

The Trojan Tractor

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BIBA

Friso closed the menu.

“I’ll have the chicken with Brussels chicory and Bruges witbier.”

“I haven’t decided yet,” said Hero, rubbing his chin with his thumb and forefinger. Friso often did the same. It was a family trait they’d inherited from their father.

After the meal, the brothers walked to the door. The two women who had been sitting beside them left at the same time. At the cloakroom, the woman with the dark hair leaned in close to Friso. As her mouth went to his ear, he smelled her perfume and his throat clenched. She asked him the way to the nearest metro station. He replied that they were heading in that direction.

“Are you from Mexico?” he asked as they were leaving the brasserie.

“No, Bosnia,” she said. “But I grew up in Germany. People often think I’m from South America.”

“What kind of work do you do?”

“I’m a translator for the Committee of the Regions.”

Now he could hear her Slavic accent. Her voice sang inside his head like a violin sonata by Mozart. He couldn’t feel his body anymore, but his head was spinning.

She introduced herself as Biba.

“And what do you do?” she asked after he’d told her his name.

“I’m a freelancer,” he said. “I’m doing a job for the government.”

At the metro station, they exchanged telephone numbers. The women wished the brothers a pleasant evening and stepped onto the train.

That Saturday he called her. Biba invited him to a party at one of her friends’ houses. He travelled by train from Amsterdam to Brussels. The party went on until three in the afternoon of the next day. He fell asleep at one point and then woke up and started talking to Biba again.

They spent the whole weekend and the following Monday together. They talked for hours on end and played records at her house. He put on “Bring on the Night” by Sting. Biba thought the saxophone improvisation was aimless noodling, so he swapped the record for one of Led Zeppelin’s. The chemistry kicked in when “The Battle of Evermore” came on.

“Why wait until tomorrow when it could have happened yesterday?” said Biba.

He thought exactly the same. They both had some catching-up to do. It was as if they had suffered some kind of damage on their way through life.

Her name meant “white” or “purity”. There was a legend about a girl bleaching her white dress in the water of a clear lake. One day, a caravan came by. The boy who was riding at the front fell madly in love with the girl by the lake. Her name was Biba.

After German, which she hadn’t finished, she’d gone on to study philosophy. She pondered abstract problems and came up with concepts related to human development. She wanted to advance civilization by sharing ideas. In a few years’ time, she said, world history would be determined by the exchange of information. Groups in different places all over the world would form networks.

Biba was quick-witted, impatient and stubborn. She’d got those qualities from her father, she said. She challenged Friso in all sorts of ways. Intellectually, she was more than a match for him, but she didn’t flaunt it. She never humiliated him. They both sensed how far they could go. They didn’t really hurt each other. It was just a foolish game. Then, one day, he realized it must be love. With her volatile, contrary and overbearing behaviour, she made him feel and react the same way Andrea had done. That was where the similarity ended though. This woman was an intellectual, although she would rather ride her motorbike through town than meet up with the little cliques that wanted to take the world by storm.

She was an only child. Her little brother had died of an incurable illness. After his death, her parents had withdrawn from society, while she had immersed herself in life with all her energy. She deliberately, or perhaps unconsciously, sought out conflict with her father. He had different expectations of her. But Biba was just as headstrong as him and did her own thing. She was a little boyish because she wanted to live up to her father’s image, no matter how fiercely she had rebelled against him. He would rather have had a son as his firstborn. The motorbike she rode when she visited Friso in Amsterdam had been a gift from her father, and she usually wore shabby jeans and tight T-shirts or an old sweater.

Actually, she wasn’t Friso’s type at all. But he still became hooked on her. She was like a pain that seemed as if it would never go away, but as soon as it did, you missed it.