

Extensa
by Jacek Dukaj

translated by Christopher J. Caes

(excerpt)

I was six years old when Grandpa Michael died. I remember a lot. I used to play with Larysa by his grave on the other side of the stream. A big oak grew there. We used to climb into its boughs. Grandpa's grave was to the left. The shadow of the oak would slip in its direction in the afternoon. We used to lie down in the grass on the soft earth beyond the reach of the patriarchal tree's gnarled roots. The same insects would wander over our bodies. We would stare into the fat blueness, talk about nothing. Half awake, half dreaming, childhood. Three crosses over us: Grandpa Michael's, Great-Grandma Kunegunda's, and Hieronymus'; Hieronymus was the first.

Closer to dusk, the shadow would point to the real family cemetery: the one on the other side of the stream beneath the willows. A hundred and eighty-eight crosses. Somehow it never occurred to me to ask what the stream formed the boundary of.

We played under the oak and in it because it was the biggest tree in the vicinity. From its highest branches I could see the roofs of our farm, the tower of the windmill. I read about Thales and the very next day I measured our shadows – mine and the oak's. It was forty-seven six-year-old-steps tall. Truly, a God among plants. Larysa asked me what I was doing as I slowly stepped straight towards Grandpa Michael's grave. "I'm conjuring spirits," I replied, since it really did appear to be a ritual. I jumped from the end of the shadow in between the crosses. Haaa-ha-haaah! Legs rising high, bending deeply at the knees, arms bent sharply, face to the sky. That's how a child passes from game to game, there's no dissonance as the chords follow one another. Larysa joined me. We danced. Giggling.

After the hundredth pirouette, I saw him sitting there, at the base of the trunk in a cradle of roots. He was smoking his pipe. I froze; Larysa turned around and saw him too.

"Grandpa!" she squealed and ran towards him.

Grandpa Michael smiled, held out his hands. She plunged into his arms at top speed. He grunted and laughed – I recognized his voice.

I went up to him. I picked up his pipe, which my sister's charge had knocked out of his hand, and gave it to him. He took the stem with his left hand; with his right he was stroking Larysa, she was already sitting on his lap, hugging his neck tightly, cuddling her head into his gray beard. Only a month earlier she used to fall asleep like that, in the scent of his tobacco, beneath the touch of his great hands – almost every evening. Later he would carry her off to her bed. Larysa was the youngest, he was her oak.

Now she was whispering something into his ear. I stood and watched, another moment and I'd have run away. Grandpa raised his gaze to me, smiled, winked. I returned his smile.

I pointed a finger behind me, at the cross.

"You're dead."

He nodded.

"Yup."

And so I didn't run away.

I sat down next to him. I touched his shoulder – through the rough material of his shirt; then the dry, wrinkled skin of his hand directly. He watched with a smile. I know now that my wide eyes amused him. The eyes of a child, mirrors of naivety, everything is true for them, everything is completely normal, even in the greatest amazement. "Where have you been?" asked Larysa. "Always by your side, my little squirrel," he whispered back, kissing her forehead. Tears in the eyes of an old man, lakes of pain forgiven, of wrongs absolved.

He told us a fairy-tale. He would sometimes tell fairy-tales. He did this time too; a long one. A Prince and his Book. The Book was very old, it had been in the family since time immemorial. Whenever it was time to make an important decision, the Prince – like all before him – would seek his father's advice. He would open the Book, recite the spell, the spirit of the Old Prince would appear. Until one day an especially difficult decision had to be made. What should I do, asked the Prince. His father didn't know, but would gladly ask his own father – as he had always done before. The Old Prince takes the book and conjures up the Grandpa Prince. The Grandpa Prince, the Great-Grandpa Prince. The Great Grandpa, the Great-Great-Grandpa...

And so it went in a falling cadence to the rhythm of a children's counting song; we laughed and chanted along with Grandpa.

In the end Larysa fell asleep. The sun was already setting, I remember the crimson of that sky, I liked to fall asleep in that crimson, on the damp-smelling veranda, to the breathing of the big house with all of its doors and windows open onto windy spaces... Home! We've got to get back! I jumped up, Grandpa woke Larysa. She got up reluctantly. I pulled her, still sleepy, by the hand.

"Remember the Book!" he called after us, no longer visible in the shadow of the massive oak, as we waded across the cold stream. "Remember the Book!"

Then I wondered to myself how the fairy-tale ended; if it could even ever end.

Later on I had more than one opportunity to ask him, but somehow it never occurred to me. It's not easy to focus the attention of a six-year-old for long.

Meanwhile, Grandpa's spirit told us about a lot of other things. I remember a lot.