JURGA TUMASONYTĖ

THE NEWBORNS

The story translated by Romas Kinka

Paulė and Elžbieta's Travels

Paulė and Elžbieta's room in town had been rented out to other people a very long time ago. Perhaps the newcomers had ripped off the green wallpaper with its twisting, intertwining patterns reminding Paulė of headless snakes. She remembered that Elžbieta used to chop wood with a small axe and then put the pieces into the hot jaws of the stove. She also remembered eating grapes with her mother and spitting the seeds out straight onto the floor. They had had their own bedding and so what if the sheet had a light brown stain in the middle. Where had all of that disappeared to?

'Mum, why don't we have our own place?', asked Paulė.

At that time, they were sitting on the train with the monotonous view of snow-covered hillocks drifting past the window. Elžbieta was reading a book, and an elderly couple sitting opposite were silently sipping the tea prepared for them by the train attendant. When they heard the girl's question, they smiled reservedly.

'Mum?'

'What is it?'

'How much longer are we going to be travelling for? I'm hungry.'

'It won't be long now.'

Their belongings consisted of Elžbieta's suitcase stuffed full of an array of medicinal glasses, medicine and tweezers, a couple of small bundles of dresses, amongst which she'd put three books without illustrations and with well-worn covers, as well as an ABC book for Paulė, and that was it. The train began to slow down. Elžbieta closed the book and stroked her daughter's head.

It seemed to Paulė that the winter was never going to end – she'd got used to not having solid ground under her feet – she was either skating along a slippery surface or battling her way through giant snowdrifts, and always hungry like a little bear cub. Her mother, it seemed to Paulė, never ever ate or slept.

To Paulė the village looked ugly – the houses were small and low, the windows dark, with the nauseating smell of smoke everywhere. Elžbieta told her daughter not to frown and to move more quickly or she'd get lost – she'd be left in the street to gnaw on icicles. They were met by a slip of a boy dressed in dirty rags. He muttered that the house of the people they'd be staying with wasn't at all far from the station and it wasn't worth harnessing a horse for such a short trip and didn't utter a further word. In answer to Elžbieta's friendly questions he only nodded his head. They came up to a sizable house painted the colour of earwax, a dog started barking, the gates made a mournful sound as they were opened. The boy whistled at a creature chained up which was barking away and frothing at the mouth,

thick vapour coming out of its mouth. A teenage girl wrapped in a brightly coloured scarf, emerged from the house calming the beast down. The dog looked at the newcomers with bloodshot eyes, now only growling hoarsely. Paulė stuck her tongue out at it.

'Tadas, Petkus said you should go to the shed and get some beets,' the girl shouted in a thin voice.

'You don't get enough time to finish one job and there's another one waiting to be done,' the boy grumbled and slunk off deeper into the yard. The dog again began pulling on its chain and flying around in all directions.

In the anteroom the guests stamped their feet to get the snow off their boots. Elžbieta helped Paulė unbutton her fur coat. The dog's barking died down and finally they were able to understand one another.

'Are you the daughter of the mistress of the house?' Elžbieta asked the girl who was staring at them intently.

'No, I'm just hired help.'

'I thought the owners themselves would be greeting us.'

'I'm the one to greet guests.'

'Like a lackey,' interjected Paulė, a little proud of herself for knowing what function a lacky performed.

'That's the way things are done in this house. They're all waiting for you at the table.'

'You have nice hair, just make sure you wash it more often with chamomile tea otherwise it'll go grey,' said Elžbieta smiling.

The girl didn't reply but a light blush coloured her cheeks. She took Elžbieta's suitcase and the bundles, opening the heavy door decorated with forged iron. They found themselves in a long kitchen with a low ceiling. In it there was a tiled cocklestove, the tiles with floral decorations, unusually grand for such a house. Paulė could smell sautéed cabbage and meat, her mouth started watering, her saliva warm as water off the boil. They went through the kitchen and then another small room with a narrow bed covered with a brightly coloured bedspread, clothes on a hook and a short-pile wall hanging depicting what seemed to Paulė at first glance a lion consuming the sun.

At a long table in a spacious dining room there sat a group of children and two tall, fat adults. As the guests came in, everyone stood up.

'We've been waiting, we had to start without you,' the man said smacking his lips.

'Sit down, sit down, over there, we've laid a plate for each of you,' said the woman in a friendly tone.

Paulė stood huddled up to her mother, looked on by a multitude of curious eyes. Even though she was used to strangers and strange places, she felt uncomfortable – she was tired and hungry, and the last thing she wanted was to listen to long, boring talk from adults.

'Mum, I want to eat …' she whined irritably, pulling on Elžbieta's sleeve.

They sat down at the table and the lady of the house put a piece of steaming meat, some cabbage and mashed potatoes onto the guests' plates.

Paulė immediately grabbed hold of her spoon and began attacking the food on her plate.

'I couldn't come any earlier because I had a lot of work and the train didn't take

the line we needed. Am I correct in thinking that my advice didn't help?' asked Elžbieta, picking up her spoon.

'We did everything you told us but Gendrutė was born in autumn.'

'Your sixth?'

'No, no, she's already the seventh!'

'Where is she?'

One of the older girls waved her hand at the cradle in the corner of the room.

'She's there.'

'Which of you girls is the oldest?'

'Me,' said the same girl who looked to be about twelve.

'They were all born a year apart,' said the master of the house.

'You're blessed to have healthy children, not everyone's so lucky.'

'But all we keep producing are females and with the number of dowries we'll have to give we'll end up as beggars,' grumbled the pot-bellied master of the house, frowning, his bushy eyebrows merged together in an unbroken line.

'Eat, dear guests, we'll discuss everything later on,' the mistress of the house urged Elžbieta.

Paulė kept on stuffing herself until there was no more room in her stomach and her trousers began to get tight around her waist. The girls left the table quietly, the baby cried out and the girls' voices joined in. Paulė didn't like small children and was glad she didn't have any brother or sisters – as it was, she always missed Elžbieta's attention even when she was next to her. In the past she used to be sad that because of not staying in one place for long enough she wouldn't be able to make friends. Eventually, she got used to it and couldn't any longer imagine herself in a group of children her own age. Besides that, to Paulė adults seemed more interesting than children – you didn't have to compete with adults for anything, they would often show an interest in her and listen to her or tell her or show her something interesting.

The mistress of the house, her head down and nervously biting on her lower lip, was listening to Paulė's mother. Paulė, who had eaten her fill and warmed up after coming in from the cold, sat on the bench unable to move, feeling like a pile of melting snow, while her mother who was speaking a lot still had food on her plate. Tiredness gradually overcame the girl and she didn't feel how she drifted off as if on soft clouds. In the background she could hear the soporific sound of her mother's voice and feel her mother's warm protective hand on her. Paulė dreamt of a large white tower of snow which Jack, from the tale about the magic bean, was trying to climb up using his fingernails. She awoke in the dark, she was lying in a strange, well-heated place. She sniffed the pillow – it smelled of baked bread and of a warm, newly laid egg.

'Mum?' she shouted.

After a closer look, she saw that the room wasn't large. She was lying on a high bed, dark rectangles loomed in front of her – perhaps they were pictures of saints? Pictures like that were quite frequent in the houses where they would sometime have to spend the night. Paulė turned on her side and drew closer to the warm wall. She needed to imagine that she was snuggling up against her mother and wait for a dream to surface from the depths. She woke up again, aware of the sweetish smell of sweat – Elžbieta was dressing in the dark.

‘Mum?’, she muttered.

‘Sleep, sleep,’ whispered her mother.

She climbed into the bed and put her arms around her daughter. Paulė started to find it difficult to breathe – she freed herself from Elžbieta’s embrace and put her forehead against the wall which was still warm.

In the morning Paulė was woken by Elžbieta moving around. Opening her sleepy eyes, she saw her mother bent over and rummaging through her implements, lining them up on the white window sill – scissors, forceps, medicinal glasses, and sharp metal objects – just the sight of them made her queasy. There were indeed pictures of saints hanging on the walls - she’d seen similar ones at Uncle Anicetas’s place.

‘If you’re already awake, get up and stop staring – your clothes are over there on the back of the chair,’ said Elžbieta without even looking around at her daughter.

Sometimes it seemed to Paulė that her mother had another pair of eyes in the back of her head under her stack of thick hair. As she was dressing, she heard a knock at the door. Elžbieta opened the door – the master of the house asked if the guests had slept well and invited them to breakfast.

Once again, the table was laden with food. Paulė still felt full but she knew she had to stuff the food down because who knew when the next such occasion might present itself and so she put some sweet cake into her mouth. The moist bite was cloying in her mouth. The adults were sitting at the table and the hired girl was pouring tea out of a blackened kettle.

‘The neighbours have several young stallions, but we certainly are not going to visit them. We don’t want them to find anything out.’

‘If you don’t say anything they won’t find out.’

‘And what about you …’

‘That’s my problem.’

When all the boring talk came to an end, the adults got up from the table.

‘Let your little daughter stay here with us, she can play with our girls,’ clucked the lady of the house.

‘Paulė, would you like to do that?‘

‘No, mum, I want to go with you.’

‘Small children can’t go there, it’s dangerous. Prancė will take you to the where the girls are, you can play with them,’ said the lady of the house in a stern voice.

‘No, I’d rather go with you.’

‘Paulė, don’t talk back,’ her mother scolded her.

Paulė stuck out her lower lip, trying with all her might to control herself but her throat felt as if she’d swallowed a fish bone.

Prancė, dressed today in bright violet clothes, walked with her bottom wiggling strangely. Following her, Paulė imagined that under her heavy skirts the young woman was hiding a tail– similar to that of the lion on the wall hanging, a tail with a tuft at its end. They passed through two empty rooms, in one of which stood a cumbersome wardrobe with

an oval blackened mirror in the middle of it. Paulė glance at her reflection – on her eyelashes she could see what seemed like large salt crystals.

'Where are you?', the young woman shouted irritably.

In a corner room an old woman dressed in black clothes, like ones worn for burial, was sitting on a low chair used for peeling potatoes. The black colour made her white bony face look even older. She was using one hand to rock a baby in the cradle, and by her feet, on a soft scarf laid on the floor, two small infants of breastfeeding age, probably not yet able to walk, played with rattles.

'Oncė, tell me where the other girls are. I've brought along a friend to play with them,' said Prancė.

Paulė looked around the room which smelled of the poo and pee of small children – thrown around on the floor were rag dolls, a teddy bear, and wooden blocks. She would have been happy to play here.

'The devil take her, the old woman's sleeping with her eyes open,' Prancė grumbled unhappily.

At that moment one of the little girls made an attempt to stand up and banged her forehead on the floor – she immediately started screaming, followed by her sister and then by the baby in the cradle. The old woman woke up with a start and lifted both the screaming girls onto her knees and began vigorously to rock the baby in the cradle.

'Whom have you brought here?' the old woman shouted pointing at Paulė with her chin.

'The daughter of someone from town.'

'What?'

'I'm telling you – the daughter of someone from town!'

'I can't hear anything you're saying!'

'Where are the other girls?'

'What?'

The children were screaming so loudly that it was impossible to have a conversation, so Prancė grabbed Paulė by the hand and dragged her out of the room. The two of them went back into the dining room where the table was not yet cleared and crumbs still on it after breakfast. Here the screams of the young children could no longer be heard.

'The girls are probably outside,' said Prancė.

'So, I'll stay with you.'

Prancė sighed showing her discontent, picked up a pile of greasy plates and turned to go into the kitchen with Paulė tripping along behind her.

'Do you do all the tidying up here on your own?', Paulė asked.

The young woman didn't reply but piled the dishes into a large enamel bowl.

'You've worked her for a long while?'

'Yes.'

Don't you get bored?'

'No.'

'And what's your favourite colour? Mine is lilac.

Prancė again sighed her discontent, then wiped her hands on a wash cloth and sternly said:

‘You should get dressed and go out into the yard. I’ll fetch you your outdoor clothes.

‘I’m happy here, everything’s fine’, Paulė exclaimed but the young woman was already walking off in the direction of the anteroom.

The young woman gave her the clothes and looked on as the girl dressed slowly.

I got this fur coat as a present from a hunter. This is bear fur,’ boasted Paulė.

‘Don’t tell tall stories,’ the young woman said dismissively with a wave of her hand.

‘It really is!’, Paulė said stamping her foot, determined to tell the story of how her mother and she had visited the family of a hunter, had eaten beaver meat and had given cow‘s milk to wolf cubs separated from their mother.

‘Chose what you want to put on, come on now.’

‘I’m afraid of your dog,’ muttered Paulė, slowly buttoning up her fur coat.

It’s tied up, it’s not going to do anything. The girls are somewhere in the yard, you’ll be friends.’

Paulė hadn’t yet managed to place a foot on the path when the dog came bursting out of its kennel pulling on its chain and clacking its fangs. If the chain were to break, the dog would immediately jump on her and bite her nose off, rip her woollen hat off and then crack her head open like a nut with her brains spilling out onto the snow. God would smile down from heaven, wave to have her soul rise faster and shoot up to heaven. Paulė had seen the brains of hens, pigs, calves, cats and mice – they all looked horrible. The brains of a human being would look no different. Thinking about that, that a poor soul had to live in such an ungainly, unattractive body, she crossed the yard taking the path cleared of snow and turned into the orchard. Apple trees, snow-covered and frozen from the cold, bushes covered with a thick blanket of snow, and clumps of frozen flowers were sleeping in the orchard. The mounds of snow reached up to her knees, she stopped to breathe in the fresh, nostril-tingling air. The dog had stopped barking. From the other side of a snow-covered hedge could be heard laughter and then looking closer she saw the girls, the daughters of their hosts, pulling sleds along the village street.

Hey,’ Paulė shouted at the top of her voice.

The girls waved and dashed off into the distance. Paulė didn’t know if it was worthwhile trying to catch up with them because she would have to go past the angry dog again, besides that, if they had wanted her to join them, they would have called out to her. And perhaps those weren’t the same girls? She hadn’t really been able to make out their faces from a distance. And besides that, she couldn’t really remember what they looked like.

She stopped where she was for a while and then made her way, again tramping through the snow, back to the house. Woody creepers were twisted around the window shutters. Suddenly someone’s pale, ghostly face with a head of matted hair appeared through the window. The girl ran back into the yard where the dog’s angry growling could be heard again.

‘Quiet, you spawn of the devil, quiet,’ a man shouted.

The dog, still growling hoarsely, got back into its kennel. Paulė smiled shyly at the man with a spade. He lifted his cap and again began furiously clearing the snow, as if he were in competition with someone.

‘Perhaps you’ve seen where my mum is’ Paulė asked.

’Who’s that?’

‘Her name’s Elžbieta. We came here on the train.’

‘I don’t know anything, I haven’t seen anyone.’

He carried on clearing the snow, getting closer to the barn beyond which were wide fields, white as boiled sheets. Keeping what she thought was a safe distance, Paulė silently followed the man clearing the snow. The old man took no notice of her and carried on working in front of the barn, his breathing becoming faster, until he got tired and stopped. He began to rummage around inside his cotton wool padded jacket. He pulled out a dark small bottle, took a slug and shook his head.

‘Are you still here?’ he asked, finally paying some attention to Paulė.

‘I don’t have anywhere to go. My mother’s not around, I can’t find the girls,’ she said.

’So, stay with me,’ he said grinning widely.

To Paulė he seemed quite nice, just very old, and not husband material.

From a distance, Paulė watched patiently as he fumbled with the lock of the storehouse for a long time until he managed to pull open the door swollen from the damp and disappeared into the darkness. Paulė began to sniffle because of standing around in the cold air and started to stamp her feet. She didn’t want to catch a cold and be ill in this house, to lie for hours on end with a fever in that narrow room with the walls covered with pictures of saints. Of course, that would be better than being ill on a train. Paulė remembered last winter when she had had a terrible earache. In the railway station her mother had smeared rabbit fat as deep into her ears as possible, and from a glass pipette put drops of some kind of liquid into them and then wound a scarf around her head to protect her ears. Despite all that the pain did not go away. On the train Paulė laid her head on Elžbieta’s lap and sobbed while the fat, having warmed up, dripped out of her ears and mixed with her tears under her chin and soaked into her scarf and hair. The ticket inspector checked Elžbieta’s tickets for the longest time with the other passengers asking what had happened to the girl and why was she crying like that. A lady even tried to offer Elžbieta a tablet to give to her daughter. Paulė knew that it was unpleasant to be ill amongst strangers.

‘Come inside, I’ll show you something!’, she heard the man shout from the storehouse.

It was semi-dark in the storeroom because the only source of light was a tiny window – and that was covered with a film. She could make out the shapes of rakes, a spade and other implements the names of which she didn’t know.

‘Where are you?’ asked Paulė.

‘Come closer, I’ll light a lamp,’ a voice answered.

Only then did she see that there was another room beyond the first one and so she stepped boldly into the semi-darkness. The man lit a small lamp revealing a metal barrel he was standing next to. Paulė look around – in this part of the storehouse there were crooked wooden shelves full of various boxes, glass jars and bags.

‘Come on, don’t be afraid,’ the man urged her.

‘I’m not afraid,’ said Paulė.

The man opened a metal lid riddled with holes and shone the light on the inside

of the barrel. There were perhaps five or six rats inside. They began pushing against one another, getting up on their hind legs, one of them jumped up and almost managed to catch the barrel's edge. Paulė stepped back. The man covered the barrel and put two bricks on top of the lid.

'How do you like that?' he asked.

'Why do you keep them in a barrel?'

'I'm going to breed the best variety.'

'How?'

'I put them live into a barrel and don't give them any food. They become hungry and begin to fight amongst themselves. They attack one another until the strongest one is left alive. And then I repeat everything from the beginning – I throw in some new rats to battle with the survivor to see what'll happen.'

'And what happens?'

'At first it was a certain big rat that was the winner, I marked its back with some tar. But now, it seems, it's also been finished off. There is one who's smaller but very rapacious and he's the winner at present. Well, we'll see what happens. I'll have to repeat the process a few more times and then it'll become clear if I've been successful.'

'And what'll happen if you are?'

'When I am, it'll mean I've identified the strongest rat, I'll get it used to good food – bacon, bread, milk and once in a while I'll throw in a new portion of small rats for it. Then, when it's dependent on the food I give it and considers me its master – I'll release it. It'll hunt mice and rats like a cat,' the man said chuckling.

'You live with the houseowners?'

'With the Petkus family? No, God forbid,' he answered, laughing again.

'And how are you going to get the rat to come home with you? On a leash like a dog?'

'We'll see.'

The man blew out the flame in the lamp and came out of the storehouse. Paulė felt a shiver run down her body. It was as if a small rat, invisible to the naked eye, was using its sharp claws to make its way through her veins, poisoning her with cold, and brushing its unclean tail across her throat.

The man was again having trouble with the key in the lock.

'I managed to get it in and now I can't get it out,' he complained.

'You need a new lock.'

'We'll soon fix that problem,' he said with a wink and pulled out the small bottle from inside his coat and after several sips, frowned.

The man asked Paulė to go to Prancė for some fat with which to grease the lock. The girl sneaked past the dog which was sitting in its kennel and no longer barking. The door to the house was bolted, so she banged on it with her fist and then saw a tin bell hanging on the wall.

It was Prancė who opened the door. The shouts of children could be heard coming from inside the house.

'There's a man asking for some grease for a lock.'

'What man?'

‘I don’t know his name. He’s the one breeding rats.’

‘Quiet!’, the young woman shouted, turning her head into the house, and then returning to the kitchen.

It was very noisy - the children were screaming and shouting in the rooms, the dog began barking outside, a black mare turned into the yard, her mother and their hosts were sitting in the sleigh the mare was pulling. Paulė ran out to meet them.

In the evening she was sitting at the table together with four of the girls, who were chatting quietly amongst themselves and paying no attention to Paulė. The snoring of the babies could be heard from the corner of the room, and the muffled moaning of the master of the house from the other room. From all of that cacophony of sounds Paulė was able to make out her mother’s level voice, and then the moaning again. The mistress of the house wasn’t at the table nor was there any sign of her. Prancė ladled out a portion of dumpling soup for each of the girls who obediently began to eat it, their spoons making a noise when touching the bowls they were eating from. Paulė felt a little hurt that the girls weren’t including her in their conversation and so she fixed her eyes on the soup and sipped it slowly, while wondering what the rat trainer was doing and to whom she hadn’t been able to take the grease – as soon as the houseowners had returned he had disappeared.

‘Would you pass me the salt?’ one of the girls asked suddenly.

She looked the same age as Paulė, only a bit smaller, facially very similar to her father.

‘This one?’ she asked, holding out a clay egg, which she had looked at the evening before.

The girl shook the egg above the soup and raising her eyes to look at Paulė smiled shyly.

‘Can your mum fly on a broomstick?’ asked one of the other younger girls and was immediately cuffed by her sister.

‘Shut your mouth, Genovaitė,’ hissed the older girl who had cuffed her.

They carried on eating in silence. Paulė slowly ate her soup which was now getting cold. All the girls got up from the table at the same time and, carrying their bowls, went off to the kitchen. The master of the house moaned again. Paulė thought that she didn’t want to spend any more time in this house.

After supper, which, as it turned out, she didn’t get to eat, Elžbieta on her return wasn’t talkative, telling her daughter to sit in silence. They were whiling away their time in that room with the pictures of the saints and with clouds of smoke drifting up to the ceiling. Paulė was stretched out on the bed, tracing her finger on the pages of her ABC book – since she was already able to recognize the letters, she was now independently learning to read double letters. The ABC book, a gift from her uncle, was new and still smelled of printer’s ink. Elžbieta, turned away from her daughter, was at the table, slowly sucking on a rolled-up cigarette and from time to time turning a corked flask filled with a whitish liquid in her hand.

‘I’m really bored, mum,’ Paulė finally said and closed the book.

And then she sniffled again.

‘I’ve probably caught a cold,’ she complained but her mother wasn’t listening to her.

Angry at Elžbieta, Paulė clambered off the bed and went out of the room. The room she was going through was dark and unpleasant. She would gladly have tried to find the rat breeder, but she didn’t want to go out into the cold. She listened hard and was surprised at the deafly silence. She tried to leave the room, but the door wouldn’t open and tried to get back to her mother but the door to their room was also bolted.

‘Mum, mum, open the door!’ Paulė shouted, rattling the handle.

It seemed to her that in the semi-darkness the creature with matted hair in the window she had seen earlier while standing in the orchard was coming towards her.

‘Help!’ Paulė wanted to scream at the top of her lungs but not a sound came out of her mouth.

The monster was coming closer, clacking its white fangs, and already opening its mouth to bite her head, to suck out her brains, when Paulė suddenly opened her eyes and realised she was on the bed, feeling the hard ABC book under her back.

‘Shh, shh, don’t scream,’ said Elžbieta, stroking her daughter’s head.

‘I was having a nightmare,’ the girl cried.

‘You’ll soon forget it.’

‘I don’t want to be in this house any longer, I don’t like it here.’

‘We’ll leave as soon as I’ve finished my work here.’

‘And when are you going to finish?’

‘The day after tomorrow.’

‘Take me with you tomorrow,’ she pleaded through her tears, ‘ I don’t want to be here on my own.’

‘Fine, I’ll take you with me,’ Elžbieta unexpectedly agreed.

In the morning they had to get up early – it was still dark. Paulė really wanted to sleep but tried not to show it and hurriedly put on her outdoor clothes. In the kitchen the mistress of the house was putting the last of the freshly baked buns from the baking tin into a basket. The women went into the yard, a person dressed in shabby clothes was harnessing a horse, while the master of the house shone an oil lamp on him. The mare, on seeing the housewife, neighed loudly as if in complaint. The angry dog was nowhere to be seen – perhaps it had frozen to death in its kennel? The women folk sat in the sleigh – the master of the house was in the front holding the reins, with Paulė squeezed in between Elžbieta and the plump woman.

‘Can the horse see where it has to go?’ asked Paulė warily, looking around in the semi-darkness.

‘It can’t see but it knows where to go,’ answered the master of the house.

They were sitting quietly, only the clip-clopping of the mare’s hooves could be heard, and they had hardly left the village when dawn began to break. The housewife opened the wicker basket and pulled out several buns that were still warm.

Paulė got one with bacon in it.

‘So, you don’t like it in our house? Is that why you wanted to go with your mum?’ she asked the girl.

‘I’m used to travelling with mum everywhere,’ Paulė answered with her mouth stuffed full.

‘Our daughters are simple village girls - you need to approach them yourself and not be afraid of them,’ continued the housewife.

‘Paulė gets on better with adults,’ intervened Elžbieta. ‘Besides that, she’s already seen such a lot and been everywhere with me there’s nothing strange in taking her with me.’

‘She’ll be able to cast spells soon as well,’ the master of the house sitting in front said in his deep voice.

No, when I grow up, I’ll be a pastor’s housekeeper, I’ll live in a large house and won’t want to leave it to go anywhere,’ countered Paulė.

‘But you do know your prayers, don’t you?’ said the housewife laughing.

‘Aha,’ Paulė answered in a serious tone of voice.

‘Did your mum teach you?’ asked the master of the house turning around.

‘My uncle,’ she blurted out.

Elžbieta squeezed Paulė’s gloved hand. The talk then turned to uninteresting things and Paulė stopped listening. They drove past the fields and turned into a thickly wooded forest, the pine trees had so much snow on them that the branches were barely able to bear the weight. The path through the forest was rutted so they had to move slowly.

Paulė believed that small dwarves lived in the forest and that they had dug deep caves under the ground. They slept with their arms around badgers because badgers are clean animals – they worked as servants for the dwarves. Paulė imagined herself living in the forest and crawling into a burrow to be with the dwarves – it would be cosy and warm there. Without being aware of it she dozed off and when she woke up, they were travelling along the village road.

‘My husband’s brother has a good heart but let’s not tell him anything – he doesn’t believe in spells,’ the mistress of the house warned them.

The mare turned into an untidy yard lined with leafless bushes. The house looked neglected, the windows were smoke blackened. They were met by a little dog the size of a slipper – it had begun to bark at the guests from a distance in a thin voice. A balding man just in shirt sleeves came out of the house.

‘Well, you’ve turned up early. Did someone bite you in the tail for you to come flying here like this?”

‘Hello, Jonas, we have a lot of work waiting for us at home today and we need to be back before lunch. Look, we’ve brought some guests with us,’ said the master of the house, waving his hand at Elžbieta and Paulė.

‘Our guests are from town, they haven’t seen how country people live, so we wanted to show them,’ said the master of the house laughing and gave Jonas the basket with food in it.

‘Well, blow me down,’ said Jonas grinning widely. His teeth seemed very strange to Paulė – they were very small and ended in a sharp point like that of a pike fish.

‘It’s all very interesting,’ said Elžbieta smiling.

‘But before that why don’t you come in to warm up?’

Jonas’s house looked tidier inside than from the outside – perhaps because there were very few things in the room. He hung a cauldron of water above the stove.

‘We’re not going to be drinking that much tea,’ laughed the master of the house.

‘Don’t you worry, it’ll be used up. It’s the last Tuesday of the month, you may remember that mum used to say Tuesday is cleaning day,’ responded Jonas.

He invited the guests into the living room in which the only furniture was a roughly nailed together table and two benches. He took the food out of the basket – the buns, half of a yeast cake and something else which Jonas didn’t put on the table but took to the kitchen.

‘And where did you find these fine ladies?’ he asked bringing in the tea.

Paulė got a cup with a broken handle.

After breakfast, the master of the house unharnessed the mare, Jonas opened the barn door and led it into a stall with a brown stallion in it. They neighed and the stallion sniffed the mare’s rump.

‘This could be a long ceremony,’ said Jonas spitting.

‘My daughter and I will stay on and if something were to happen, we’ll know, ‘ said Elžbieta.

‘You mentioned you’d bought a new sowing machine?’ asked the master of the house.

‘You haven’t seen it yet? Let’s go, I’ll show it to you. As for you women, you stay on to look and if anything happens, call us.’

In the barn there was also a goat stomping about , three bacon pigs squealing in a stall, and a cow mooing by a trough.

‘Jonas is a serious man, but he just can’t find a normal woman,’ said the mistress of the house as if a little proud of him.

‘Men like that always find it hard to find a good woman,’ Elžbieta responded politely and then focused her attention on the mare.

Paulė had seen horses coupling before, so she wasn’t in the least surprised when the stallion with the longest erect willy jumped up on the mare and began going into her. Once he had jumped off, the mistress of the house came up to the stall and called the mare to her. Then Elžbieta drew out of her pocket a syringe prepared for this matter and pushed her hand under the mare’s tail. Paulė’s job was to keep watch by the door and say something to Jonas to stop him if he were to try to come into the stall to see how the stallion was getting on.

‘Just apply it as deeply as you can, I don’t think you applied enough last time round,’ Elžbieta admonished her, giving her the syringe with the whitish liquid in it.

The mistress of the house pulled up her skirts, looking around apprehensively.

On the way home, Elžbieta asked for the mare to be stopped because she needed to poo. They stopped. Paulė watched her mother stepping through the snow drifts and going deep into the forest. In no time she could no longer be seen – she disappeared behind the snow-covered fir trees which looked as if they had powdered sugar poured over them.

‘Why is she going so far?’ muttered the master of the house in irritation.

Paulė had got lost in the woods more than once – that always happened when she was with her mother. Elžbieta would walk more quickly than her daughter and then suddenly disappear. At first Paulė would start to cry and call for her mum and run around in all directions. Then, once she had lost hope she would collapse on the mossy ground. She had no understanding of how much time she'd been left on her own when her mother would unexpectedly reappear, coming come out from the shadow of the nearest bush or tree and acting as if she had never disappeared in the first place.

Sometimes Paulė was surprised to realize that her sense of time was so different from that the sense of time of adults but this time it seemed to the master and mistress of the house, as well as to her, that mum was taking an age. Elžbieta had never before disappeared with strangers present.

'Perhaps we should go and look for her?' the mistress of the house wondered.

'Can I go with you?' Paulė shouted.

The master of the house helped his wife clamber out of the sledge and lifted Paulė out by her armpits. The mare neighed and shook itself. They followed Elžbieta's footprints in the snow.

'Perhaps a wolf has attacked her or she's become unwell?' the mistress of the house said in concern.

'No, I'm sure not,' Paulė exclaimed.

At a dip in the ground, the footprints stopped. The mistress of the house and Paulė started calling Elžbieta by her name. The woman was waving her arms around in despair, looking like a rag doll. They turned around to go back, the woman hurrying, not looking back at Paulė who wasn't able to keep up. The girl burst into tears. Wading through the snow, they got to the sleigh. Elžbieta was already sitting in it and chatting to the master of the house.

'I had a runny tummy,' she exclaimed. 'I apologise if I frightened you. Paulė was sobbing and, once lifted up into the sleigh, she snuggled up against her mother's shoulder which smelled a little of mud.

They slowly continued their journey. The girl, now calmed down, was staring at the mare's rump, remembering what the mistress of the house had used to apply to her nether regions – it would be funny if in spring it would not be the mare that gave birth to a foal but the woman. Paulė tried to imagine a foal the size of an infant, it being washed in a bowl and laid next to the mother. And several hours later it would be prancing around the house. Paulė dreamed one day of owning her own pony.

The girl was looking through a gap in the door. The mistress of the house was lying down with her skirt rolled up and her legs wide apart. Elžbieta was humming and waving a censer of burning herbs above the woman's noonie overgrown with light brown hair (her mother always told her to call it 'the female reproductive organs').

Before that, the master of the house had with disgust been chewing a cockerel's raw heart which he himself had ripped out of the dead bird. He had caught the cockerel - without the other members of the household seeing him - in the barn and finished it off by hitting its crested head with a ladle. He had put the opened-up bird in the outside kitchen for Prancė to pluck, gut and stew with soured cream. Paulė observed how for

him to be able to eat all the heart and not to sick it up – for each bite to go down more easily – her mother had had to prepare some tea for him to drink.

'Well, it's not all that horrible, and it gives you strength,' said the master of the house, sipping the tea from the cup Paulė had given him.

In the evening Paulė went with her mother and their hosts to the bathhouse behind the house. A long, narrow plume of smoke was coming out of the bathhouse chimney. The master wasn't carrying anything, Paulė was carrying the towels, Elžbieta her suitcase, and the mistress a jug with tea and a basket full of food.

The bathhouse was made up of two parts – in the entrance room there was a clothes stand, a roughly nailed-together table with a bench, and a steam-stained mirror hanging on the wall. In the other section through the steam could be seen a stove with rocks in it, a two-tiered bench, a small window at the bottom, and a bucket of water. Before closing the door, Elžbieta drew a circle in chalk on the uneven wooden floor and placed six copecks inside it.

The hosts disappeared in the thick steam together with Elžbieta. Paulė had been told to sit in the entrance room and prepare the refreshments – she spread a woven cloth on the table, took a side of bacon wrapped in newspaper from the basket, put out dried apples, sliced the bread, and unwrapped a towel with sweet pastries in it. She took a bite from a temptingly looking bun and deeply inhaled the pleasant aroma of the bathhouse. Behind the door the splashing of water and her mother's voice could be heard – she seemed to be singing.

Paulė tasted a little bit of this, a little bit of that more than once, and if not for Elžbieta she would have devoured everything. Coming back from the steam bath her mother admonished her. She was naked but for a towel wrapped around her, steam rising from her heated body. She sat down, drank some tea straight from the jug and gave some to Paulė. The tea and the warmth made Paulė drowsy. She leaned on the table and put her head on her hands. She was half asleep, half awake. Through the membrane of sleep, she heard the outside door opening. She didn't have the strength to lift her head. Someone familiar sat down next to her.

What the name of this creature was she didn't know. The creature was sitting at the table. Paulė saw the newcomer's bare calves covered with thick black hair. The creature's voice sounded unusually melodic; it was as if Paulė were listening to a song. Or as if she were lying in a glass coffin and a prince was walking by. He would bend down, kiss Paulė on the lips, and a warm tear of his fall on her cheek and red flowers begin to blossom in her body. It was impossible to make out the words of the song. Elžbieta was speaking with this creature:

'You say you sailed away? Did I understand you correctly?

The sweet voice said something in response.

'Well, imagine that! So, where would you have gone? Do you think you could begin to live like normal young women?'

Paulė yawned.

'You're not talking nonsense, are you?'

The intonation of the voice rose, it seemed that a climax was about to happen – and the refrain begin.

‘No, I won’t give it to you!’ the voice shouted angrily.

Paulė wanted to lift her head but despite her attempts she couldn’t. So, then she tried to bite her lip to wrench herself out of sleep.

‘A child is a child. There’s no reason to wake her now, let her sleep.

Paulė felt that while running her legs got tangled up and she was about to fall on her knees – she flinched. She realised she was falling into an ever-deeper sleep, so, trying with all her might, she began biting her lips and her tongue.

‘You’ve never asked for a head for a head before. What’s happened?

The creature’s voice now came from farther away, the guest had moved from the table.

‘What, won’t one girl be enough for you? Let her fall out of the wagon and her end will be quick. What do you say?’

Paulė felt the taste of metal in her mouth – she had bitten into her lips until they bled.

‘But she won’t have to suffer for long, alright?’

Paulė then heard a quiet bleating and snuffling, as if somewhere on the other side of the wall there was a barn with animals. She got up, passed right through the log wall and found herself in front of the pig pen. Two gigantic rats were sitting there. In place of the cow stood the mare. Buns were growing under the mare’s belly. Paulė broke one off and threw it to the rats in the pen. Then she saw a baby’s head in the rat pen. Its long hair was dishevelled, its eyes tightly closed, its mouth barely open, and in place of where its neck should have been – was a mosaic of white bones, red meat and yellowish fat.

Paulė yawned. Morning was breaking. She was in the room, in bed. Elžbieta was holding her hair out of the way as a green, horrible mess thick like algae streamed out of Paulė’s mouth. After she’d finished vomiting, her mother wiped Paulė’s mouth with a damp towel. She was shivering and felt weak, she wanted to sleep but her body shook again and again from waves of nausea.

Elžbieta said that Paulė had food poisoning, and she herself has spent some time in bed and had occasionally vomited. Prancė brought them some tea from time to time and washed out the bowls they had vomited into. The master and mistress were also unwell – they didn’t have enough strength to get out of bed.

‘Tell them this is what had to happen,’ Elžbieta said in a weak voice.

When they got better, the mistress of the house saw them off to the station. She gave Elžbieta an envelope with money in it and an icicle of sugar to the girl. She confessed to Elžbieta that if she didn’t give birth to a boy this time, her husband was going to sleep with Prancė.

‘Everything is really going to turn out fine. Have you settled on a name yet?’ Elžbieta asked brightly.

‘Gabrielius perhaps…’

‘That’s a good name,’ she said touching the housewife’s shoulder. ‘My wish is for Gabrielius to have a smooth entry into this world and grow up healthy and happy.’