

STARA BABA

Michael Levan

After he settled the infant carrier on the kitchen table and pulled the blanket down from his sleeping son's chin, the young man looked at his grandmother sitting opposite him, focusing hard on her thinned hair and dentures that slipped every time her thick Polish accent flitted a hard *t*. He sat and smiled at her, knowing full well that by the time this visit was over, he would be ashamed of what he had to do for his family. But having his son here made things easier. The young man could steal for him.

"I said, 'How are you feeling?'"

"Oh, *Żaba*, I so old, I ready to casket."

He couldn't decide whether to laugh or allow himself to acknowledge that what he had seen glimpses of in his parents was happening to his grandmother, so instead he focused on what was familiar: the thirteen-inch television perched on the counter with its bent antennae that, somehow,

remained perpetually tuned to *The People's Court*. The pencil lines next to the pantry door from when she measured his height and then hers, which were always within a few inches of each other, no matter that summer's teenage growth spurt or the gradual way her back had begun to curve into a C as she leaned into the future. The commemorative plates lining the kitchen walls, a half dozen or so Pope John Paul II's battling for top billing against Reagan and Nixon, her other two heroes who in porcelain looked forever spry and presidential.

"You're not so old. You're—"

"I a *stara baba*. You know what that mean?"

"'Old lady.' From that song. *Stara baba* da da da da something something *cavalera*. 'Old lady on the prowl for a young man.'"

"Where you hear that?"

"You sang it last time."

She paused and stared at him, and almost seeing someone familiar in him, the old woman leaned forward in her chair, searching.

"And the time before that," he finished.

She shook her head and turned to the little boy, gently brushing the socked foot before remembering she shouldn't wake him. She settled back

into the vinyl seat, which for as long as the young man could remember, was split in the middle. He heard the cushion yield to her weight and knew that the yellow foam crumbled under her, which made no sense to him but it felt as right as anything else he kept in his heart.

“Oh, *Žaba*... guess how old I am?”

“You’re a regular spring chicken.”

“Ha. I a *stara baba*. Remember I hit you?”

“You never hit me,” he said as he thought of all the visits he made with his parents, trying to recall any time she might have done what she said she had. Yes, he often tried to avoid kissing her hello, her lips all butterscotch and nicotine long after she set her cigarette into a falcon-shaped ashtray. And the painting of mustachioed Casimir Pulaski over the loveseat that caught late afternoon’s shadows and seemed to follow him around the room, guiltig him into replacing every snuck peppermint back into the candy jar. The lamp with the bare-breasted mermaid rising from the base shaped like a wave that made him feel embarrassed for reasons it took years to understand.

“I hit your *dupa*. I did. You bad boy.”

“You never hit any of us.” There was no hitting; he was sure.

She rolled her eyes and waved him off, muttering something in Polish, that, he thought, must have been either regret for not having ever laid a hand on him or anger that he refused to remember a single time she had. As she continued to mumble, he studied the display cabinet in the dining room. He saw the auto-penned note from President Nixon congratulating her on her fundraising efforts for his campaign that his father always turned upside down and placed on the top shelf, high up enough that she couldn't reach it without a stepstool in order to put it back in its place. He stared at her collection of turn-of-the-century, bisque porcelain dolls that his mother had yelled at him for touching given how fragile they were, and there was the row of Little Red Riding Hood cookie jars, organized from smallest to largest and one vacant spot away from being a complete set. He had always hated the way the girl's smile was captured and how the hood hugged her face so that she seemed innocent and protected from the world. Still, his mother had said once that they were worth a lot of money to a collector, so they became something else he was forbidden from laying a hand on.

“Remember when I *hushtu hushtu* you?”

He stared back at her, but the sun slanted through the window and blinded him for a moment. He held his eyes shut, and then, after blinking

the light away, he caught sight of a fly, tracking it until it landed on a plate in the far corner of the room, on Mrs. Nixon's right shoulder as the President looked down fondly on his wife and on the young man sitting in his grandmother's kitchen.

"I bounce you up and down. You laugh."

He didn't say anything, so she smiled and lifted her heel and tapped the ball of her foot against the linoleum, her knee bobbing rhythmically under the weight of some imaginary boy.

"I remember," he replied.

"Oh, I knew you remember," she grinned. "I do to you and Casimir and Lech and Thaddeus and Bartosz and..."

"Who?"

"What you do, *Żaba*?"

"Hm?"

"You have job?"

"I'm still in school."

"How you still in school? You too old be in school."

The young man was twenty-eight and also felt that he was too old for school, but she wouldn't understand that. "I'm going to be a doctor. That's why."

"*Doc-tor?*" she said, her voice rising at the first syllable and falling off for the second.

"Yes. Sort of. I'll teach college."

"Oh, big *doc-tor*... make lots and lots of money. You take care of me. Ha. I proud of my *Žaba*."

"I can't do that, Grandma. Not yet. Too many bills, Grandma." He looked toward the living room again: the Little Red Riding Hood cookie jars, the framed Nixon letter, the limited edition bisque dolls' perfect porcelain skin, all glazed with months' worth of dust. He marveled at how so much hadn't changed since he was a boy, how even in having a place, each item wouldn't be missed, not by her now.

She interrupted, "You know *Žaba*?"

"Little froggie."

"I told you that?" she garbled as her dentures slipped again.

"You called all of us that."

"Who 'all of us'?"

“My mom and dad. My sisters. Cousins—”

“Oh, *Zaba*, I getting so old. You be kind doctor take care of me?”

“Not that kind of doctor, Grandma. I can’t take care of someone else. It’s hard enough as it is,” his voice felt strained, not like his own.

“You sure? You not be heart doctor? I think you be good heart doctor.”

The young man looked at his son and counted to ten, breathing in deeply on the odd numbers and out slowly on the evens. He remembered his mother’s advice: “Yeah, sure. A heart doctor. I’m going to be a heart doctor.” His voice felt even stranger as he shared with her this fiction.

Grinning again, she said, “You know how old I am?”

“Eighty-nine.”

“Noooooo... I not that old.”

“You are, I swear,” he told her as he pointed to the faint scrawl of numbers on the table his mother hadn’t completely wiped away the last time she had watched her mother try to figure her age. “Here’s when you were born,” he said, tracing over the year in pen again, “and if you subtract that from this year—”

“That this year? Noooooo...”

“I promise.”

He thought she was going to resist his assurance, but her eyes quickly un-narrowed. She sat back and patted the table lightly three times before placing her hands in her lap. The young man knew she trusted him, wholeheartedly.

“You be doctor?”

“Yes. Doctor. Brain doctor, Grandma.”

“Oh, *Zaba*, I so proud. You make lots of money. You buy big house. You make big, strong babies. You be happy,” she smiled again at him, and he suddenly felt even younger than he was and less pleased with himself.

“Who your daddy?”

“Mike. Mary’s my mom.”

“You not Big Mike?”

“That’s my dad.”

“Then who this?” she asked as she pointed at the baby, who yawned like he could swallow the whole world before settling back into sleep.

“That’s my son. Your great-grandson. Don’t you remember?”

“You *hushtu hushtu* him?”

“He’s too small for that now, but I will,” he said.

“What his name?”

“I told you when you let us in the house. This is Max.”

“Where you get that name?”

“It’s German. It means ‘the greatest.’”

“German? Who German? You wife? She a little Hitler?”

“No Hitlers. I swear. We liked the name.”

“Good. He kill my brothers. Casimir and Thaddeusz and... who else?”

The man replied, “I don’t know. I never heard about your brothers or sisters.”

If he hadn’t been looking her in the eyes, he wouldn’t have seen the old woman’s eyes go blank for a moment before she came back. “Look at your little *Žaba*. So handsome. He grow up be big football player. Or doctor like you. Where your wife at?”

“She’s at work.”

“You let wife work?”

“We don’t have a choice. We can’t make it just on me.” He held back enough to keep from yelling, but he grew more ashamed every time she frowned.

“You make sure wife stay home with baby. No work. That’s what doctors do, *Žaba*.”

He felt his jaw tense and stood up, catching sight of a smug Richard M. Nixon holding his arms above him and the first two fingers of both hands turned into V's. "I shouldn't come here for this," said the young man, who was now definitely displeased with his life. "It's not right."

But he walked through the doorway to the dining room anyway, stepping on the plastic sheeting she spread over the carpeting's highest traffic areas, and reached up to the top shelf. He slipped the largest Red Riding Hood into the empty space he had left in his son's diaper bag. "I'm sorry, but we need this one, too, Grandma," he said.

She stared back at him, confused, as his son stirred for a moment before opening his eyes and cooing. He looked at the boy, and then at her. He thought of the plaques and tangles choking her brain and the cookie jar which had paid for his son's last two doctor's visits. He wondered if he'd need to be back within a week for the next one. He hoped it'd be a month, or maybe never again, but that didn't seem reasonable anymore. On the drive home to his exhausted wife, he'd place the jar on the passenger's seat, making sure to turn Little Red Riding Hood's smile away from him.

The young man took his grandmother's hand and kneeled in front of her. They sat silently under the watchful eyes of his son, two presidents, and the Pope until she asked him, "Know how old I am?"

"I don't know. How old are you?"

"89," she replied. "I a *stara baba*. Know what that mean?"

"Tell me."

"I old woman looking for a young man. Ha."

A long pause followed.

"Remember I hit your *dupa*?" she said.

"I do. I was a bad boy," he said.

"I *love you, Żaba*."

"I love you, too, *stara baba*."

Michael Levan has work appearing in recent issues of *Indiana Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Radar Poetry*, *American Literary Review*, and *Heron Tree*. He is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Saint Francis and lives in Fort Wayne, Indiana, with his wife, Molly, and son, Atticus.