famous for - I tried to buy some, but they have ran out of stock.'

'Indeed they are, but I will give you all the remaining ones if anything remains. They are good though. Is this the only thing you want to ask me?' the notary was laughing, but Konstantin remembered a line of a novel

he could not pinpoint at the moment, that he should be sensible and not let the opportunity slip. He drew a lungful of air and asked, 'What shall I make of the contents of gran's safe?'

'Now that is a multiple choice question if I have ever heard one... I hoped that Elka would sit down with you and explain it herself, but she may have been caught off guard. You are a young man and it is hard to explain it to you as you don't believe in the same things that we took for granted, Kosta. No, not the ordinary ones like how to love your neighbors like yourself and not to kill. I am talking about the things that cannot be explained reasonably from the point of modern mankind. It will take adjustment for someone who had not been raised into it and you are not. Your grandma was a Gate Keeper; she was the one to take care of the security in Brashlyan, so to speak. It is a special place, where a lot of events are unfolding differently. Time is different from what you know. I know you are lifting your brows mentally even if the good breeding does not allow you to show it, sonny, but it will not change a thing. The sea and the grotto there are "point of entry" to use the modern term and need to be supervised. That is why one of your ancestors in the eighth century got the job. It had always been a woman since, may be because women are more flexible and would easily adapt to the ever changing requirements, or they would teach the next Gate Keeper what needed to be done. It is the first time the Gate is given in man's hands - yours. Elka did whatever she could to have a daughter, but it was not meant to be as you know. She hoped that your father would produce at least a granddaughter while she was alive and the girl would take her place. It is always the first-born girl. When it did not happen she was very upset. Then Georgi married to Lorelei and it broke her heart as your sister-in-law is not an ordinary woman either. You remember where they live, right? She is bound to the lake there and she knows it, so that crossed out Georgi as a potential provider of a Keeper. That left you and she started to move around to get you back to Brashlyan. Sofia was an "arranged marriage" as you have probably guessed by now, and Mitzi is an accomplice. Grand lady, Mitzi, I am telling you. She understands a lot more than she says. She continued what her husband started and may be she will come and talk to you also this year; it is a year to remember, Kosta.

But back to your grandma. Few years ago Elka copied all the records since time immemorial and put them together - I believe you found them in the safe. You have to sit down and read them, they will reveal a great deal to you. As you have already seen, there is serious amount of money to be managed, that is why you

were sent to study banking, just like Georgi. These are new tricks, keeping the Gate safe is an ever changing work. Elka thought that it would be an age of great distress if the Gate is to pass in man's hands and as you see she was right. Now it all had fallen on you. I know you are not happy to be saddled with this, but someone has to do the dirty job and it is yours. I hope you will not try to wiggle out of it!. It will rip a piece of the time fabric. Of course, there would be someone to patch it, God knows His job as well, but think about how many generations you will be betraying, and how many people who rely on you. Talk to Mitzi, she has something to tell you for this year, what is coming in store and why it should not be changed. So, go and read, Kosta, and try to understand it and to accept it. I am sure that you will be fine until the order is restored and the Gate is transferred back to a woman as it has to be. Talk to Mitzi, ask her how she came to be who she is, how she accepted her role and why. There are tons of stuff you have not been told and most of it is not pleasant one.

If you want to ask me something, let me know. I may come to Brashlyan soon, need to talk to Mother Superior about something. Have you met her?'

It took Konstantin few seconds to swim back to the reality. 'Yes, I did, I spent Sunday afternoon cutting grass at the monastery's cemetery and we talked before that about the finance of the place. Is there any trouble there?'

The elder notary smiled widely. 'No, not really, but I am glad you already started taking care of them and the village. It will be fine, you will see!'

It was time to meet Dimitar. The young banker put the bundle of sheets in his backpack and went to the bus station. Valkuda drove an ancient Moskvitch and delivered his friend there with only few minutes to spare. He had a backpack also and few plastic bags which indicated shopping on the road. The manager was obsessed with security issues but did agree that the remote village is the best place to hide her boss. Just before they boarded the bus to Tsarevo, Konstantin remembered the request by the driver who went to Brashlyan and run to buy the entire range of racy newspapers and magazines, surprised by their assortment. The old lady who was selling them offered him also the previous month ones half-price and he got them, coming back to the pair who politely tried not to look elsewhere.

'These are not for me, come on! I promised the driver some as they are not sold in Tsarevo.'

'You see, they are interested in real things there, not in me!' Dimitar was trying to convince Valkuda.

'That remains to be seen and be very, very careful there! It is not an ordinary place!'

The bus honked and they boarded before Konstantin had the time to ask her what she meant by that comment about the ordinary place.

The two young men sat in the yard where the evening breeze was bringing a little hint of chill and filled each other about what had happened with them since they have parted ways at Easter. Dimitar was surprised that not only his grandfather had left him a family diary and was waiting impatiently for Valkuda to forward him a new copy in exchange for the stolen one. He agreed to be a sport and share with Konstantin the work, although he had brought his carving instruments and insisted that there should be enough old fences around. Konstantin hesitated a little but decided to try his luck.

'Do you believe in fairytales like the magic rings, the gate keepers and stuff?'

'I don't know anymore,' Dimitar was trying to be diplomatic. 'Ten days ago I would have told you to go get sober, but now I am getting not so sure. Valkuda seems to believe in them though and she is otherwise overmuch sensible one, great sense of business, I don't know how the two parts exist side by side. But listen, my head is definitely scrambled from the ride here and you have done it twice in a day, that is enough to shake even the sturdiest of brains, lets get some sleep and we will see tomorrow.'

The morning was gray, with thin irritating rain and Konstantin looked at the list of repairs to find something to be done indoors. There was a barn floor to be fortified, several plumbing issues, one sagging roof and few chairs in the church. Those were the narrow benches along the walls, he thought, and his guest would have some sightseeing. He took his grandfather's tool box and whistled to Dimitar who was studying the fence with unrestrained eagerness.

'Listen, this fence has been here before Gran was born I think, so you are not touching it. But in the barn there is plenty of wood and some driftwood even, you can choose whatever you want. Now let's go and repair the church chairs.'

'Chairs... Don't you have something more exciting?'

'Choose your pick - barn floor, leaking sink or bended roof.'

'OK, you talked me into these chairs!'

Father Ivan was in the small office immediately inside the church door and welcomed them with a knowing smile. He lit the grand crystal chandeliers and the gray day stepped aside. Konstantin followed the priest to the first broken chair while Dimitar sauntered to the altar and gave a startled cry. The two men approached quickly expecting a calamity of sort. Dimitar was reverently looking at the delicate carving of the altar and then came closer to the doors, touching them lightly, as if not believing what his eyes were seeing. Konstantin had admired the beauty of the old church thousands of times, it was an incredible work, he had forgotten how breathtaking it may be to the fresh mind. Yet Dimitar's reaction was beyond the mere artistic appreciation. The sculptor turned to Father Ivan.

'Do you know who did it?'

'Yes, although it was not done for this church at the first place and you can see it does not fit precisely, it had some parts that were done later. These are the doors of an old church that were brought here after the village it was in rebelled and was destroyed. A man entered the burning church and tore the altar doors only before the building was consumed by fire and you can see the burn marks on them. He took them with him in search of safe place and brought them here, then he and his brother carved the rest of the wall that hides the inner sanctum. I think that the doors were done by someone else, as no matter how impressive the other parts are, the altar doors are magnificent beyond them. I have been here for what, twenty years now and I still think that the wine leaves change places when I turn my back, honestly. Whoever made them was a true master, had an angel on his shoulder.'

'This is a work of the Debar school, there is no doubt about it, but I could have sworn that it was made by my mentor, Mr. Debarski. It reminds me of some of his early works so much! Have you heard about him?'

'I have in fact, but I thought that the name is mere coincidence and he works in somewhat different style these days. You are most welcome to tell him about what you saw, young man.'

'You will allow me to make some photos? Please!'

'I will on condition that you promise me that they will never get into other people's hands. We have enough trouble keeping the place isolated; we don't need church robbers or worse.'

'I will, but I will need the photos developed in town anyway.'

'Not exactly, we have an old photo laboratory at the library. The equipment was left from the school when it closed but I think you will find the necessary chemicals for black and white photos. This is a condition, young man!'

'Of course! It is miraculous nobody had found it up to now!' Dimitar was jumping excitedly.

'No, it is not a miracle, it is just a well guarded secret and you are now in the omerta, as the Italians say. But I believe Mr. Debarski has the right to know, although the family names in the church registrar are not Debarski. One of the men was even buried at the monastery; he was older and died here. I will check.'

'Father, you will have ample time, I think, those chairs have a bit more work that I thought. And Dimitar's talents will not be wasted either, better than demolishing my fence.'

'What was that about the fence?'

'How about you come for a dinner and we will tell you, now while there is some light we better work.'

The days rolled by, Konstantin and Dimitar fixing the dilapidated village one board at a time. They were taking turns cooking and the unexpected change of pace made them talk at night under the stars that they had not seen in their respective cities or read under the bright light that was installed above the garden table. Dimitar was reading the copy that Valkuda had sent him to Tsarevo in Konstantin's name and his host was reading the big record book that Gran had copied for him. The companionable silence was rarely interrupted by an exclamation and they discussed their readings like two literary critics would do, but the reality was swimming further and further from them in the calmness of their nights. The people who had died before their parents were born were rising as contemporaries and the two young men were seeing that nothing was new under the sun, and that their ancestors had had the same problems of accepting the reality or the fantasy as they themselves had. Yes, they were opening the fridge and not the ice box, they were riding the bus instead of a horse cart, but that did not make much of a difference. The order had remained the same due to the selfless efforts of many, many people. Konstantin and Dimitar have visited with Mother

Superior and she told them that when she would be old enough for her age to prevent her from going to town to sell the cheese that the monastery was famous for, she would search for another, younger Mother Superior to take care of the monastery and she would step down and become an ordinary nun like Sister Maria before her and the one who preceded her. She would not cling to the position when the feeble body would no longer be useful to do what needed to be done for the monastery to survive, for the people who seek refuge there to be properly tended to. It was the cycle of the nature that dictated the understanding and the will of the man should not contradict it, as it was doomed to lose.

As Peter had predicted, it was not easy. Konstantin had been in the city for long and he thought nostalgically about the possibilities there. His grandparents had left him rich, really rich in both land and money and he could easily spend his life not working, but that was not the point. He was responsible for the village, it was not disputable, and he had to take care of it. He did not understand the medieval mechanism that was making it work, or may be it was not even medieval. The records showed that the first gate keeper was around the eighth century, even if it was only a fairytale. But the job had evolved and augmented, since the remote location could no longer provide enough protection, then the money had come. At different times different people had supported the monastery and the village, donations had been meticulously traced through time. The money had gone for repairs, bribes for the authorities to either forget the place or declare it a restricted zone, for food supplies in bad years. When it looked like the money was drying up, another donation appeared from out of the blue, without any apparent link to the place. Like Iossif, Mitzi's husband. He had poured a fortune into the monastery coffers and put another one in Elka's hands only because an anonymous woman had given birth to a baby girl at the time he was visiting the village and he had adopted Rada's mother on the spot. Odd, Konstantin thought, not one name of a donor appeared on the walls of the monastery, not a single name of a donor was engraved in the church. Usually that was the purpose of the donors, to have their names immortalized, but those people in the books never wanted to get public despite the sizes of their offerings. Brashlyan was a village of the omerta, as Father Ivan had said. It kept the names in the record books which were hardly public records. Konstantin doubted his father even had seen Gran's

diary. It was disheartening to know that he had to give up all his life for a hardly alive village at the end of road to nowhere and then few miles after the turn.

Dimitar was ecstatic - he had clicked through five rolls of film and had locked himself in the old dark room to produce a series of extraordinary good black-and-white photos which he packed and was waiting for the next Tuesday for Konstantin to go and post them from Tsarevo. He had wanted to go himself, but his manager had sent hysterical e-mails and threatened to send the security company to babysit him if he did not behave. He had made some copies of details that stroke him as extraordinary close to Stoyan's style and had repaired the throne-line chairs with genuine care to placate Father Ivan who was surprised by the time the young man could spend studying the altar. Dimitar's help about the sagging roofs and barns was not as enthusiastic, but Konstantin reminded himself that he had hosted a refugee and not a laborer. The weather was helpful and the spring dry, the roofs were redone after he had procured a truckload of new beams. He found that his popularity has a silver lining - the old ladies dropped from time to time with a meal that was prepared following recipes that the city had forgotten ages ago. The monastery thanked him for the new fence with a round of yellow cheese with some magic herbs that even the French-trained noses found irresistible, especially with Grandpa Konstantin's white wine. The sea was still unwelcoming, the water too cool to swim, but they got a healthy tan from working in the garden under the supervision of Elka's friends taking turns around to teach the two city dwellers how to arrange the tomato bushes and how to ward the slugs with vinegar.

May was almost over, Brashlyan celebrated with great pomp the day of Saint Constantine and Elena with a special liturgy but without the dance on the live coals. The village drum was taken out, brushed but not beaten and the old villagers were unhappy that another part of their world was slipping away. Dimitar received a letter from Stoyan with request for more photos. The famous woodcarver was fascinated and pledged that he would visit Brashlyan as soon as he came to Bulgaria. The visit was to be postponed because the restoration of a burnt church in the south of Greece would take more than he had planned even before he went there. There was a problem with the wood that should have been dried in a special way and

it was not, the beams were twisting and cracking and the master was angry with the sloppy work of a supplier without a conscience or as the old man said "without fear of God".

June came with unexpected heat and the sea was warming but the waves in the cove were still dangerous. Neither Dimitar nor Konstantin took swimming far into the sea as there was a kind of dead undercurrent that was showing unexpectedly and close enough to the shallows at it. On the plus side, the sea brought a lot of drift wood and Konstantin started stowing it at the barn as the house was equipped with few burners that might prove useful in winter. He did ask Diane for another three months claiming urgent repairs which was true. One of the houses that was his although an ancient grandma lived there was in dire need of new window shutters and they had to be ordered as the measurements showed that there were not two identical windows. Diana chided him that he probably wanted to spend the summer at the seaside, but as there was not much work at the moment and the bosses were going for extended vacations also, she granted his wish.