

## **An Abandoned Harley in Reno**

He reluctantly pulled the covers back, sat up, put his feet on the floor, and looked for his glasses. Across the room, he could hear his wife doing something with the coffee brewer. She walked to the window and pulled back the curtains, complaining that she needed more light, then went to the bathroom to get water for the coffee brewer. When daylight entered the room, he saw, but ignored, his glasses on a bedside table. He didn't need glasses to see they were in Reno. He briefly considered pulling the covers back and putting his head on the pillow. He felt numb.

This was the seventh hotel in as many days, but he could not recall the name. The road trip started in Seattle on a rainy day in May, with no plan for where to go next or when they needed to arrive. The trip was their first vacation without children. It was intended to celebrate the sale of their bookkeeping business, which they had operated together for twenty years. The truth was that he had disengaged from the business years ago. His wife ran the business, and he reluctantly re-engaged simply to get the sale transaction completed. She was also the SUV driver on this southward journey because he was not feeling up to the task, had no energy, and wanted to sleep as much as possible.

"Where are we?" he mumbled as he stretched and rubbed sleep out of his eyes.

"The Eldorado Hotel in Reno," she replied as she poured water into the coffee brewer.

Something didn't feel right as he stretched his arms above his head. He looked down at the pajamas he had worn every night since they left Seattle and saw a black leather vest over his pajama top.

"What are you wearing?" his wife demanded when she turned from the coffee brewer.

"Frank, what is that vest doing on you?" she asked as she walked to her husband.

Frank shook his head, stared at the vest he knew he didn't own, and ignored his wife's questions. Sometimes, he felt overwhelmed by questions or demands for immediate decisions. Doctors said he was in good health for a slightly overweight man in his 50s, but after deeper discussion gave him a prescription for depression, which didn't seem to be working at present.

"Did you leave the room last night?" she asked with a note of accusation.

“Of course not,” he said, still looking at the vest and noticing for the first time there were red and yellow patches on the front, which he could not read because they were upside down from his perspective.

“Then explain where it came from,” she demanded as she stood before her accused husband, who was now fully awake.

Frank straightened his back, slowly rubbed both hands down the front of the vest, pulled the bottom panels together at his waist, and admired the oversized brass zipper pull. His wife watched as he pulled the two parts of the zipper together.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m seeing if it fits,” he replied, moving the zipper to mid-chest. “What do the patches say?”

“It’s a motorcycle vest! What do you think they say?” she exclaimed with exasperation. “Did you find it in the room?” she continued interrogating.

“Look at the pockets,” he deflected, moving one of the horizontal zippers on an upper pocket.

“Frank, look at me,” she demanded, waiting for his compliance. “Where did you get that thing?” she asked again.

“I didn’t get it anywhere,” he replied as he stood up. “How does it look on me?”

“You are not answering my questions, Frank.”

Frank walked over to a mirror mounted behind the silent coffee brewer and admired the vest. “Frank, the vest belongs to somebody else; there are labels on the back,” she insisted, pointing at the back panel.

“Let me guess,” he said, looking at her in the mirror. “It says Harley-Davidson and mentions motorcycles. Am I right?”

“Take that thing off,” she advised.

“Where is the coffee?”

“The brewer won’t turn on,” she explained.

After fumbling with the rocker switch on the coffee brewer without success, Frank went to the closet, found his chino pants, and held them up below the black vest. “No, blue jeans or nothing,” he concluded.

“Where are you going?”

“To get coffee in the lobby,” Frank replied as he pulled on his blue jeans and transferred his wallet and cell phone to the pockets. “The Cole Haan sneakers are an interesting touch. I need black leather boots,” he mumbled to himself as he tied the sneakers.

Frank partially listened to his wife’s protests, cautions, and insistence that he take the vest off while he admired the patches in the mirror. A patch below the pocket zipper read ‘Candyman.’ A gold pin below the pocket on the other side read, ‘Sturgis 2018.’ The most prominent patch was a Lone Star with ‘U.S. Army Ranger’ on top, and ‘Afghanistan’ below.

“Take that thing down to the concierge and let them deal with it,” his wife insisted.

She was still giving instructions when Frank left the room, wearing the leather vest. He marched off the elevator into the busy hotel lobby and commenced an aggressive search for coffee. A man wearing a black vest and black boots glanced at Frank’s vest and waved a thumbs-up. Belatedly Frank returned the gesture. A man wearing a black leather vest gave Frank a fist bump and kept walking. Another man said, “Hooyah,” as he passed by.

Frank strode to a coffee shop just off the main lobby, thinking he would order coffee to go. He heard somebody say ‘Hooyah,’ but he couldn’t tell if it was directed his way. As he approached the hostess, she welcomed him and pointed to a breakfast buffet, saying, “For club members.”

“Club members?” Frank repeated cautiously, eyeing several black-vested bikers eating breakfast near the buffet.

“Aren’t you part of the club?” she asked. “You need a wristband to get into the buffet all four days of the rally. Where is your wristband?” she asked as she looked at his arms.

“I don’t have a wristband. I’m not, . . .” Frank started to explain.

“There it is,” she interrupted, pointing to a side pocket of the vest. She pulled out the orange plastic wristband and told him to hold out his arm. “They should have put this on when you checked in at registration for the convention. Is your wife with you? The orange means a guest is included in the buffet,” she explained.

Frank walked toward the buffet, receiving nods and more fist bumps. One biker said, “Rangers lead the way,” and looked at Frank as though he expected a response. Despite the Cole Haan sneakers, Frank thought that not shaving for the past two days enhanced his new persona.

He sat in a booth, pulled out his cell phone, and called his wife as a waitress poured coffee. While waiting for the phone to ring, he noticed a sign across the lobby welcoming guests to the Street Vibrations Motorcycle Rally, surrounded by a list of club and corporate sponsors. “Come down to the coffee shop; we have a free breakfast buffet,” he said when she answered the phone.

“What are you talking about?” she demanded.

“Come on down and I’ll explain,” he replied, then listened as she suggested what a professional bookkeeper should do with lost property. “Okay, you are right, but somebody has to eat the food. I’ll see you in a few minutes,” he said and hung up.

“I have a booth at the back,” he said when his wife arrived and led the way through the tables. Frank was greeted with fist bumps and ‘Hooyahs’ from several bikers as he showed his wife the buffet and handed her a plate. With plates loaded, they sat down facing each other, and Frank could see his wife did not appreciate the bikers’ comradery.

“Frank, they think you are a biker,” she whispered as she cut a slice of cantaloupe. She said nothing more while the waitress came over and poured coffee for the biker and biker mama. “You don’t own a motorcycle, don’t even have a DOL endorsement to drive a motorcycle, and don’t belong to a biker club. They will figure you out, and it won’t be pretty. These guys are not smiling,” she observed.

“A DOL endorsement is not that hard to get, and at least I was in the Army and know what Army Rangers are,” Frank protested with a hint of optimism.

The couple ate breakfast as people started to leave the coffee shop and bikers gathered in the lobby. “There go my people,” Frank said as he finished his coffee.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” she said with a note of accusation.

Frank stood up and started going through the vest pockets, “I wonder what else we can find,” he said.

“More trouble,” his wife suggested.

He pulled a key attached to an H-D fob from the right front pocket and held it up for inspection. "Do you think the fob locks the doors?" Frank asked with a chuckle.

"That is enough," his wife demanded. "Take the vest and key to the hotel concierge right now, or I'll do it for you!"

"I'm going to check out my Hog. Breakfast is on me," he replied, holding up the orange wristband as he walked away.

Carrying the key and H-D fob, Frank followed a group of bikers moving toward the hotel parking lot, where the group joined a larger crowd of bikers warming up their machines, talking, smoking, and organizing equipment. He heard people talking about the rally and concluded they were meeting at a park on the Truckee River. There had to be over two hundred bikes, mostly black Harley-Davidsons, and Frank had no idea how to match the key to any specific bike. He watched the primarily male crowd put on helmets, and riding gloves, slowly forming groups in line to enter the street. Occasionally he would stand at the edge of the parking lot and pretend to be waiting on somebody. When all but a few bikers had cleared the parking lot, he figured one of the few remaining bikes had to match the key, so he wandered among the abandoned machines, unsure what to do next. He didn't even know how to start a motorcycle, and watching the veterans start their bikes convinced him this was not a sport for amateurs.

From the fourteenth-floor hotel window, Frank's wife watched her helmetless husband walk among the dozens of bikers, looking like a man who wanted to join the party but knew he was not invited. Even from the hotel tower, the sound of the bikes warming up was exhilarating. She couldn't see his face, but his body language told her Frank enjoyed the sound of thunder and the energy. She stopped watching when only a few bikes were left, knowing he would not get on the bike, even if he found one that matched the key.

"I found your phone number printed on the key fob," Frank said to the man who answered the cell phone. He explained that he was at the Eldorado Hotel and had the man's vest and key.

The man thanked Frank for calling and confirmed that he was "Candyman." Three days earlier, he had been in Reno for the Street Vibrations Motorcycle Rally, staying in the same room Frank was in now. He told Frank he was at home in Houston. Frank explained to the man that he had identified his bike in the parking lot.

"How could you tell which Harley was mine?" he asked.

“When the bikers went to the rally few bikes were left, and only one had a Texas license plate,” Frank explained. He hesitated and then asked the man why he had left his vest and bike in Reno.

“I meant to leave the bike, but I suppose leaving the vest was carelessness caused by pressure. My wife called to tell me our oldest son was injured at work and taken to the emergency room. It was a two-day ride to get home, so I took the next flight out of Reno,” he explained.

Frank didn’t want to ask more than the man wanted to share, “I’m sorry. I think that explains why things got left behind. Is there anything I can do at this end? Do you want me to send the vest to you?”

“No, maybe I’ll come back for them after the funeral,” he replied, and then there was silence. After an uncomfortable wait, the man said, “I don’t know if I even want that stuff. We are in a time of transition, and some things are not important anymore. As it says, ‘There is a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn, and a time to dance.’ We aren’t dancing right now.”

Frank waited a few moments, then expressed condolences to the man, got contact information, and said he would find a way to deal with the vest.

He slowly walked back to the hotel elevators. When he got to the room, he asked, “How about taking our road trip in a different direction? Call it a transition.”

“What direction do you want to go?” she asked, noting that Frank was pensive, but not depressed.

“I think we need to see an Army Ranger in Houston.”

“Are we taking the vest?” she asked.

Frank took the vest off and said, ‘Yes, the vest goes with us, and we leave in the morning. I’ll do the driving. Rangers lead the way.’”