

## The Trap

Riga, Latvia. 1990s.

Janis caught Valdis in the blooming lilac bushes, where he hoped the local punks wouldn't spot him.

— Hey, get over here, you little shit. Got money? Cigarettes?

— No, — Valdis mumbled, shrinking, his head tucked into his shoulders.

— Then come here, I got something to whisper in your ear. — Janis yanked him close and spat right in his ear.

— Ej, dirst, debīlais kroplis—don't let me see you again. — He gave Valdis a hard kick in the ass. Valdis hit the ground, crying from the humiliation, spat on and beaten. Janis loomed over him, laughing — he was older, bigger.

— Loser, — he said, spitting on his head.

But Valdis's shame turned to cold rage, a dark wave washing over him. As Janis turned to leave, Valdis grabbed a metal rod nearby, sprang up, and smashed it into his bully's head.

— Ow! — Janis yelled, dropping to his knees, clutching his head.

But Valdis couldn't stop. He swung again and again, hitting Janis's head, his hands, until his face was red with blood, his blue, broken fingers went limp, and he passed out. Valdis, panting, smashed the rod one last time into the bloody head, where bits of skull peeked through, and screamed:

— Die, you fucker! Spitting on him, he threw away the bloody pin and ran away.

Valdis, out of breath, reached the wasteland on the outskirts, their meeting spot with his friend Juris. It was drizzling, and gray, tattered clouds raced past with a huge flock of cawing crows. Valdis watched them when Juris showed up. He was from the neighbouring yard, they went to the same school and were in the same class.

— Hey, what's with you? — He saw the dirty clothes, the bloodstains. — The older kids again?

— Yeah, — Valdis nodded, his hair a mess.

— And? — Juris asked.

— I dealt with it. Smashed Janis's dumb head with a rod.

— Haha, good job, my friend, ballsy... but what's next? — Juris asked, worried.

— Fuck it, — Valdis waved his hand dismissively, annoyed by all the questions. — Let's hit our hideout, smoke.

They headed to the abandoned construction site, where they kept a stash of cigarettes and gum. They were in eighth grade, already picking up adult bad habits, even buying draft beer from a barrel from a lady they knew.

They reached their gap in the fence, listened, and slid the board aside. They slipped onto the construction site, frozen since the USSR collapsed, its black window holes howling with wind. A heavy rain started.

They were heading to the entrance when Valdis, climbing up, turned and saw Juris standing, listening to something.

— What... — Valdis started, but then a big black rottweiler leaped silently from around the corner, clamped its jaws on Juris's neck, and tore into him like a rag doll. Something snapped in his neck.

— Juris didn't even scream before he died.

Valdis, frozen with horror, backed into the entrance and slowly climbed the stairs.

What the fuck? he thought frantically. There was never a dog here. For years they'd snuck around, knowing the watchman was always drunk and sleeping in his shack.

But what just happened...

On the third floor, he dared to peek out. His heart nearly burst from fear and what he saw — the rottweiler was still savagely tearing into Juris's body.

Valdis screamed in horror at the gruesome sight of his friend's body. The dog snapped its bloody muzzle up, locked eyes with the boy, and silently charged into the entrance.

Valdis heard the rapid click of the dog's claws on the stairs... Panic hit. He didn't know where to run, knew he wouldn't make it anywhere. Without thinking, eyes shut, he jumped into the gaping darkness of the elevator shaft — just as the dog reached the floor.

Valdis plummeted, hitting boards and debris. He crashed at the bottom of the shaft, breaking his arms and legs, buried under the rubble. At first, he moaned softly from the searing pain, calling for his mom, until his voice faded completely — in the elevator shaft that became his grave.

The watchman woke up toward evening and went on his rounds.

— Benny, old boy, where you at? — he called, shining his flashlight into the dusk. Then the beam caught the dog, playing with something bright, like a jacket.

— Benny... you son of a bitch, — the watchman whispered, seeing what it was. The dog, spotting its owner, dropped its game and ran up, panting, wagging its docked tail.

— Hold on... — He pushed the dog aside and checked the find.

— Benny, fuck... — He looked at the happily prancing dog and made a decision.

He walked around the entire construction site with Benny, checking the basements and floors, watching the dog in case it suddenly sensed an intruder. But finding nothing suspicious after inspecting the site, he returned to the corpse.

Sighing heavily, the watchman grabbed the child's remains by the torn jacket sleeve, dragged them to a deep trench dug for a future waterline, and dumped them in. He collapsed the trench's edge with a shovel, and a slab of sand buried Juris.

Taking a wheelbarrow, he scooped up sand and covered the bloodstains. Then he called the dog:

— Let's go, Benny, I'll clean you up, you damn predator.

Juris and Valdis were never found. Years later, when the site was unfrozen and construction resumed, workers found a child's skeleton, gnawed by rats, under the debris in the elevator shaft. The coroner's report said: the boy fell and died from his injuries.

The End

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