**The Angel on Gothard Hill**

Michael Pikna

Matis never dreamed he would end his night of drunken frivolity sitting next to his older sister high atop the sandstone cemetery gateway outside his home town of Hořice. As a sixteen-year-old Czech high-wire sensation who’d already toured most of Europe, his dreams involved women, fame, moving to America, and more women. Yet there he was, staring down the fifteen meters to the ground, vomit speckling his shoes, a cyclopean knot rising on his forehead. And there she was, her typhus-ravaged body swimming inside her wedding dress, sitting in the lap of a stone angel bearing the same name as her dead fiancé. He peeked over his shoulder at the cemetery behind them where Anděl was buried. Matis had liked him, but he was glad the fever had taken him and not his sister.

He leaned forward, assessing again the height of his sister’s folly. “You know, the fall probably wouldn’t’ kill you,” he said, although he was sure it would. “You’d end up a cripple, all tangled and grotesque. We’d have to wheel you around in a cart. Before long, Papa would sell you to the gypsies.”

Karla shook her head. She’d known Matis was following her after she entered the thickness of Sochařský Park and heard a distinguishing string of obscenities. When he stumbled into the clearing on Gothard Hill and saw her perched on top of the gateway, he’d retched on himself.

“Your breath smells like you licked the floor of an alehouse shitter,” she said.

Matis was encouraged. She sounded more like the old Karla.

“And if I were you, Matis, I would worry about what Papa’s going to do to *you* when you get home. I hope it was worth it.”

Matis smiled. Few things scared him. Not the wire; it was his playground. Not the Nazis, who had recently claimed Austria; he would join the armáda if need be. Not his father, whose brew of anger had lost most of its potency as it had sifted down through the layers of Matis’ six older siblings. But the Karla who’d emerged from the vapors of sickness, translucent and ghostlike? The one who’d passed into an even darker cloud when she’d found out Anděl hadn’t survived? That Karla terrified him.

“I had fun. The crowd at the Královsky Dvor, they’re good people.”

“What do *you* know? You can’t even hold your drink.”

“And after, when I’m walking through Poděbrad Square, I stop to pee—”

“You should have been arrested, you and your little worm.”

“—and I see someone in a wedding dress walking down Riegrova at a good clip. I think, who is this crazy person?”

“Watch yourself, Matis.”

“I would have caught you. Damn low-lying branch slowed me down.”

“Beer and slivovitz, that’s what slowed you down.”

“I’m serious, Karla. What are you doing up here?”

“I wanted him to see me in my dress.”

Matis frowned at the stone angel. “That’s not… You know that’s only a—”

“Enough, Matis! Let’s just sit here for a minute.” It had been difficult for Karla to separate the effects of typhus from that of her loss. As the fever receded, her grief had thumbed its nose at her survival and enshrouded her anyway. Matis’ presence only confused her more. He shouldn’t have been out tonight, and yet here he was, doing whatever he wanted. And he would get away with it. In the currency of family indulgence, Matis was well compensated, being the youngest. But did he think he could buy her grief with it?

Matis sat uneasily in the silence while his sister lingered again between two worlds. Hadn’t the first time, in the hospital, been enough? Sitting here now, she in the sloping lap of an illusion and he in the funk of his own uselessness, was unbearable.

“I didn’t like him very much at first,” Matis said. “He was so full of himself.”

Karla rolled her eyes.

“Running across the wire like a showoff. Like no one had ever seen that before.”

“No one had, stupid. Then he taught you how to do it, and you’ve been impossible ever since.”

Matis shrugged. It was true. “He was good. And Papa liked him.”

“Papa liked the idea of him joining the act.”

“But that wasn’t the plan, was it?” Matis said. He touched the lump on his forehead. He wanted to go home, put a cold washcloth on it. Maybe eat a little something.

“He told you?”

“About America? Yes. Honeymoon in Denmark, then a steamer to the States.”

Karla sat up straighter. “That was *our* secret.”

“Anděl liked to talk.”

“Who else did he tell?”

“Just Gusty, I think.”

“Wonderful.” He had told her two younger brothers. What had he been thinking?

“We can still go, Karla, the three of us.” Matis dug a packet of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket. He struck a match on one of Anděl’s unfurled wings, lit two cigarettes, and held one out to Karla. “Gusty has the smarts, I have the talent, and you have…”

Karla snatched the proffered cigarette. “What! What do I have, Matis?”

At a loss, Matis looked at his sister’s feet. She was wearing her high-wire slippers. “I don’t know, Karla, but you have it, and we can’t be without it.”

“Huh! What do *you* know, Matis?”

“You keep saying that. But you’re not that much older than Gusty and me. Maybe you should listen to me.”

Karla shook her head. She was eons older than him. Someday he would love someone more than he loved himself, and then he could talk. And yet this boy, spoiled as he was by the increasing distance and disorder in the family, casually smoking a cigarette as if he’d invented feigned indifference, had managed to stick a finger in the eye of her grief and make it look away, if only for a moment.

Karla pulled deeply on her cigarette, felt something catch inside her. “I’m listening,” she said.