

## **THE OLD WOMAN**

**by Velina Minkoff**

translated from the Bulgarian by Velina Minkoff

I worked as a mover for a small, privately-owned company with my friend Ivan during the summer after we graduated from high school. Moving people out of and into residences had turned out to be not only a profitable, but also an enjoyable summer pastime. After two months, we were really getting into the swing of it. In the wave of thriving capitalism in Bulgaria, more people were able to afford to live in downtown Sofia, selling or renting out their apartments in the gray concrete suburbs to young families, foreign students and people from all over the country, who seemed to be flocking to the capital city more than ever before.

It was really nice of George, the owner of the moving company, to hire us with brand new driving licenses and no experience. He was an acquaintance of Ivan's father, who had asked George to take us on to keep Ivan and me out of trouble, as well as to help us earn pocket-money for life in Sofia, which was getting more expensive by the minute. With the new clothes and music shops opening up every day all over town, as if trying to keep up with the even larger number of fast-food places, coffeehouses and clubs that multiplied nightly, there were so many things we needed to get, so many places we had to go. Most of our friends were working odd jobs as well, so we knew we were doing the right thing, earning our lifestyles and independence. We were making more money than ever before in our lives, and, so far, George had presented himself as an agreeable, even amusing character. He gave us unlimited use of the truck we drove people's belongings across town in, and it's really cool giving our friends rides home in the big, old Soviet ZIL-130 after a night out dancing or shooting pool. Ivan admired the vehicle because it was the closest thing in Bulgaria to an American pick-up truck; I, on the other hand, liked its rough, unornamented design. It wasn't in very good shape – a true remnant of the communist era.

We're very different, me and Ivan. Girls can never tell which one of us they like more. I have dark-brown, almost black hair, which is really curly so Ivan insisted I grow it out ear-length. Otherwise, he said, it looks like an Afro. My eyes are also very dark, and I'm wearing contact lenses now because Ivan claims that when I wear glasses I look like a wonk.

Ivan, in contrast, has ash-blonde hair, which he wears slicked back James Dean style, and bright green eyes. He wants to be a musician and looks are really important to him.

During the past year, he began going out to clubs a lot, usually making me go with him, which I didn't mind at all, even though I prefer to stay home and read. Ivan makes friends easily, people laugh at his jokes and all I have to do is hang around, throw in a clever comment. We've been inseparable since our freshman year.

The amount of physical labor involved in moving furniture was helping us build muscles, and we showed off our broad chests to George every now and then at the office. He would say that he owned the only "stink-free" gym in the country under the code name Mercury Movers. We felt grown-up around George because of his open sense of humor; he never worried about being pompously polite to anyone about anything. We could swear as much as we wanted, it made work cool and fun.

Besides, some of the people we'd moved were very nice and generous. An elderly gentleman gave us a sack full of old military hats, belts, gloves, unaware most probably that they were now classic socialist collectors' items. A widowed housewife was more than happy to get rid of her late husband's vinyl collection, and there was the businessman with the black leather briefcase and the cell phone who gave us each a crisp new 1000 leva note.

"My dad keeps saying how we should be thankful to be having such a wild time, that when he finished high school things were very different," Ivan was telling me one day on our way home from a moving job, the canvas-covered back of the empty ZIL jangling behind us as he drove down an uneven cobbled street. He was flicking the ashes of his cigarette out of the window, his right arm stretched out towards the steering wheel. Both of us had been in elementary school when the communist system had been overthrown, thus much too young to understand what was really going on. During the past year, I had developed an interest towards Bulgaria's not-so-distant past after seeing re-runs of some old Bulgarian films on television, and I was constantly comparing new things I learned about life then with the things we saw around us now. Several new books had come out on the subject of the changes in Bulgaria, I was reading two of them simultaneously and Ivan wouldn't stop making fun of me.

"They were all brainwashed, Vladimir. Imagine not being allowed to wear blue jeans in public or getting arrested if you were caught smoking before you were eighteen," Ivan said. "Then you see the way the kids in *Rebel Without a Cause* lived in fifties America... And over here, with their hideous school uniforms and communist march songs...!"

Ivan's main interests revolved around music and fashion, American style, and he insisted we both go out to jobs wearing black leather boots and belts over our stonewashed, second-hand Levi's, and clean white T-shirts we would take off while moving furniture so as not to get them dirty, as well as to expose our broad, masculine chests. An image modeled after the 1950's American urban cowboy on the posters in the new Levi's shop in Sofia. To tell the truth, I was beginning to like our newly adopted, harsh, Brando-like attitude and behavior. Ivan was saving part of his salary for an electric guitar to substitute the old acoustic one he had so that, he claimed, he could finally start playing real rock'n'roll.

"Don't you feel sorry for all those people sometimes though, I mean our grandparents, our parents, they were all part of that horrible time and they had no choice," I went on as I lit a cigarette, my feet on the dashboard.

"Cut the philosophy and I'll pick you up at nine," Ivan announced as he brought the truck to a screeching halt outside of my building.

"Where're we going at nine?"

"Out, Vladimir," Ivan grinned. "Night-clubbing."

"Nine it is, then," I grinned back, slamming the door shut.

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"George called," Ivan said later that evening, as we drove into the city center, our hair still damp from showering, the scent of the latest men's fragrance by Calvin Klein hovering in the air of the ZIL's spacious cabin. "We're supposed to "transport our muscles down to Lulin" tomorrow and get the "garbage" of a "deaf old hag."

"Yeah," I laughed. "That sounds like something the boss would say."

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The following morning, we were balancing plastic espresso cups on the dashboard of the truck and chain-smoking in an attempt to shake off the sleepiness. We drove in silence through the center of town, past the club where we had been dancing until just a few hours ago. I was behind the wheel, and I honked at some friends of ours who had gone from the club to the coffeehouse next door. Their faces were pale in the early light, some of them sitting

around the tables, others on the sidewalk.

We were on our way to Lulin, a suburb of Sofia built in the early seventies. It was a concrete jungle of identical rectangular high-rise apartment buildings, divided into several “micro-regions,” as they were called. Every building looked like previous and the following one; with the only difference between them being the huge numbers, hand-painted in black, on the crumbling gray plaster of the facades. So naturally, when we got there, it took us quite a while to find the building we were looking for.

No flowers grew in the little fenced lawns out in front. They were covered with trash and dog muck, and homeless mutts were lounging about them, enjoying the morning sunshine. We parked the ZIL and entered the graffiti-decorated foyer, holding our breath so as not to inhale the odor of filth and urine while waiting for the elevator. Ivan laughed as he pointed to the blackened wooden mailboxes, survivors of a pyromaniac’s effort to set the building ablaze.

“Iron Maiden,” I read from the door of the lift. “All cops are bastards; Red Hot Chili Peppers,” I continued from the inside as the elevator car creaked its way up. “Kill the dogs before they eat us; Down with Communism; Metallica.”

“They forgot to write “Drink and Drive,” Ivan was snickering.

“Welcome to the Bulgarian ghetto,” I announced and pushed the door open when we reached the tenth floor.

The name we were looking for, Margarita Dimitrova, was written in sophisticated handwriting on a piece of paper taped to the door. Ivan rang the doorbell and we waited. No answer, he rang again. We could hear voices coming from inside, but nobody answered until Ivan pressed the doorbell into a piercing, incessant buzz and I started knocking a speedy rhythm against the door with my knuckles.

“Rock’n’roll,” I whispered.

“Who’s there?” the voice belonged to a white-haired dumpling of an old woman, peering at us from behind at least three security chains that stretched with a clank, preventing the door from opening any further.

“We’re the movers,” I bent down from the waist in an involuntary attempt to make eye contact. “Mercury Movers, you called to have your things driven away?”

The door slammed in my face, almost catching my nose in it. A moment later she opened it again, completely this time. She was mumbling something to herself as she walked back into the apartment. We took that as an invitation and followed her. It wasn’t easy. The corridor was full of cardboard boxes, newspapers, plastic bags full of empty yogurt containers, and old plastic bottles full of what looked like water. The old woman’s broad hips rocked to and fro, threatening to knock over the piles. She was stout and short, very short indeed. But her legs were even shorter. A painful sight, swollen to the size of columns from an ancient Greek temple, purple-red streaks criss-crossing them all over. The paling royal blue shirtdress she had on stretched tightly around her thighs, barely covering her knees. It was the dress of a factory worker. Her thinning snow-white tresses fell below her shoulders, shedding wavy white hairs down her pale royal blue back.

We kept going, cautiously, until we got to the only room in the place.

“And we thought the corridor was crammed,” Ivan whispered to me.

The room had piles that reached almost to the ceiling. Piles of everything imaginable: boxes, newspapers, clothes, books, pots, pans. The smell of old mothballs almost choked us. Several makeshift paths spread out into the piles, and the woman disappeared down one of them. I had never, and I’m sure Ivan hadn’t either, seen so many things crammed into such a small space, and after the initial shock we sustained, my friend asked:

“Where would you like us to start, Ms. Dimitrova?” She hadn’t stopped mumbling, and now we assumed she was answering the question. We strained our ears to hear. She was over in the other end, behind a wall of wooden crates, more boxes and what looked like rugs and winter coats layered evenly on top of each other.

“He gave me that medicine, everybody said he was a good doctor, he had never seen such a swelling. I can hardly walk, I told him, no shoes fit me anymore. Now I can’t eat a thing, and my ears are ringing,” she obviously hadn’t heard Ivan.

“Remember George said she was deaf, I thought he was just badmouthing, but maybe it’s true,” I whispered to Ivan. I then turned into the isle where she had busied herself putting empty jars in a box, and asked, “Ms. Dimitrova, where would you like us to start?”

She shrieked. “You scared me, boy! How did you get in here! Are you a thief? If you want to move things, then stop nosing about my personal belongings. Everything is ready. And don’t touch these jars, you might break them.”

I turned to Ivan in disbelief; he was shaking his head.

“She’s the craziest we’ve encountered so far,” Ivan spoke quietly. “Let’s just start getting things out of here and into the elevator.”

The bloated, pinkish face of the old woman glared at us from behind a plastic kitchen counter. Her skin was oily and wrinkled; her eyes were the size of peas, jet-black.

“Make sure you wash your hands before you touch anything there, you two, everything’s brand new,” Ms. Dimitrova warned. “There’s water in the plastic bottles outside in the corridor, I go downstairs to the neighbors to fill them up. My neighbors aren’t very nice so don’t use it all up.”

“Is something wrong with the tap?” Ivan asked with mock concern.

“Water doesn’t always go up to the tenth floor, silly boy. The taps haven’t been working properly for a long time,” she snapped.

She obviously hadn’t packed anything, but we saw it was useless to argue, so we started carrying things out, piece by piece. Everything was covered in dust and grime. There were newspapers and magazines from the fifties, sixties and seventies, which probably hadn’t been moved since the eighties, cockroaches living comfortably among them until the two of us ruthlessly disturbed their existence. We gritted our teeth as the grotesque insects ran about. Then Ivan dropped a roll of about ten identical glossy posters with photos of tractors and factories under the caption *30 Years Communist Bulgaria 1944 – 1974* and a medium-sized rat scrambled out of it, sending chills down our spines. Most of the boxes contained unopened packages of rice, finely ground Cuban coffee and sugar; the wooden crates were full of dark-green glass bottles of sunflower oil with Soviet labels. A couple of them had cracked and were almost empty, the oil drenching all the clothes, rugs and newspapers around it.

“I wonder where the hag keeps her furniture,” Ivan whispered to me, on his way out with some more boxes. We figured there was no point in trying to talk to the old woman, she was ugly, deaf, mad and unpleasant. Her mumbling continued, she was talking to herself. We

didn't really even listen, just exchanged glances and snickered when she said things like:

“What a mess, and I had everything so clean and tidy.”

Later on, she took to singing. She sang as she walked about, looking busy. Ivan made faces and mimed slow dance moves, while I laughed as silently as possible and listened. She sang a song about the brave partisans, returning to their hometowns after the victorious revolution, a young girl embracing her beloved, adorning his chest with a wreath of red flowers.

The day dragged on, but the old woman's apartment looked as if it hadn't had anything moved out of it. The more we moved, the more it seemed we had to move.

“Come over here a minute, look at what I found,” Ivan called to me from the other end of the room. I walked over and took a small photograph from his extended hand. We both stared into the picture. It couldn't be, although it most certainly was, Margarita Dimitrova, photographed alongside a ZIL like the one we drove, only on the canvassing were hand-painted the words, “Let's Build a New Communist Bulgaria!” There were about twenty others, probably the same age as her, the men with white vests and gleaming muscles, and the women with tight white shirts and knee-length trousers. The men were handsome, the women beautiful. They all looked like they could be on a Levi's poster. They were young, smiling with an open enthusiasm.

But the shocking thing about the photo was Margarita. She was, without a doubt, the most beautiful of all the women. Petite, elegant, with dark, wavy tresses outlining the delicate features of her face.

“It's her,” Ivan said.

“Yes, it is...” I replied quietly.