

Miro Gavran

How We Broke Our Legs

(excerpt)

www.mirogavran.com

Email: miro.gavran@zg.t-com.hr

(...)

9. Black Ranko

As I am writing this composition, I am so curious about what Jadranka is writing at this very moment in her composition.

She probably doesn't know that to present your home and your home town what is most important is to speak about people and events and not about geography.

But still, despite the competition, I shall write my composition to the very end in the same way as I started it. That is why I am continuing on, without stopping.

My sister Neda is a pretty girl, but that is a source of misfortune.

And one big piece of misfortune arose three and a half years ago, when Neda was in the third grade of high school.

Neda was an excellent student and there were no problems with her in that respect. The problem was elsewhere.

In other words, some dude called Black Ranko fell in love with Neda. I don't know what Ranko's surname was, because that "Black" was the nickname they gave him in the reformatory.

Black Ranko had a real motor-bike, like those hooligans in American movies.

Black Ranko was the most dangerous dude in Nova Gradiska and everyone was frightened of him.

Black Ranko fell in love with my sister Neda.

To make things even worse, my sister Neda fell in love with Ranko.

Nobody in this world knows how it is possible that serious and pretty girls fall in love with misfits and hooligans. Nobody knows why and no-one has ever explained it in scientific terms, but such things really do happen quite often.

When my mother found out who Neda's boyfriend was, she almost fainted and wanted to separate Neda's head from her shoulders, but she managed to control herself.

When my father found out who Neda's boyfriend was, he almost separated Neda's head and Mama's head from their shoulders, but he managed to control himself, realising that it was better to be tactful in such matters.

Then one day while Neda was at school, my father called a meeting of all the members of our family, including me, who was almost seven at the time, and my brother Drago.

At that meeting, Dad informed all present of the fact that Neda had found a boyfriend and that the boyfriend had spent two years in a reformatory. And in the end he said:

-There now, that is how things stand. This crazy affair should be made impossible and brought to an end, but I just don't know how to do it. I thought that Neda should be beaten with a belt, but I was afraid of making things worse, and that my daughter might run away from home into the arms of this hooligan. That is why I have called this meeting, and that is why I am asking all of you to help me with your advice on how to return Neda to the straight and narrow.

Grandpa coughed and was the first to speak:

-My son, I think that when such things happen it is better for the mother to talk with the girl, and not the father. In such situations I think daughters have more faith in their mothers than in their fathers. That's why Maria should have a talk with her in an indirect way, but so that it is still clear what they are talking about.

To that, Mama said:

-Well, I must admit that I decided on my own to do something like that, to talk about with her indirectly, but she told me with no beating about the bush that she loved him and that he was a wonderful, lovely boy. As far as I can see, she regards this as something serious which has a long-term perspective.

-If that's the case, then the situation is very difficult. What do you have to say about all this, Simon? - Grandpa asked my uncle.

My uncle, who was very sparing with words, was put in a position when he had to give his opinion, and he gave it very briefly.

-I think that the best thing is to let time take its course and the problem will solve itself. If we try to solve it, we could make it all much more complicated. But if the conclusion to this meeting should be otherwise, and if I should be expected to help in any way in saving Neda, I am here for you and shall help as much as I can.

-I am afraid just to let things ride, when I don't know what's happening. I am afraid just to sit here and wait - said Dad.

-I'm afraid, too, - said Mama.

Then everyone fell silent and that's the way they stayed for five long minutes, trying like mad to think of something which would help to solve this problem.

After a long silence, Dad spoke up again:

-As far as I can see, we can't talk with Neda, nor can we influence her to change her opinions, so that means that the key to solving the problem lies in that Black Ranko.

There was another silence, but shorter this time, and then Grandpa spoke up.

-Peter, I think you are right. It's a well-known fact that people who are engaged in criminal activities all have the same weakness - and that is money. For people without character and morals, money is all that is sacred. They are prepared to do anything for money.

-I think I understand - said Dad. - You think that we should bribe Black Ranko to leave our Neda alone.

-Exactly - said Grandpa.

-But which one of us should approach him and offer him money? - asked Dad.

-Well, I think it should be someone of the female gender, because such people are very rough talking to men, but they don't dare to be like that with women - said Grandpa knowingly.

-That means that I should be the one to do it? - said Mama.

-Yes, you - said Grandpa.

-I could do it, he won't do anything to me because I am still a child - said my brother Drago.

-No, that's out of the question, even though it's a good idea, but when a lot of money is involved, and we will have to offer a lot of money, then the negotiations have to be conducted by adults because we have to demand a receipt for the money, if he agrees to the deal - said Dad.

So Mama was chosen as our delegate to speak with Black Ranko and to offer him a lot of money if he would promise to break up with Neda.

With a heavy heart, Mama went to Nova Gradiska to meet the gangster, and she had a lot of trouble until she found Black Ranko in a tavern and made our proposal to him.

When Black Ranko heard what Mama was suggesting, he started laughing as if ten people were tickling his tummy, and then he made fun of my mother and mocked her, because he turned down her offer and said:

-My dear Madame, you are mistaken if you believe that everything in this world can be bought with money. I am fond of your daughter and do not intend to look for another girlfriend.

Mama returned home like a cat who had been caught in a downpour.

And Dad called another family meeting.

Mama delivered her report.

A fruitless discussion then took place with Mama and Grandpa blaming each other for the failure of the mission.

And then Uncle Simon took the floor:

-I have an idea.

-Tell us what it is - said Dad.

-I'll tell you, slowly. We used the wrong tactics with Black Ranko, because those people have their pride, too. But all those punks and dudes are afraid of one ordinary everyday event in human life. They are afraid of marriage. We have to let him know that we expect him to marry Neda, and I guarantee that he will take to his heels the very same day.

-You are quite mad - said Dad.

-No, I'm not. Just think about it - said Uncle Simon.

There was a silence and everyone thought like mad. I could swear that at that moment I could hear the buzzing of their brains. It was so quiet otherwise. Grandpa was the first to speak:

-It's seems to be a wise idea.

-I think so too - confirmed Mama.

-But who should speak to him about it? Who should be the one to tell him that we expect him to marry Neda? - asked Dad.

-Only you can do it. It's worst of all when it comes from the girl's father. To bachelors, that's a real indication of an emergency situation - said Uncle Simon.

-Good, then I'll do it - said Dad.

And so it was, Dad went to Nova Gradiska, found Black Ranko in a tavern and told him that he expected him to marry his daughter Neda as soon as possible, that there had been enough messing around and that she was a serious girl who needed a warm home, and that she and her parents expected him to propose within a month at the outside.

While Dad was talking, Black Ranko could hardly catch his breath. Suddenly he said:

-Excuse me, please, I have to go to the bathroom for a moment.

-Alright - said Dad.

The men's room was out in the garden.

A moment later Dad head someone outside firing up a motorbike. He looked through the window and saw Black Ranko fleeing on his motorbike as if all the demons of hell were after him.

Black Ranko ran away from Nova Gradiska, and did not appear there again for the next six months.

And when he did come back, he avoided my sister the way the Devil avoids the Cross.

So that's how we saved my sister from the jaws of a dangerous hooligan, and how we saved a member of our family who was in grave danger.

Don't you just love happy endings!

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