

# Until One Day

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## The Way to Oz

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Soon the sun would set. It was getting cold outside, but Pavel Cugir didn't care at all. His shirt was sticking out of his wrinkled trousers and the first two buttons were undone. He walked with his hands clasped behind his back, wearing sandals. Every now and then he would unclasp a hand and smooth his black hair, ruffled by the wind.

The park was full of people. Many were coming from the opposite direction, in what seemed like hundreds. He would run into some of them. Others would stop in front of him for a few seconds, but he would never move. They would walk past and then turn round to look at him. They would see his slightly wobbled walk, grumble something under their breath, something like "drunkard" and "street", after which they would go back to their own things. Pavel didn't hear a thing. He felt his body weakened, his head was heavy and hollow, and his legs were stiff.

A black, medium-sized dog, would circle him, and then leave.

"Blackie, come here!", Pavel would say from time to time, without looking at it.

The dog would listen to him almost every time. It would sniff at his sandals, wait a few seconds, and then start running.

"Blackie, come!"

He liked to hear himself giving orders. He liked being listened to.

The dog would sometimes linger with its muzzle in the dried leaves and dusty wrappings.

"Blackie! Here I said!"

It would run with its mouth open and its ears bent back. It would watch him with anxious eyes, trying to figure out his voice. Pavel would stretch out his hand in its direction. Blackie would stand up on two feet.

“You damned cur. Sit!”

It would lay flat on the ground.

“Roll over”!

It would roll with its paws bent, and then remain on its back, waiting for its prize. Pavel would bend down at the waist and start scratching its belly.

“Good boy.”

For a year now, Pavel and Blackie had been inseparable. He had found it on the streets, in a cardboard box, four days after Anca had left with two old suitcases, so full they were held only by the buckles.

“Come back! Where do you think you’re going? You’re coming back this second.” Pavel had yelled after her from the bathroom, from the tub’s edge.

But Anca had slammed the door behind her. Pavel had got up, with one hand on the door handle, and the other on the chipped sink. It was in vain. He felt nauseous. He stopped over the toilet. He hadn’t drunk that night more than on the other nights of the last fourteen months: a bottle and a half of wine, after the few bottles of beer he had had during the day, who knows how many there were, as he had bought them on credit, and when the debt gets too high you don’t really keep count anymore.

He could have slapped her anytime he wanted and that was enough for him. He had never done it. He would rather see her humiliated and shivering in her yellow bathrobe, without having to lift a finger. Besides, he never got time to wake up and start his life where he had left it off: the linoleum burnt here and there, the dampness, the rust, the smell of pasta, pasta again.

Anca would bring him food in bed, wash him from head to toe, buy his beers and keep them cool, she would let him feel her up at four o'clock in the morning, when he came back home, one hour before her alarm went off, signaling a new drive on the minibus, towards the textile factory on the outskirts.

She would then lean against the wall that was on her side of the bed and start to blink slowly in the dark, waiting for the alarm to go off. She felt the cold mortar melting on her spine and the chill getting down to her soles, but it was better than touching him. Pavel didn't use to snore, he would just breathe hard and deep, like an old man. She knew he would not change his sleeping position. She would carefully pass over him, turn on the light in the hallway and stand in the doorway, looking at the fresh marks left by the man's shoes on the white sheet.

She was trying to be patient. She had got used to the idea that nothing could be patched up anymore. All she could do now to gather strength was to wait for him to ruin himself.

When that day had come, she sat him down on the bed and made him watch as she was packing up. After every dress she packed she would look into his eyes.

This had happened a long time ago, a year back, maybe it didn't even happen like that. Pavel didn't remember much of it. Even if he changed it in his head, that night was still the same.

He sat down on the bench, pulled the leash out of his pocket and bound Blackie with it.

“Up!”

“Sit!”

“Up!”

“Sit!”

“Sit!”

“No!”

He struck it over the eyes.

“Did I say ‘Jump’? Sit!”

“Roll over!”

“Jump! Jump! Jump! Jump!”

Blackie barked.

“Silence. Jump! Jump!”

“Crawl!”

Blackie crawled as much as the leash allowed it to.

“Back! Come to me! Hey, can’t you hear me? Who’s in charge here?”

Blackie barked.

“Do you have something to say? Jump!”

Blackie stood on its feet, exhausted.

“Jump I said!”

There was no reaction.

Pavel shortened the leash, pulling the dog near his sandals.

“Whom do you have to listen to?”

He raised his hand to hit it. The dog lied down on the ground, squinted and crawled back. The leash made the skin around its neck wrinkle. Its tail was stretched to the maximum. Pavel saw it shivering. He stopped with his hand in the air. He let the leash fall out of his hand. He leaned on the bench’s backrest. They looked into each other’s eyes for a long time.

*\*Fiction*

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