Hosha

By Yuliya Zimina

The sun barely broke through the curtains of the country house as Yegor woke up to his wife's scream. "That furry scoundrel, I'll kill him!" came from the kitchen. Then the front door slammed, and everything went quiet. Lying in silence for a few more seconds, he opened his sleep-deprived eyes and reluctantly stood up, feeling for his slippers. He could only find one, cursed, and went barefooted. The mirror reflected a middle-aged, unshaven man with a barely visible belly under a gray robe. The house had cooled down overnight, which meant it was below freezing outside, and he would have to turn on the heating, thought Yegor as he entered their purple-pink kitchen.

"Can you believe it, that vile beast peed in my new designer bag!" Alina complained. Her slender figure, wrapped in a red robe, bent over something bright yellow under crocodile skin. "I left the door open for a second while I was taking out the trash, and he slipped in and marked it!" she fumed, grabbing the bag and tossing it aside.

Yegor sniffed the air. Indeed, it reeked of cat urine. "Maybe the cat thinks he's immortal," Yegor commented, observing the bag's trajectory.

"Do something already, deal with that cat," Alina hissed. "Or I'll deal with him myself!" She picked up the bag and went to clean it, hoping that household chemicals would win the battle against the cat's stench.

Yegor put on a tracksuit, threw on a jacket, grabbed a pack of cigarettes, and went out into the thick fog. At forty, Yegor Zakharov diligently avoided people not associated with his funeral services business. Managing it brought in income that grew exponentially, just like his melancholy. Perhaps it was because he and Alina had no children? Or maybe, constantly dealing with death, he had forgotten about the joys of life?

The neighbor’s gate was a model of noble poverty amidst the ostentatious opulence of the dacha village. They were begging for a coat of paint, their "mouths" peeled and cracked. Spitting through his teeth, Yegor knocked. The gate creaked open, revealing an old woman in a worn coat and galoshes over bare feet. She could have been seventy or ninety-two. Her back was as straight as a ballet school graduate, though it was clear it came with difficulty.

"What do you want, fleecer?" she asked, cunningly regarding him with her right eye. The left was clouded by cataracts. Yegor laughed, then broke into a smoker's cough. Making an undertaker laugh was a hard feat, but this old hag managed. Regaining composure, he became serious.

"Semenivna, your (he wanted to curse but held back)… cat has gone completely mad. Yesterday, he tore up the trash in the yard, and today he ruined Alina's bag. Let's settle this peacefully. Get rid of that rascal, or I'll do it myself."

"Oh sure, when pigs fly! Just you try, and I'll raise all connections at once! They'll prosecute you for... for animal cruelty. I bet it wouldn't be hard to find dirt on you. You'll end up behind bars with confiscation!"

"With confiscation, indeed?" Yegor feigned doubt.

"Yes! Exactly that!" Semenivna declared triumphantly, raising an arthritic twisted finger. Her right eye was laughing, while her lips, pressed into a narrow line, remained motionless.

"Alright, we'll see about that. If I see him in the yard again, I'll bury the scoundrel right there! Or give him fish for his last supper," he said calmly, looking the neighbor squarely in the eye. She waved her hand dismissively and disappeared. Yegor took out his pack of cigarettes and lit one.

The cigarette smoke mixed with the fog, slowly rising over the sleepy village. He'd have to do something about that fluffy hooligan because Alina would definitely fret him to death. It'd been two years since they'd settled here, yet that creature wouldn't leave them in peace. Audacious, with the tip of his ear torn off, this cat seemed to enjoy petty mischief. Semenivna called him "Hosha," though he and his wife had much more colorful names for him. Conversations with the old woman were futile. The cat sneaked through any crack. Once "Hosha" ruined their festive table at a housewarming (they had set it in the gazebo), and they had to urgently order pizza. Guests teased them for a long time, claiming the hosts had nibbled on everything themselves to blame the cat. And once, Yegor witnessed the cat dragging away a sock that had fallen from the line. Yegor roared so loudly that "Hosha" dropped his loot and ran for it. They had to get a guard dog. But that rascal began to taunt the mastiff. He'd sit just 30 cm away and start grooming himself. When the Zakharovs got fed up with the barking at night and arguments with the neighbor on the right (some official lived there), they had to give the dog to friends. The cat, smug with victory, seemed to calm down. But now he was up to his old tricks again.

That day off, Yegor spent fishing, accompanied by a rod and a jar of worms. Alina had gone to spend the night with a friend whose husband had left her. She promised to return in the morning by bus. No matter.

At eight, while Yegor was cleaning fish, the funeral agency's administrator called. Reluctantly, he wiped his hands free of scales. "Yegor Mykhailovich, sorry to bother you on your day off, but we have a call to your neighbors; some old lady has passed away. Might you want to be there too?" Yegor stepped outside and only then noticed the black van near Semenivna’s house. Already knowing the answer, he confirmed, "Address? Yes, I'm on my way."

Yegor locked the door and stepped out in a blue suit as comfortable as house slippers without backs. He lingered by the gate before entering. The yard was large but neglected. Grass, beginning to yellow, sprouted through the cracked asphalt, and the entrance door, upholstered with faux leather, was scratched by cat claws. A man in his fifties with a mop of unkempt gray hair emerged.

"Hello, who are you?" he asked anxiously, eyeing Yegor's sturdy figure.

"I’m the neighbor. And you?" Yegor inquired.

"I'm her nephew. Anna Semenivna called me, saying she felt unwell, and now I’m here. The funeral service mentions they handle everything turnkey. Unlike it used to be." Flustered, with eyes shiny from either drink or tears, he frequently shrugged his shoulder as if shooing away an invisible fly.

Yegor nodded. It was convenient to have people who knew exactly what to do when a relative passed away. Nothing was forgotten, service was first-rate, leaving relatives just to mourn, undistracted by details like scarves or chairs for the casket. Artem, the administrator and Yegor’s weekend substitute, emerged from the house. Restrained yet effortlessly elegant, as befitted a funeral service worker. They entered the house. Yegor followed behind, glancing around with mild curiosity. He’d never been here before.

Examining the sparse yet tidy room, he noticed the wooden floor seemed scrubbed to a shine. A bed, wardrobe, chair, table, and a bookshelf spanning the wall furnished the area. It smelled of medicine. Photographs adorned the walls. Almost everyone in them wore uniforms. A black-haired young woman stared directly at him from one picture. About twenty years old, at most, but with the same gaze. In one corner, instead of religious icons, certificates and pennants were displayed: "For Distinguished Service in the Police Force."

The deceased lay with clenched fists. It seemed her right eye still gazed at Yegor. Suddenly, he heard a wheezing sound from under the bed. He bent down and froze. On the floor, in a puddle of its own vomit, lay a ginger cat. Its body trembled and twisted. Yegor hesitated only for a moment. He pulled the cat out and wrapped it in a nearby jumper, carrying it outside. His mind swirled with dizziness. The old nemesis was finally in his hands! He sat in his car and drove off, not really knowing where. Headlights illuminated the freshly paved road, his heart somehow pounding joyfully. It wasn’t that he didn’t regret Semenivna, but the cat... such an opportunity was hard to resist.

"This is where you’ll perish," Yegor said, throwing the cat onto a pile of leaves by the roadside. The ginger cat lay limp, blending with the similar-hued leaves. He drove a few meters, cursed, then reversed and brought the dying creature back into the car.

The veterinary clinic was nearby. Yegor pushed open the first door. The vet had just concluded an examination of a small dog when a burly man with the face of a lost boy appeared on the threshold. Realizing the urgency, the vet bid the dog owner farewell and turned to Yegor.

"How can I help you?" he asked.

Instead of words, Yegor placed the cat, still wrapped in the deceased's jumper, onto the table. It wheezed as if there was a fist-sized hole in its lungs. "Ah, it seems to be suffocating. Just a moment. Olena, hand me the tools," the vet called to a white screen. A weightless blonde emerged, silently handed the vet some tongs, and disappeared again. With a deft movement, the vet extracted a massive fish bone from the cat’s throat. The cat immediately went limp, as if its energy reserve was exhausted and help arrived a second before its last breath. After settling the clinic fees, Yegor drove home. Dense darkness had already draped the street like a heavy blanket, slightly dimming the streetlights’ glow.

The cat sat quietly in the car, occasionally glancing at his adversary-cum-rescuer with green eyes. At the neighbor's yard, Yegor opened the door, and the animal leapt back into its territory. He went inside and drank coffee. Being alone in an empty house unsettled him; his spirit longed for space, so Yegor stepped back into the October evening. He crushed his pack of cigarettes and discarded it. For the first time in years, he felt alive. Life seeped into him from everywhere, accompanied by night sounds and scents. Yegor seemed to hear crickets singing for the first time. And he was alive! He would live a long, long time! As for Alina, he’d divorce her, even if it cost him dearly, because all she cared about were her clothes and friends. He sat on a bench near Semenivna's house.

Light shone from the windows. The nephew, whose name Yegor couldn’t recall, came out of the house and sat beside him. "It's a shame about Auntie," the late relative sighed, shrugging his shoulder. "She was a great woman, put so many crooks behind bars, wow! Everyone feared her, though the family did too. No kids, husband died young. So, besides the cat, she didn’t really care for anyone. She called today saying Hosha had been poisoned and her heart was acting up. Asked me to call an ambulance. By the time I got here by bus, she was already gone." Yegor pondered the words in silence. The nephew continued: "And the cat, I see, came home in the evening, alive and well. What a rascal!"