

**“A tale of badgers and other lost life forms” published
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Unbeknownst to me, a young badger had found its way into the trees planted last year by the Conservation District in a cost-sharing venture that aims for “living snow fences.” Between the rows of trees, which are growing in weed barrier, a profusion of sunflowers have sprung up. Right now the flowers are larger than my trees.

I was weeding in front when I heard a commotion coming from my dog. She had spied the badger. Before I could stop her, she’d grabbed the young animal by the scruff of its neck, shaking it violently. I yelled and screamed until she dropped it. A yelp was coming either from Abby (Had the badger managed to lash out with its claws?) or from the small animal. I took the dog into the house and went back to check on the unfortunate little thing. It raised itself up on all fours, puffed out its fur wet from Abby’s mauling, curled its upper lip and snarled at me in a high-pitched voice. When I backed off, it settled back down into an earth indentation among the sunflowers, moaning softly in its high voice.

I texted my son the wildlife veterinarian. “Take a picture,” he texted back. “You might leave it some dog food.” Then I went into town for lap swimming, keeping Abby inside, quarantined in her carrier.

When I returned, the badger had taken off. I hope the little thing made it to a nearby field, currently unused, that shelters a prairie-dog town. I hope it found an abandoned tunnel where it escaped the heat of the day to rest and recuperate.

The little thing meant no harm to anyone. It may have been a male striking out on his own, or a female who’d lost her mother. Either way, s/he only sought to make it through another day, look for food, look for a mate. My ranching neighbors despise prairie dogs. I imagine they despise badgers also.

The German word for badger is “Dachs.” The Dachshund—Americans call it a “wiener dog”—was bred for short legs on a long body to tunnel into badger dens and flush out the inhabitants. When they emerged, farmers would shoot or clobber them to death.

My father was a boy in a farming family of five siblings. Their parents deemed themselves modestly successful; they owned a draft horse where other villagers used oxen for field work. But the horse was confiscated for the war effort in 1914, my dad's father conscripted in a war that began as sibling rivalries among the feudal houses of Europe. His wife was left to tend the fields and care for five young children. When she died her oldest was 13, my dad, the second, was 12, while Anna, the youngest and only girl, was barely eight.

I'm sure it would not have occurred to any of them to worry about a badger. Besides, badgers would have suffered extinction decades or even centuries earlier. As for prairie dogs, they do not exist in Europe. Wolves and foxes managed to hang on for a time but they, too, went the way of the badgers.

After his wife died, my dad's father's superiors relieved him of service in the war. The children must have been glad to have their dad with them, though they would have mourned their mother. Soon a stepmother entered their home, the father having remarried. The new wife, a widow, brought with her a daughter, Babette, who was the age of Anna. The two little girls developed an intense relationship that seems to have consisted mostly of hate. Soon more babies crowded into the farmhouse.

Before I immigrated to the States, on the rare occasion he shared something of his childhood, my dad was still grieving for his mother. He, too, had been forced to serve in a war, in WWII, where he spent horrible times in Russia. It made him largely oblivious to the troubles his own children suffered. Badgers? Never heard of them.

One time I returned to visit my dad's birthplace of Neibsheim. By then Anna was my aged aunt, well past eighty and stricken with Alzheimers, who resided with her daughter and son-in-law. My dad, the only one of her brothers to live long enough to marry, had died the previous year in a nearby town. My cousin showed me the farm house where her mother and siblings grew up. It was tiny though tidily kept. One of the half-sisters lived there with her family. They ushered us in for coffee, insisted I accept a bottle of home-made pear schnapps.

When I took a walk with my aunt, she talked about my cousin. "That woman," she whispered, "pretends to be my daughter, but she really isn't. I know she's Babette. She's trying to get her hands on the field I inherited. See, I'm watching." Babette, my cousin said later, died at a young age.

I'm not excusing my dog's attack on a juvenile badger with tales of human hardship. I'm saying, life is difficult for us all. I pray an atheist prayer that the badger survives.