**Život**

Michael Pikna

Dorothy descended the steps of her trailer, using her cane, clutching her scotch plaid robe together at the neck despite the warm summer air. Freddy, her sixteen-year-old gray tabby, sovereign of the wooded lot her trailer sat on, lay dead a few feet away, his fur matted with drying blood. Only a few minutes ago he had been alive and lurking around the bird feeder, his tail swishing with blood lust. She had wanted Freddy to go before she did. But not like this. He had deserved better.

She went inside and dressed, then walked to the basement house built into the land sloping up to the road. The young immigrant couple could not yet afford to build the rest of it. In winter, when snow blanketed the flat roof, there was little to infer a dwelling but for the smoke from the furnace, making it seem as though they lived underground. She made her way down the drive to the left of the basement, past a chicken coop shaded by tall oaks. No sign of the dog. As she came around back, she waggled her cane, dispersing a few snow geese guarding the door. She knocked using knuckles enflamed with arthritis and grievance.

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At the sound of the authoritative rapping, Matthew turned off the small black and white TV—he was not supposed to be watching it. He had also been told not to answer the door. Using the stove was another no-no, yet he routinely raided the chicken coop and fried eggs for lunch, feeding the sandwich his mother had made the night before to his dog and the chickens (a fair trade). The rules for being alone were for his own good, he had been told. He was afraid of getting caught and punished, but he was even more afraid, in a way he couldn’t explain, of never getting caught.

He opened the door to the tall figure of the old lady who lived up the road, her lips set in a line that dared crossing.

“Oh, hello Mrs. Loughlin. My—”

“Your dog”—she slammed the tip of her cane down—“killed my cat!”

Her words charged the morning air between them, swelling her dandelion nimbus of white hair and electrifying her cornflower blue eyes; seizing Matthew with the memory of the conversation between his father and the township constable over complaints of their dog running down deer and nipping at the heels of neighboring cows.

Matthew stared at her openmouthed.

“Where are your folks?” Dorothy deemed the effort to recall the boy’s name an impertinence on his part.

“They’re at work.”

Dorothy’s heart sank. The boy could not be more than ten, and here he was alone. Slumping, she lost and inch or two in stature.

“Well then. Come with me, dear. We have work to do.”

Matthew considered briefly the most important rule, which his father had prioritized by bending to Matthew’s height and delivering it in a portentous hush—You do not leave our property—but defiance, gaining momentum from rules already broken and lacking resistance in the frictionless air of his own say-so, propelled him out the door.

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The long-handled spade was taller than Mathew by half again, yet he managed it well, jumping nimbly on top of the blade with both feet. He laid Freddy in the grave and filled it in after a nod from Mrs. Loughlin. They stood on the periphery of a small field adjacent to her land, Matthew leaning on the shovel, sweating lightly in the humid air. But for the nattering of Blue Jays and Northern Flickers, it was quiet, too early for the midday drone of insects. Across the field, at the threshold of discernment between the dusky woods and the open field, sat the dog.

“What is your dog’s name?”

Matthew tracked her gaze, willed his dog to stay put.

“My mom named him Život. In Czech, it means life.” Matthew’s subsequent shrug conveyed as much irony as a ten-year-old can shoulder. He looked down and added, “When my dad finds out, he’ll take him into the woods.”

Dorothy nodded. The dog’s life for Freddy’s—it had old testament appeal.

She walked away and sat in a rusted garden chair, her eyes drawn to the small garden she had managed to plant in the spring. She no longer had the strength to pull the bindweed and crabgrass that were choking the life from it.

Matthew followed her. He had kept his father company when he hunted in the neighboring woods, recoiling at the sight of the deer’s legs buckling. With a sense of displacement, he had witnessed his mother slaughter rabbits and chickens and geese. He could not reconcile the love of his parents with the bare carcasses, the slippery coils spilling out onto newspapers; could not separate sentiment from the business of life.

“He’s not a bad dog,” Matthew said, standing in front of her. “Just a little wild. He doesn’t know better.” He held his hands out, palms up, the budding supplicant.

Dorothy leaned forward, taking both of his hands in hers. It had scared her when Život came for Freddie, but what had scared her more was the way the old tomcat seemed to give himself up, as if he’d known it was his time. Holding Matthew’s hands made her feel less transitory. His hands were warm and moist and they gripped hers fearlessly.

“Come see me tomorrow, won’t you?” she said. “I need help with the garden. You can bring Život with you.”

“Really?”

Dorothy nodded. “Let’s see if we can’t civilize him.”

Matthew smiled, then broke away.

Dorothy watched him run through the field with Život, both of them as young as the moment. They knew no authority but that of their senses and no purpose aside from their own presence. Envy and joy and heartache swept Dorothy up and bore her into the trailer, where she made tea and waited for tomorrow.