

Excerpt from the *Line of resistance*, by Jacek Dukaj

Translated from the Polish by Garry Malloy

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C R A C O W , P O L A N D .

He was late for the celebration; his child was ill and he stayed at home with his other half. Little Andrzej, his cousin, a living after-image of his childhood. ...

The cousin who was more like a brother. From a time when they both lisped: *couthin, couthin, couth*; only he - from among his many cousins - was to remain as the lifelong brother with no brother. Once upon a time he used to log in as *Qqazn*. ...

They are sitting on the wooden porch. A light bulb sways inside its tin shade, the spring darkness ebbs and flows, insects make their music, a dog rattles its chain. On the far side of the road, someone tries to fire up a wheezing wreck of a car.

It's chilly, so, hot chocolate. As they drink, they nibble at the last few pieces of Michał's cake from the china side plates. Paweł paints fairytale monsters with the smear of chocolate on his plate.

(Dialogue). How are things at home? Same old, same old. Everybody bugging each other. And you? What have you been up to? Ugh, I've had enough of it all. All what? Money, traffic, city life, the gage of madness? Go on, tell me what's been happening.

Nothing's been happening. There's nothing to tell. No stories. Everyday incidents, turning the pages of the calendar, simple as that. Day after day after day after day after day after day.

Why are you so down? Is there something wrong? I don't know, Andrzej, it's a cliché, but life has its schedules, for both women and men: such and such a number of years goes by, and then you have to change direction, or you'll

wind up on existential fallow ground. The measure for chicks is their fertility; for blokes it's a mid-life crisis. I have it all written out, step-by-step, disco proteo.

What are you talking about, man? How old are you? How old are we? We're still kids.

So what? I feel that leash, that collar around my neck.

Leash?

I never stop counting. It's almost two years' long now.

Are you up to your eyes in mortgage debt?

Paweł stares at Qqazn as if he's crazy.

He gives him a soul-penetrating look. What a *faux pas* - Qqazn is as soulless as the rest of the country bumpkins.

Ha. Quite the opposite, Cousin. A couple of years and it'll be longer than my life expectancy. Free capital. Living the life of Riley.

Now it was Qqazn's turn to stare at an idiot.

Hallelujah and praise the Lord! That's what everybody wants.

A grey curtain hangs between them, an impermeable sheet of plastic. Moths and mosquitoes buzz around their heads, but no thoughts come buzzing past.

In spite of all, Paweł presses on.

Hey Cousin, it's not like that, it really isn't.

Wałęsa mode: It wasn't luxuries of that kind we fought for.

So you'd prefer it the other way around?

Work is a luxury. ...

As for those who don't work, we - those of us who do work - have to keep providing them with content for their lives.

Content: gameplay. ...

At first it was called "spending your free time". But as productivity grew, the free time increased in proportion to working hours. There was a rise in those branches of the economy concerned with providing content for the part of life we call "free time".

So-called entertainment

So-called lifestyle

So-called celebrity (life by proxy)

So-called self-education

So-called sporty lifestyles

So-called charitable work

So-called social work

So-called politics
So-called religion
So-called drugs

Content. A filler. (Content to be content).

After all - you have to do something when you don't have anything to do.

(I have a family, Paweł; just you try doing nothing in that situation!)

Don't look backwards, look ahead. YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO NOTHING.

It's hard work - the hardest! - continuously devising and updating a repertoire of meanings of life.

It could be the colour of your top. Perhaps it's a sword with a bonus to your attributes. Or - perhaps it's a metaphysical system. ...

Qqazn finishes his cake and licks his spoon clean. He really is trying to understand.

He digests and digests and digests, until he can digest no more:

You mean that in the evenings you have nobody to talk to.

No, Cousin, no. You open your mouth to speak - and what do you talk about? Just think about it, and be honest.

Do I have enough to last me until the first of the month

Whose turn was it to go shopping

How is your guild getting on

What kind of mischief has your kid been getting up to

They're all sick at work

The club has bought a good goalkeeper

The neighbour's ripped up the pavement

The new taste of sugar

The frost in a constellation

There'll be a new game tomorrow

They've caught a paedophile MP

Or perhaps we'll go on holiday to New Zealand

In this game - splitting up, in the other - everlasting love

You looked so lovely in the green dress, what style is that

A spider bit me during the night

Who'll be the new Bond

And that, that's your content!

That is the meaning of your life.

And now subtract financial fears (they'll disappear).
And subtract family (that'll disappear).

From the remainder - what percentage was not produced
by us, by me?

Be honest.

Qqazn stares into the night, listens to the sounds of
the sleepy village, and cocks his head to one side. ...

No. I'm not buying that, Paweł.

But it's true. THAT'S THE MEANING OF LIFE. That's
exactly what drags people from one night to the next,
from one weekend to the next.

The content coming from our minds.

Creative people's lifeblood.

Now, perhaps, something has broken through the
curtain. Qqazn looks up, then down, up, then down.

Paweł reads the look in his old friend's eyes: Poor
sod. What have they done to you. You have money, but you
don't have a life. Sympathy Link +5.

Paweł knows that Qqazn is not capable of understanding
more. (On the other side of a Lagrangian point). He
hasn't had the kind of life experiences to which he could
attach Paweł's words, even the most precisely chosen
ones.

And so Paweł keeps them for himself. Staring into the
night. (A dog barks, a barn door clatters).

That's the truth, *mon ami*. The future that can't be
avoided. You'll get there, too. And if not you, then your
children.

It's the only business that'll preserve its *raison
d'être*, once everything is cheap, luxurious and safe. ...
The only business *ad infinitum*: producing meanings for
life.

We produce them. We do it for you. To stop you sinking
into your own *nolensum*.

It's us, us, us. Day after day. Wringing our neurones
dry. Pumping the sperm from our souls. Ripping our teeth
out.

There you have it.

But Paweł isn't saying any more. He fetches some
vodka.

They sit and drink.

Pale-faced demons with celluloid wings lean over them,
smiling sadly. The spirit of a rusty tractor sails right
through the barns and farmyards. There's a whirlwind of
moonshine blowing.

Soundtrack: Chopin's *Grande Valse Brillante in A
minor*.

Paweł squints, and sees clearly:

Andrzej teaches Polish at a county secondary school. He will set the children this as an essay topic. And in one season's time the entire neurosis will come back to Paweł, to the Geyser. They will build desires and demands upon the drama of the creative and the disclosure of artificially produced ideas. He can see stories, fashions, emotional bundles, designs, contests and re-contests, and colourful rebellions.

Work is what happens when you get carried away.

Translation by Garry Malloy