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PARTNER IN TRANSLATION

VILNIUS REVIEW

Augustė Gilytė (A Novel of What Could Have Been)

Translated by Kotryna Garanašvili | From literary magazine *Vilnius Review*

14 June

Hello! It's me, A.G. You can call me Asta. This is my diary. If you are reading these words, please close it right this second and put it back because everything written here is private.

No, that's not right. Private will make them want to scheme, read, and seize. Turn one piece of private property into another.

Or even worse – collectivize it.

Please don't read!

And who am I supposed to address? Myself? Makes no sense. This notebook is nothing but empty pages before I speak. Nothing more than empty palms.

Address the reader? Reader who is not there, put it back. Put it back, *ya govoryu*! Close it, Vladukas, and get lost.

Scram!

Good day, Mister KGB man! Hello! Hello! Name? A.G., daughter of Baltramiejus. But you can call me Asta. I'm not making this up. It's my father's name. Not my fault. What were my grandparents thinking? You should know. Check the basement archives, you fuckers.

Pardon my Ruyan talk, diary.

Four in the morning, wide awake. I put on *Fojė*, but so quietly that I can hear mice having a feast two floors below. The dorm walls have big ears – radars, more like. Press your ear to them and you'll hear a hum. People say it's the death rattle of Soviet plumbing. The testament of the sewers. The last will of shit. The composition of a Lithuanian soul, *chisto teoreticheski*, can be determined from a sample at the wastewater plant. Things we flush out of our insides! Just pull the little black knob on the porcelain!

In the old days, the nation awakened its silenced truth with ritual murmurs in the kitchen, my father once said.

These days, it happens in the shitter. Alone: no witnesses, protectors, submissive listeners. Truth all by itself, individual and private, stuck to the rust-stained ceramic.

Ah yes, Comrade Lieutenant… Or is it Colonel? Colonel, just in case. I'll shoot it straight at you like an AK bullet to your skull: girls poop too. Smoke on that!

Ten minutes to five, which means… It's already late. I keep playing *Kitoks Pasaulis* on repeat, *zanovo, zanovo, zanovo*. And again.

I go to bed late.

[…]

29 June

My classmate K. and I went to the Zelionie Ozyory lakes. She was more understanding than E. You should read more advice columns, she said. Try the *Kompanion* app because it helps, really truly. If you fail to satisfy or to be satisfied, you should fake an orgasm. I didn't understand why it should be faked. It seemed like faking defecation or loyalty to the party. An orgasm, like party discipline, either exists or it doesn't. These things can't be faked.

We were equal in background (daughters of intellectuals) and shared the same social status (philology students), yet I still couldn't help comparing our bodies in bikinis. Her tummy and hips looked like they were poured from a biscuit baking tray. Her breasts, just as small as mine, filled others with greed. She was the one the volleyball players ogled, not me.

Maybe it was her chocolate tan? Despite roasting myself in the sun back and front, I looked pale like the skin of a boiled chicken. I asked her to rub me with tanning oil. She asked me to do the same.

She lay down on her stomach, unhooked her bikini top.

She turned her face to me. I felt her gaze through the tinted glasses.

And as if sunstruck, I forgot how to breathe.

30 June

I'm looking into the little mirror. I'm fixing my hair. First, I tie it into a bun, then into a ponytail. Then I leave it loose. Hair falling freely over my shoulders hides the flatness of my chin and the size of my nose, softens the thickness of my brows. I detect Jewish features. Maybe I'm a Jew? I have no one to ask how much genetic truth there might be to this assumption. My grandparents are dead. I don't ask my mother, because anytime she's asked about family history or origins, she responds with the offended dignity of a *Ruyan zhenschina*, warning me not to poke around the family bones. In essence, I like myself. Most of the time. And I understand that this *moladaya zhenschina* in the mirror is of no interest to anyone.

Last summer in Crimea, this young woman gazing back from the mirror met a man from Poland, a gentleman ten years her senior. Unlike the typical imperial type, he began not with breasts and vodka but with wine and literature (though he wasn't very well-read). It was my first time talking to a foreigner. He stroked my knee, filled my glass, offered treats, hoped for something.

Enchanted, I would either fall silent for a minute like a stone or giggle across the entire restaurant like a fool. The cocktails loosened me. He thanked me for the evening, paid for the wine and… He kissed me on the cheek and left. Nothing happened. The next day I noticed him by the pool with a pretty wife and two children.

I had a shower. The hot stream washed my neck. I stared at the warped shower door, the cracked plastic. I watched the water rushing down into the depths of the pipes, over my too-large toes – one of my many flaws – over the hair on my lower belly, which I had no reason to shave since there was no one around who could, by

merit, stroke my lower belly. Through the hot steam, I watched my shins, thighs, loins, and I knew I was all good, hunky-dory, a girl like any other.

The rot was not within me. Something was rotten in the sociokingdom.

[…]

15 August

Got drunk and forgot what I'd written. I'm truly deranged.

But I'll burn it next time. For now, I must write. If I don't write it down, I might forget the important things that are happening. Closer… I'm getting closer.

I don't go to the dorm every day. I sleep either at the manor, or at K.'s, or in my parents' empty house. When I'm in my parents' empty house, in my mind I repeat lines from an old book that I absolutely hate, just like all the other memories from school. But the phrases simply fill my head, syllable by syllable:

I fear to confess that this duty
Was not to the party, but to the word.
The word that needed rescuing from death,
That needed to be put in a shape,
So it could testify across the ages
To its own being and perhaps its life.

What does this even mean? Why do I know this passage by heart?

I murder the days that I don't record in my diary. If I don't record them, it's like I didn't live through them. Not that there's much to live through. Summer days are dull and uneventful in the Imperial Sociocapitalist State. They feel shabby, like potato haulms in drought. In winter, things are happening, there are some unexpected side-turns. But in summer… Every day vibrates like a taut string. It doesn't give a tremble or make anything else tremble. Perhaps this is why the diary is so trivial. And secretive. And the way I had hoped to write! The way I wanted to put things down! Oh, the private matters I shall split open! Mother probably expected a similar effect from the herring pictures she posted, thinking they would give her some of that social sparkle. Fat chance. Shit chance.

If only it would rain…

Last week I was on duty at the manor.

I'm writing it down retroactively: I was on duty at the manor.

I'm writing it down, but I'll fucking burn it. Tear it up and burn it.

Something is actually happening, so I write: I visited the abandoned manor library. A library is not abandoned as long as it has at least one reader who visits and more than one book. The manor library was alive like a fallen tree, not alive in itself, only as a habitat for insects and fertilizer for the soil.

Some books were painfully familiar. The collected works of Baltušis, Krėvė, Mieželaitis, and so on, literary drudgery, the tar of aesthetics, the stone of the canon (around your neck). I noticed a Geda booklet I hadn't read, Šliogeris, a few from

Aputis. If I wanted to read them all, I'd have to stay here until the next party congress. In the library room, a few boards had come loose from the boarded-up windows, so more light seeped in from outside. I could only study until dark because lighting so much as a candle in the evening meant signing my own sentence, and books are useless without light. The parquet was excellently preserved – it didn't creak. K. pulled a binder of periodicals from the shelf.

He wiped the dust off the table with his sleeve, and it rolled into small clumps. He opened the binder. It was a collection of newspapers printed on paper yellowed with age: *Revival*. A whole year fit into one binder.

When the authorities shut down the internet few years ago, decades of memory and current events sank into oblivion. Everything that had happened and was known in the internet era could have been invented, fabricated – there was no way to check. The things K. was always telling me about couldn't be checked. We used a low-bandwidth substitute for the internet called *Syet*. Turning on *Syet* in the shelter would be like dashing down Lenin Avenue naked and hoping no one noticed. We received a normal internet feed from the satellite, but even that wasn't fully safe.

I remember my father crying when he talked about the periodicals turned to ash. Before, memory lived either in newspapers or online. When they began destroying periodical archives in libraries, the internet had already been shut off. From then on all you could rely on were chance stories passed from mouth to mouth, distorted by the chain of transmission – embellished, breaking apart. Recent history was erased, the events of the twenty-first century drifted into people's fragmentary and fading recollections. You could only count on today, only the present, only this moment in the abandoned manor library with my dear K., the only one who is real to me.

Listen to one such erased story.

Once upon a time, a Lithuanian leader in exile, Kęstutis Berglundas, went on holiday to Rome. Ruyan spies learned his holiday plans and carried out an operation: they quickly took over the little hotel in Rome, where he had reserved a room and planned to rest. Hitmen and thugs instead of cooks and housemaids. But the spies' target No. 1 chose a trip to Sicily instead, and the ISB operation flopped. No newspaper or webpage will ever confirm how much of this legend is true.

Now the dusty, yellowed gold treasury of old news unfolded before my eyes. That was K.'s intention – to acquaint me with erased history. He turned the fragile pages: "From yesterday you'll learn something about today. I don't have the patience to read so much." Thus began my era of *Revival*.

16 August

We finally went to Trakai. A little break from service, team building. At the checkpoint I played the coquette, and it worked: the soldier's eyes were on my legs, not on the documents. I was wearing a light mid-thigh dress with little poppy dots. Mother would have approved.

K. liked it too. After our swim, we made love. It happened without words and with ease of something nature itself had intended. He turned the Niva onto a narrow road before the cemetery, where fewer holidaymakers went. We walked a kilometer to a small secluded beach in the shade of ash trees.

Across the lake, children splashed in the water, while their broad-shouldered mothers discussed their concerns and the shortages. All working-class women talk to each other about shortages, children, and shortages.

We swam. He remained silent and uneasy. The fine hairs on his slender body were beaded with droplets. He pressed against my back with his cool chest, and a hot shiver swept over my skin from neck to ankles. The children's chatter on the other shore blended into white noise. I soaked into the shore grass like lake water and watched birch leaves chiming in the wind, shooting off silver sparks of sunlight.

K. drew away from my back and jumped into the water again. My body trembled, and the birch leaves trembled like a million tiny mirrors.

"Won't you swim anymore?"

I didn't answer. I kept rustling. For him even the act itself had a Platonic origin – better not to imagine things. I turned toward K., watched him toweling dry, and felt grateful. In the world of duty he gave me lightness and simplicity, and that was far more than any Party woman could hope to receive.

He curled up on the blanket with a smoldering roll-up, sunk in his thoughts, his eyes fixed blankly on the other shore. I looked at his profile.

"You know…"

I searched for words.

"You know, you could have anyone. Every other one, at least. Why do you sleep with me?"

He fell silent.

"Because you're interesting to talk to."

He propped himself on his elbows on the blanket and let his gaze dive into the depths of the lake. His wet hair, black as tar, curled around his shoulders like serpents. Then I observed, with plain irony, that we never spoke openly about sex or about Lithuania. As though those two things were self-evident. As if they were meant to happen on their own. Though they certainly were not. So he told me everything. He glanced at the children playing on the far shore, then began.

The Edita Complex: Normal People Don't Smile

Translated by Rimas Uzgiris | From literary magazine *Vilnius Review*

Chapter I

He was standin' right in front of me. He took off his Adidas sweatshirt…

He came up to our table.

To try on a sweater.

The market's full of sweaters and they're all the same, all the same price, but he came up to our table.

Here first of all.

And second of all – who tries on sweaters at the outdoor market, especially when there's no mirror? Especially when it's November.

If it doesn't fit, you can come back another day, and we'll exchange it.

But he was tryin' it on.

He was tryin' it on right in front of me, having taken off his A-di-das.

Monika was here with me for company, and Aunt Margarita was walkin' around somewhere with stuff to do.

But he was standin' right in front of me, having just taken off his Adidas sweatshirt, and…

…and then it dawned on me. The light went on so brightly I got scared. That white sleeveless t-shirt, that so-called undershirt which everyone wears around town in summer, that t-shirt, even if it wasn't black, but white, that shirt was just like Johnny's from *Dirty Dancing*.

What does *Dirty Dancing* have to do with anything here? Well, since I first saw that flick, I can't get it outta my head, and now it's like a volcano's gonna explode, 'cause I finally connected the dots and get who the actor reminds me of.

Johnny's name is Raimis.

And now Raimis is wearing a white t-shirt and tryin' on a sweater right in front of me.

There's this one Michael Jackson video that begins like a horror flick. But then it shows Michael Jackson himself watching the horror flick in the movie theater. Everyone around is all afraid, his girl is clutching his arm, but he's just smilin' and chowin' on popcorn. I probably looked the same watching *Dirty Dancing*, maybe not smiling so much – but my face all focused and lit up by the screen.

Though at first in that *Dirty Dancing* it's all in this fancy resort with a girl whose parents are annoying and all the events are like at your auntie's sixtieth birthday party. There it's all American, but it still feels like any old family party over here. People are having fun, though it looks a bit like they forgot how to actually have fun.

In the movie, there's this family that's come for a visit: the dad's a doctor, the mom's I don't know what, and two sisters. One of those sisters, the one who sometimes even reads a book, is called "Baby." She doesn't care about those family parties, that whole carnival of fun, but wants something real. That something real comes in the shape of a dancer. The dancer's name is Johnny.

It so happens that Johnny's dance partner can't quite dance anymore. So Baby – called Kroshka in the Russian, Mažylė in Lithuanian – I can just make out the original under the dubbing… Beib… Baby… Well, that Baby offers to take his partner's place. Yeah, I would too. Though it doesn't seem like there'd be any chance. I mean, I don't know how to dance, and look at how long those dancers' legs are… They're longer than my cuz Gražkė's relationships with any number of her boys. Who's ever seen a dancer with short legs?

Oh, what's the difference what happened when? I don't know if the plot can tell you anything. The whole thing just fits me. The movie seems to talk to me and me alone. Just think: one of them works in the summer, dancing, and the other reads a book and mopes about not knowing what to do with herself. One is from below, you know, without any standing in society, without any money, a real uncertain type, and the other has this dad trying to set her up with these college students to marry her off to high society. So they both rise up against the annoying crap around them: Baby against her family's fantasies and restrictions, Johnny against the resort's rules. 'Cause when you think about it, what are a resort's rules in the face of true love?

And Baby's path looked to me a bit like mine: from those large, innocent eyes, from that kind of clumsy girl, to a passionate dance partner. That's gonna be my path too, just that I haven't started on it yet.

If I had to tell you about it, what I remember most about the movie is how it made me all melty. I don't know how you watch a movie like that in a crowded theater. It's like you suddenly realize that somethin' is changing, like in the Michael Jackson clip when he becomes a werewolf, and you feel somethin' melting inside of you like snow. You're changing, and you understand that when you get out of the movie you won't be the same as before. But nobody else sees what's inside of you. Everyone else sees the movie and it seems like they just see it. What gives? Nobody gets worked up about it like me. Sometimes, I didn't even see the movie 'cause I'm thinkin' what to feel about the guy next to me whose elbow I'm touchin'. What does that touchin' mean? I just seem to be melting. Everyone hears my heartbeat. Everyone feels the hot waves washing over me. I'm a burning fire whose name is Edita.

So yeah, *Dirty Dancing* is a movie with a real man, Johnny, who knows how to lead a woman in a dance. And not only there.

Johnny knows a lot more than that. So that's what's down with *Dirty Dancing*.

When I got outta the theater I knew that I know Johnny.

I was probably in love with him already, but could only admit to myself after the movie that he is my fate.

Johnny's name is Raimis.

And now he's standing right in front of me, wearing a white t-shirt in the month of November.

Well, not anymore.

While *Dirty Dancing* was playin' in my head, he managed to try on the sweater already. Now I just see Raimis's back growing distant in the crowd.

My eyesight blurs. I take a deep breath.

Monika asks me if I'm alright.

I'm lookin' at Raimis's disappearing back.

"That was Raimis, from your yard, right? Hey, you OK?" asks Monika, again.

I take another deep breath.

Everything's blurry. Sweatsuits, sweaters, t-shirts, scarves, hats… everything's ripplin' like the images of Tibet I saw on TV. There, they've got these poor little houses with lots of colorful little flags stretched from one house to the other. But here I don't see any mountains on the horizon. I don't even see Southside's high rises from here. Raimis is out of sight too, and I'm standing like I'm frozen solid.

Yeah, Raimis is from my yard.

"Take the money," says Monika.

But now, he's from somewhere else, not from my yard.

He's from *Dirty Dancing*.

I suddenly see what I hadn't seen before. What maybe no one else, no girl, has seen or understood. I guessed his secret. Now I feel how close we are, I feel the connection…

Of course, nothing really connects us. Nothing, except for the fact that we're here, in this city, and we're tied with those invisible colorful garlands of flags that stretch across the whole city, from the marketplace to the Southside apartment blocks. You could say that one of the yards of those blocks does connect us. And that's where we'll meet, Johnny.

I look around – a huge crowd in the market. Everyone's lookin' for Italian quality at Chinese prices. People believe they can find it. How? I don't know. Their hope is as unbreakable as Stalone's stubbornness to be the best boxer. And if they find somethin' here, buy somethin', then my hope to be with Raimis isn't so empty, 'cause I got plenty of stubbornness, and I got patience too.

At the table next to us, selling cassettes, they're playin' this incredibly sad song, the one by that singer with a shaved head and big eyes. In the MTV video, her eyes are all shifty like it hurts her to look at the camera. Her eyes are so big that it looks like they can fit all of our sadness and sense of loss. I don't think it's a funeral song, but it's super sad. Maybe the saddest thing isn't when someone dies but when they disappear in a crowd of strangers…

How will I get with Raimis? That question just seems third-rate at this point.

"I'm fine, Monika," I tell her. "It's just this song…"

"That song is wicked sad," agrees Monika. "Listen, I'll put the money in this box…"

I grab hold of Monika's hand. Not because you don't put money into little boxes around here. You don't. Money needs to be kept closer to your body, in a fanny pack. And Raimis's money needs to be closer to the body too, or more exactly – closer to my body.

Aunt Margarita comes back, and you can smell the peremechs1 from far away.

One is for me, one for her, but she offers hers to Monika. Monika smiles and declines 'cause she's just here to keep me company and has to take off soon. It's gettin' cold and she needs a longer jacket. Her parents told her, "Maybe you'll find something good at the market. If not, we'll go to a boutique." A boutique… I'm afraid to set foot in them, and I'm not even talking about the prices…

"Take the peremech and hand over the money," says Margarita.

No."

"Why 'no'? Just take it."

"I don't want any peremech." Though, to tell the truth, I just didn't want to give up Raimis's bills. The peremech was neither here nor there.

"You're all pale, take a bite." Aunt Margarita pressed the peremech into my hand, and with my other hand I stuffed the money into my pocket.

When I do something like that, I see myself as if from the side, like in a movie, and I'm an actor. With the money in my pocket, I need to quickly change the subject. What should I ask my aunt? Say something, Edita, now! Quick!

Should I ask, "How much are peremechs today?" Though inflation can cause prices to change every day, you can't talk about that forever.

"I read an interesting story in the paper," I begin. "How two sisters decided to see what they would look like dead. They didn't just imagine it – they bought everything they needed: coffins, flowers, clothes, and they even hired a photographer. He took all these pictures of the older one lyin' in the coffin from all these different angles, and then the younger one decided she wanted him to get a few shots from above. She brought a step ladder, like you use to pick cherries, and the photographer climbed up and asked for more money. The sister didn't really wanna pay, and they were arguin', so the older one couldn't take it anymore and sat up in her coffin and cried out, "Enough!" The photographer got scared and fell off the ladder, broke his camera and his flash and ran away, scared out of his wits.

"So where is the money for the sweater?" asks Margarita.

Just then, someone starts asking for the price of undies. I can feel myself take a step back. Look, life's just too short to haggle over the price of tighty-whities.

"Why are you standing there as if you swallowed a stake? What's wrong with you? Talk to the customer." Aunt Margarita wouldn't have been a teacher if she weren't tryin' to make me a successful entrepreneur.

"Well, if I'm so bad at talkin', why'd you ask me to come to the market, huh?" That's what I say to her in my mind. Instead, I just motion with my hand to show how my mouth is full of hot peremech.

Before stating her price, Aunt Margarita lets out a tirade: "You think we're the robbers here? We pay customs, taxes, and we have to pay for our spot here too, and we have to drive everything from here to Pabalius…" It all ends with her explaining how her husband wears the same undies, and they're very comfy, no pressure marks, and he won't wear anything else now… three litai for two.

She wasn't exactly lyin'. The undies are like see-through. They'll be gone after a few washes. So there's nothin' there to rub you or press. What difference does it make that she's been divorced from that husband for years?

So I'm holdin' the peremech in both hands, and my aunt is about to take the money straight outta my pocket, sayin', "I need change." Right, the undies are three litai and she's gonna give bills back as change.

"Ow!" I cry.

My fingers squeeze the peremech and the meat slowly presses out like the caramel in a Mars bar commercial. It drops to the ground, grease drippin' everywhere. I hold it out towards my aunt and she instinctively takes it. I see the grease drip on her hand like in some slow-motion scene in a movie. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, how did that happen?" Most importantly, Aunt Margarita's hands are all greasy and she won't be stickin' them in any pockets. We look around for something to wipe them with. Raimis's bills stay where they are. I grab a newspaper, clean my hands, and pass it to my aunt. "I have to go," I tell her. "Monika asked me to help her. She's lookin' for a new jacket."

Aunt Margarita is wiping her hands with the newspaper.

"I'll keep the money for that one sweater," I say, slapping my pocket. I want my aunt to be able to add everything up alright at the end.

She nods. I disappear.

On my way home, I couldn't believe how I managed to stand up to my aunt and keep Raimis's banknotes. It's usually impossible. I'm amazed how things go with her. I think I'm sayin', "No," but I hear my mouth sayin', "OK." You can't wrangle over anything with her. Maybe I'm too kind-hearted. Yeah, too kind. That's the only reason I help Aunt Margarita. For a second there, with the peremech in her hands, I saw her flustered face and thought she might lose it and never invite me back to the market to help. But everything turned out OK.

The real reason I come to help is so I can explain to my parents why I don't ask for money and how I help pay the electricity and other bills. I needed to establish my kind-heartedness. When I enrolled in the vo-tech high school, I started knitting stuff, then helping my aunt … and no way do I work in a video store.

The video rental store is no outdoor market. In a market you need to shout about your Italian sweaters, how cheap they are, you've gotta grab people by the arm and just about stick your goods under their noses. In the video store, the door jingles and the clients come up and ask you what you have. Even if they don't really know what they want, they'll still end up leavin' with a couple of movies. In the market, though, they scream and shout and then some schmuck comes up and starts haggling. Nobody haggles in a video store. At most they start an argument over whether to rent *Kickboxer* or *Bloodsport*.

In the market, everyone's lookin' for Italian sweaters, def not handmade local ones, and what they want are good ones, by famous designers. And the prices? Those can't be much more than for Lithuanian ones. It's not hard for us to take a Turkish or Chinese sweater and sew on a label that says "Made in Italy," which you can buy on any street corner. That's all you need to do to make people happy – they get what they wanted. Tibetan monks don't achieve happiness so easily. There you have to sit still, like forever, and not eat, not even want anything. But not wanting anything and feeling happy are a lot easier with a sweater "Made in Italy" than without one.

If some granny decides to come back and complain that the sweater shrank after the first wash, then it's easy enough to answer back and put her in her place. I mean, she bought shit for peanuts while expecting a good product that would last for life. So how did it shrink? Nobody else had their sweaters shrink, only you. Nobody comes back here with any complaints, so maybe you just washed it at too high a temperature? Did you read the label first? So you see, you didn't pay attention to how gentle and sensitive this material is, and now you come and complain. What can I do about that? Should I give you a new sweater every time you wash the old one? That's not how this works, you understand.

The granny gets it. She really didn't look at what the label says. She walks away promising herself to always look at the label. There she'll see that besides "Made in Italy" there's nothing else written. So you see, the market is not the video store. You buy something here – you won't be returning it after a day because it shrank. That's not how this business works.

These days, everything seems to be about what to buy and where to sell. If someone writes a novel about this time, then it'll be full of undies, panties, bras, and these peeps who search for Italian quality at the price of peanuts. And I don't wanna read any novel like that. It's not interesting. I like movies. I'm interested in another world.

Movies don't show those little details. They get to the heart of the matter. And that's something just now I can really feel and smell. Believe me, I'm not talkin' here about any peremech.

I take the money out of my pocket. I sniff it. Honestly, it has no special scent. What matters is that I know whose bills they are. I feel Johnny in them – my Raimis. The warmth of Raimis's hand, the scent of his skin, his energy – it's all in those bills. Invisible threads have tied us together, or those invisible garlands of flags. Now, there exists something that will pull us together. If he held that money in his hand, that means he'll hold my hand. I can feel how our feelings are gonna burst out of us – not like grease from a peremech – but like a fountain. You'll see.

Our story will be like a big, beautiful Hollywood film.

The Buttons of the Nameless Partisan

Translated by Romas Kinka | From literary magazine *Vilnius Review*

Alina
1946

I'm no partisan. Quite the opposite – I'm afraid of a lot of things. I avoid looking directly into a dog's eyes, never mind standing around gawking at fights or drunks brawling. I try to be as distant as I can from things. I wander around on the edge of forests and only go home as it's getting dark.

I can't open the shutters, I can't even light a candle. And that's because our house is no longer our house.

Nowadays the only place to be safe is in the woods, to wander around there, to talk with the crows and the sparrows, to commune with the tomtits and the clouds. That's why I'm drawn to go deeper into the woods – to try and endure these toxic times, to get away as far as possible from the occupation, the third in four years. First it was the Russkies, then the Germans, and now the Russians again. I even have a hideout – a place in the swamps. The Russian extermination battalions* don't come by here, just the odd deer or an old elk on its last legs. I've tamed a fox, and that's my life. I bring it food – it doesn't look well, perhaps it's sick. It's not in the least afraid of me. It's a poor sorry creature – like everyone else. Dreaming of escaping anything that demeans us both. Once this war is over. And there's not the least sign of that. The days are being counted not in hours and not by the sunsets or sunrises. They're counted by the number of corpses. There were nine the day before yesterday. In the Ūla River colored red. They were shot while crossing the river. Their bodies were then desecrated and piled one on top of the other**. They were instantly recognizable but stripped naked. They had been surrounded, none managed to escape.

Grigoriy Vasilych, a newly appointed major, was in charge of the operation. They call the killings search or clean-up operations. I found out where they're staying and who feeds them. One of them has Marė as a lover on the other side of the road. I'll have to get hold of some snake oil or something similar. I've got everything planned out already, and I'll meet up with Marė. Only not now, but later. We must make off with the bodies and bury them like human beings, covertly bringing a cart in which to put the bodies after dark.

It's midnight, the guard is drunk and has gone off to Rutkauskas's place to warm up.

* Translator's note. These were paramilitary units under NKVD control.

** Translator's note. The bodies of killed Lithuanian partisans were publicly displayed in a square or main street as a warning to others but also to watch if there was any reaction from the public to catch any likely sympathizers.

We quickly get hold of the bodies by their legs and their heads, one after the other, and put them in the cart. This time only two, Bear and Sorrow* – more wouldn't fit. We take them to the cemetery and hurry to put them into the earth, just below the surface. There's no time to dig any deeper.

We go back to get the others, but there's already a commotion! The paramilitaries and the police are there – we can't get to the bodies. We pretend just to be looking and they immediately ask, "What, don't you know who they are, you bitches?"

"No, no, we've never seen them before."

We find a partisan's jacket behind a spruce tree. I recognize it as Kęstutis's. And two pairs of shoes. We construct a make-shift raft and put everything on it. We light a candle – a Thunder Candle**. And then we let the raft drift away, the shoes disappearing into the distance, towards the eternal, unoccupied sea.

Linden
1948

As the partisans were attacking Merkinė***, we were having our Russian literature lesson. Vilis and I knew the attack was going to take place today, we just didn't know when exactly.

And here I am sitting in the second row, Vilis in the last one. We exchange glances, we're pretending to be studying. But what kind of studying could that be, especially on a day like today.

Vincas the newcomer is standing in front of the class reciting Mayakovsky, yesterday's homework..

Lenin
Lenin
Lenin
Lenin
Lenin
Lenin –
He lived and lives on.
He lived and lives on.
We wept tears of sorrow,
We carried his body to the mausoleum –
*Only a small part of Lenin lay in the grave****.

* Translator's note. The Lithuanian anti-Soviet partisans used noms de guerre.

** Translator's Note. A Thunder Candle is a long, thick beeswax candle blessed at Catholic churches on Candlemas Day, representing the Light of Christ and associated with Our Lady of the Thunder Candle. According to tradition, it was lit during thunderstorms to ward off lightning and could also be put in the hands of a dying person or lit at a funeral.

*** Translator's note. Merkinė is a small town in the region of Dzūkija in southeast Lithuania. Lithuanian partisans were particularly active there after the second Soviet occupation from 1944 on. Anti-Soviet partisan activity in Lithuania continued into the 1950s.

**** Translator's note. From the poem "Vladimir Ilyich Lenin" by Vladimir Mayakovsky.

Blah blah blah, blah blah blah… It's enough to drive you crazy.

Someone at the back of the classroom farts – probably on purpose. Everyone starts laughing. Ivanauskas pays no attention to the farting. He's staring out the window, looking at the snowflakes.

Vilis being Vilis, makes fun of Vincas's Suvalkian accent*. The class bursts into laughter again. Ivan wakes up from his snowflake reverie, thanks Vincas, and says children like this are the future of Soviet Lithuania.

Ivanauskas tells Vilis to go to the blackboard and recite the poem – but he doesn't know it. Not a word comes out of his mouth, and everyone starts laughing again. The teacher, with an impassive look on his face, gives Vilis a grade of two.

Then the first shot can be heard outside. The class falls silent. We all run to the window with Vilis rushing up and pushing us aside. I follow him and also push past to get closer to the window. In the yard we can see a Russian limping along with a trail of blood behind him. The partisans are coming from all sides, with the sound of shots ringing out.

Vilis points someone out and whispers, "Look, it's the Nameless One!"

Yes! The Nameless One is running along the street in front, followed by a group of our people, perhaps ten of them. The Nameless One gets down on one knee, fires a volley from his Czech automatic gun, then falls on to the snow by the side of the road. I can hear the bullets shattering the walls of the school building – it seems the Russkies are retaliating.

When the firing dies down, the Nameless One and the other partisans jump up and run to the shot Russky and grab his weapon. They run down the street towards the district offices, where thick clouds of smoke can be seen, mixing with the snowflakes and covering the whole street.

We look on as if spellbound: the Russkies are getting their butts kicked!

Ivanauskas runs up and tries to push us away from the windows: "Back to your seats, all of you, get away from the windows!"

I obey, but Vilis stays glued to the window, watching, all excited.

The teacher gets really angry, "I warned you… Kubilius, I'm going to get the head master."

Ivan turns to go towards the door, but at that very moment, as if on purpose, shots can be heard again. This time hitting the school's windows. The teacher drops to the floor and scrambles under the table. Vincas pushes Vilis to the floor, saying, "Get down, are you stupid or what?!"

"What are you doing to me?!" The boys start throwing punches at one another.

Lynx, the Nameless One's right-hand man, a terrible womanizer and a real dandy, runs into the classroom. Even now, with a peacock feather stuck in his cowboy hat!

"Stand up, get in line, quiet!" he shouts. "Are you all alive?"

Vilis stands up and salutes him.

"What are you all doing here? Merkinė is free!" Lynx announces and points his

* Translator's note. The Suvalkian dialect is spoken in the region of Suvalkija in southwest Lithuania.

pistol at Lenin's portrait hanging above the blackboard. "Well, who's going smash Lenin's face in?"

Vilis gestures with his eyes towards Ivanauskas hiding under the table. The partisan goes over to Ivan, bends down, and says, "Perhaps you, sir? Hurry up, there's a lot of work waiting for us today."

The teacher crawls out from under the table, climbs up on a chair, and on tiptoe reaches up for Lenin. While he's taking the portrait off the nail, blood begins to gush from his nose! Lenin clatters to the floor and shatters into pieces!

At first, we wonder if Lynx has accidentally shot Ivan in the head. But no, out of fear Ivan has snot mixed with blood coming out of his nose.

At that very moment, the Nameless One bursts into the classroom and shouts at Lynx, "Stop this nonsense! Let's go, we're pulling back – the Russians are coming."

He pretends not to know me and Linden. Only on the way out, he says, "Take care of yourselves, keep studying. Soon you'll be needed to rebuild a free Lithuania."

Major Grigoriy Titov
1991

Now I am at peace – I lie amongst the moss and the flowers. In Antakalnis Cemetery*, where at night the wind rustles the artificial flowers. I'm not at all angry. It's strange that nothing is left. Neither the beliefs nor the convictions that were my steel rails – straight and strong. Leading to a bright tomorrow.

Where did all this come from? From my childhood. My mother would recite poems about Lenin even while she was brushing my hair and also did that before I went to bed. My father too, even before they took him away because of his love for German music, used to repeat, "Be a man, a Soviet man. Be a wall between us and them. Because they are leeches on the healthy body of our Motherland."

I knew my calling from childhood: "To serve the Motherland! To fight our enemies! And to protect the future from darkness!" And if necessary to sweep them all away. To sweep away the bandits** as well as their families – everyone who supported or helped them. Not a trace of the bourgeois nationalists would remain here.

We deported whole families, and when necessary, tore children away from their mothers and sent them to boarding schools or to families of decent communists. To be adopted and re-educated to become human beings. How else could one change these fascists? We deported them and wrote our reports. We did everything and anything that had to be done.

They also didn't take pity on us, not one bit. How many times did I nearly die from being shot or poisoned? Something was put in my soup. My comrades flew me to Vilnius in a helicopter – barely in time. The doctors pumped through my every orifice and flushed out my insides. I could have died at any moment, anywhere. Secretly, I even yearned for that. If I were to die, let it not be like a dog or

* The cemetery is in the Antakalnis district of Vilnius.
** Translator's note. The Soviets called the Lithuanian partisans bandits.

tied to a bed. Not in a care home, but with my head held high, like a soldier. With a weapon in my hands, with a flag and a song.

When everything finally came crashing down, when it all fell apart at the seams, some funny old guy with glasses, whose surname sounded like a swear word, started to speak on TV and announced a demonstration. My heart leapt – here it was, the opportunity! I was old, but I still had a voice, and I could raise a flag. A real revolution always begins with the first corpse, with the first hero, who falls but with his will unbroken. And that hero can be me!

We're driving, we're marching, we're shouting – our Yedinstvo![*] My arms may be old, but they're strong from my days at the front. And our women are as hard as rock.

Gathered at the Supreme Council, we were given a task – to break down the doors and drive out those fascists. They promised us that if even one of us were to fall, the tanks would come immediately. There were snipers on the roofs, and the Pskov special forces were ready too. All it needed was a spark.

And I yearned to be that spark.

The gates began to give way; it seemed victory was near – one of our men pushed his way in. Then another and after him a third. It's true that with me being the closest, I heard the third one's voice as the door was shutting: "Guys, don't hit me…"

What a coward! We had agreed not to take even a single step back!

We tore the door open again, but instead of shots being fired, water was poured on us. Water as cold as ice from fire hoses.

I stumbled home after midnight, soaked through and with a cold.

One of my lungs was already weak, with a piece of shrapnel, right by my spine, there from the war. It started singing its own song. I felt things would turn out badly – I had a fever, chills, and shortness of breath.

I was shaking like a dog. I poured myself a glass of vodka – it had no effect. I had another glass – I felt even worse.

I lay down and covered myself with all the blankets I had, but the shaking only got stronger.

I began to gasp for air, but the strange thing was that I started to feel better. My lung stopped wheezing, and my mother came in. She was the same as always – smelling of farm soap and bread. She put her hand on my brow, and I began to feel better. It was as if there had never been any battles, no NKVD, no Dzukian forests, no Hungary, and no Vilnius. Only my childhood. There was a small apple in my mother's hand. She said, "Taste it, Grishenka[**]. Take a bite, my child, get stronger."

I died before dawn. They found me several days later – the neighbors noticed the smell and called the authorities. They carried me out quickly, not showing me to anyone. My coffin was closed during the funeral.

And here I am now. At peace. Under a birch tree.

If anyone were to ask if I'd choose to live the same life, I'd say I don't know.

* Translator's note. Yedinstvo (Unity) was a pro-Soviet organization in Lithuania, active from 1988 to 1991, against Lithuanian independence. It was supported by the Soviet military and the KGB.

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Perhaps not. Perhaps I would've chosen less, but more. Perhaps I would've loved more, learned to bake an apple pie. One like my mother's – even Olenka couldn't, even though she tried.

Eugenija
2018

My name is Eugenija, I'm fifty-two years old. Today, like every day, I'm going to the intensive care unit to visit my husband. Sometimes my daughter Algė goes instead of me, but not often. She doesn't have any great desire to visit her father. That's how they've been since her childhood, distant from one another. Even though their names are the same.

I make dumplings at home, but I have a feeling that again he probably won't eat them. Again, I'll have to eat them myself. It's the third day he hasn't wanted to eat anything.

He can hardly walk, but despite that, he won't let anyone help him to go to the toilet. I've tried to go with him, but he simply won't let me. He even gets angry. He went on his own, leaving his walking sticks outside the door, and then I hear a crash. I run in and see my Algis lying in his faeces. He's hit his head.

I sit him down, clean him up, and take him back to his bed.

"D'you remember our journey to Lourdes?" I ask him.

He nods and closes his eyes.

I stroke his hair, slowly, gently. As if he wasn't my husband but a naughty child too exhausted to fall asleep.

"D'you remember how we got lost? Past Lyon. We went into the mountains, taking a shortcut, traveling along the winding roads. We were looking for a small hotel."

My Algis smiles, but his eyes are still closed.

"But there was no hotel, as bad luck would have it. Not even a motel. D'you remember how you were driving?"

He shakes his head.

"With one hand on the wheel." I start giggling for no reason. "And where was your other hand, hey? What are you going to say now, you good-for-nothing?"

My husband's face flushes a little, but only for a second, and soon pales again, his face adorned with light blue circles around his eyes.

"When I couldn't stand it any longer, you stopped the car, d'you remember? In your hurry you even ruined my jeans! No, not my jeans, I'm talking nonsense – my zipper. We made love in the dark, right by the car. Someone drove up to us, stopped, shone a light on us, but quickly drove off. You began laughing, remember? You couldn't stop, you had a laughing fit. And you got me laughing as well."

He's no longer smiling. I take his hand and put it on my chest.

Algis looks around, twisting his head on the pillow with difficulty to see if anyone's listening.

"We've got a room to ourselves, don't worry. Rest easy."

I go on whispering, "This is how it happened the first time round, with us laughing like lunatics. I'll never forget it."

He turns his head and presses his cheek against my wrist.

"You got our sleeping bags and said, 'This'll be our hotel. On the grass.' You didn't say 'hotel,' you used another word. A vulgar one. I liked you when you were like that. And when we got up in the morning, we saw a huge vineyard. Like in a film. Two eagles were gliding in the sky. D'you remember who woke us up? Yes, the gray-bearded old man. We stayed on with him there, we made love while the old man kept bringing us wine. It seems to me we were there for three days, don't you remember that?"

He shrugs his shoulders.

"That young boy, he was probably the old man's grandson. A stand-in for the Little Prince. And there were sheep. Are you tired? I can keep quiet – if you want me to be, just nod."

My Algis nods. A nurse comes into the bay. She hooks up the IV, fingers the tube, and goes out without saying a word. You couldn't even hear her steps – it's as if she glided through the air.

"Are you in pain?" I ask and start to stroke his temples. Gently, with my fingertips, barely touching his long-unwashed grey hair. He shakes his head.

"I can stop massaging you if you don't like it, just tell me. Show me… In Lourdes, remember, you told me to go and bathe in the miraculous spring. In St. Bernadette's cave, in that grotto… I don't know if it really was miraculous, but it was very cold. Perhaps it was a little miraculous. Don't smile, I'm serious. There is one thing you don't know. A nun there told me to take all my clothes off, wrapped a towel around me, and showed me where to kneel – in the bath. They're made of stone, brr… Marble. She told me to pray in my own language – three Our Fathers and three Holy Marys. She then took me by my armpits, lifted me a little, and then lowered me into the water up to my neck. It was ice cold! I wanted to scream but nothing came out of my mouth – just croaks like a frog. It took my voice away. The nun said, 'Make a wish. God is listening to you now.' And I blurted out that I wanted a child even though I wasn't ready for it. It was simply the first thought that came to mind, seriously. But the doctors had said, you remember, that nothing would happen. After the operation we needn't take any precautions! They were wrong. I wondered if it was a miracle or not. What do you think? Because our dear Algė was probably already in my belly. Can you hear me? Are you still listening to me?"

I put my head on his chest and listen – his heart seems to be beating. I glance at the monitor – the green snake is moving and wriggling.

"D'you want to sleep?"

I can hear a knocking at the door – it's Algė. Speak of the devil.

"How's dad?" she asks.

"The same… he can hear everything, and he smiles," I reply and turn back to look at him. "We were just talking about you."

Algė sits down on the side of her father's bed and takes his hand.

"I'll stay on, you can go, get some rest," she says to me.

"I'm fine, I might just run to the toilet."

"Take your time, you don't have to run. Get some coffee from the machine."

I get up and tiptoe to the door.

When I get back, he's already asleep. The only sound to be heard is that of the monotonous drip, drip sound of the IV – it's impossible to make out if it's in the ward or somewhere else. Perhaps it's the rain.

"You can go, there's nothing for you to do here at night," I say to Algė. "Go home."

"And what about you?"

"I can sleep here if I need to. I'm used to it."

The doctor had got me a foldaway bed, and it's in the nurses' room folded up. I go and get it, put it up, and lie down when I get sleepy.

Algė kisses dad on his forehead and tiptoes out.

After she closes the door, there's a deafening silence for a couple of minutes until there's an annoying beeping sound. I turn to the monitor – the green cursor is no longer moving. There's only a red light flashing.

They'd told me we still had a couple of days left…

I sit down and begin to grieve even though we had long prepared for this. We had even agreed that I shouldn't cry. He would go first and prepare a place for us. We had agreed that we wouldn't bury him separately, but both of us together. Later, after both our ashes had been put into the same urn.

"Go, don't be afraid." I take his hand and kiss it.

Vilis
2019

We're walking along the beach, Saulė and I. The wind is blowing in from the sea. She's carrying a bucket, I'm not carrying anything. I'm just watching where I step. I'm no longer steady on my left leg. We're collecting stones. We discuss each one.

"This is a dinosaur skull, but half of it has been bitten off," she says.

"Who bit it off?"

"Fangy Wingy."

"And who's that?"

"Someone who flies around. And has very sharp teeth."

"And why did it bite off the dinosaur's head?"

"Because the dinosaur was bad. And you can do that to bad creatures."

"Who told you that?"

"I saw it in a film."

I nod. Saulė throws the dinosaur into her bucket. She throws it in and forgets about it.

"What are we going to do with all the stones?" she asks.

"We'll throw them out on our way home. We'll mark the way."

"Why?"

"So we can find our way back tomorrow."

"Won't the birds eat the stones up?"

"No, they won't. Nobody eats stones."

"On the way back?"

"Yes."

"But why do we need to know the way back?"

"Because there isn't any other way to get there," I say. "We always come back here."

"Where?"

"To see if I've gone off course. Before I forget everything. I'm afraid to lose my memory. My memory is already somewhere far away. The winged creature has eaten it. A lot has changed. Sometimes you don't know if what you remember actually happened or if you made it up. A picture that you've made more beautiful or perhaps the opposite – uglier."

"Have you ever shot anyone?" Saulė asks.

"Where did you get that idea from?"

"Mum said you fought. In a forest."

"That's not the question you should be asking. It would be better for you ask if I met the person I'd be very happy with."

"Did you?"

"I did. You. And not just you. I met a lot of people like that. Your granny Marija was also one of them."

"Were you sad?"

"When I thought too much about things, I was. I then tried not to think."

"And now?"

"Now I can think."

Saulė and I find the longest sticks we can and draw zigzags in the sand. Loops, mazes. I draw them and she walks along them. After that we switch. Now I limp along the paths she's drawn. She laughs. Until we get too tired. She picks up her bucket with the dinosaur's head still in it. She climbs up onto the dune.

"Draw a pig!" she shouts. "A big one."

I draw one. Three circles, one inside the other – the nostrils, the head, and the body. Dots for the eyes and triangles for the ears. Hooves. A curly tail.

"Well, how's that?"

"You always draw the same one."

"I don't know how else to do it. Come here, you can help me"

"How am I going to help you?"

"Pigs like pearls. We can decorate it with some of your stones."

She looks at me seriously.

"That's a hog and not a pig. Hogs don't wear pearls."

"Where did you get that from?"

"From wherever," says Saulė, jumping down from the dune. She runs up and draws a moustache and a beard on the pig.

We both look at it. The sea is roaring. The hog is looking at us.

Mothers

Translated by Kotryna Garanašvili | From literary magazine *Vilnius Review*

I remember that bright, unusually warm autumn day. Gazing out the window, I saw Jonas and other workers fixing the road. It was the first time I paused to think how strange it was that none of them sat in class with us. There weren't many of them in the city. Whenever I spotted one in the street, I could hardly stop myself from staring, even though we all knew it was rude. True, some said they didn't mind. They were surrounded by superstition. That they were not equally intelligent, for instance, so there was no point in educating them too much. That they could turn savage if not properly supervised. That's what Brigita said, and her face became very strange as she spoke those words. I was skeptical. Animals act according to their nature. It's not their fault that they have sharp fangs and hooked claws. But I didn't dare contradict Brigita, even though she studies from the same books as we do.

Ingrida was sitting in front of me, and when I glanced at her long, gleaming hair, it occurred to me that she resembled Jonas in some way. The thought seemed so absurd that I didn't even follow it further. As if she had heard it, Ingrida turned and winked at me with a mischievous green eye. It made my chest twinge. I don't know why I was the one she chose as her friend, but it made me very happy. She said it was because I didn't believe her, and it puzzled me. So I felt ashamed for having dared to think such nonsense about her and Jonas.

I had a chance to follow that thread of thought on Saturday, market day, when my mother and I were sitting behind the stall, selling vegetables and fruit from our farm. I spotted Jonas from afar as he made his way toward us. He looked out of place among the women busy with their shopping. He did, however, have one advantage – being physically stronger, men could carry heavier loads. I had never seen Jonas up close before, so I studied him with curiosity. He differed from the others of his kind. His face was different, I decided. His hair was reddish, his skin pale and lightly freckled. A few of the townswomen – Ingrida among them — also took pride in their red hair.

Jonas's hands were incredibly large, furrowed with bulging light green veins. Mother often said that this was what hard physical labor did to a person – and men were made for it. Mother stared at Jonas. Her eyes shone with a dangerous, unrecognizable glint. The canvas of our tent cast a dense shadow, separating us from the customer. The sky was piercingly clear.

Jonas tensed strangely and dropped a few tomatoes. Mother bent down to pick them up, but instead of putting them into the bag, she handed them to him, her fingers brushing his knuckles. Their hands touched for a moment. A shiver ran down my spine. I quickly looked around to see if anyone had noticed. The danger passed when Mother withdrew her palm. Jonas took the vegetables and said goodbye qui-

etly. Once everything had been sold, we returned home. A sweet scent of leaves and chestnuts rose from the ground, tinged with the breath of oncoming frost. The car climbed slowly up the hill where our beautiful little wooden house stood brooding. Almost all the houses were designed for two or three people, except for the multi-story buildings in the city center. Once, in a photograph, I had seen an enormous apartment block, like a gray cardboard box in which a little girl had cut out small windows. No wonder humanity had been so unhappy in those days that people sometimes killed themselves, leaping from those very windows.

The town was so small that a car was unnecessary, yet we had one; it proved useful for farm work. Way past its prime, it would take ages at the charging station. Mother managed the minor repairs on her own or asked for help from the women who worked on the farm and had a better understanding of machinery.

A few maple trees grew beside the house, already shedding golden and red leaves, which we didn't sweep from the path because they were so pleasant to look at.

When we returned home, the fading sun filled the kitchen with molten-copper light. The bouquet in the vase had left a sweet fragrance hanging in the air. I drew a deep breath and let it out.

We prepared dinner in silence, though we usually listened to the news.

"Mother, why did you touch his hand?"

"I didn't," she denied.

"You did."

Mother stopped slicing the vegetables and looked at me intently. I had noticed similar things in town before, but they hadn't mattered so much then.

She chose her words carefully, though she normally never needed to.

"Sometimes I feel lonely."

"But there are so many women around. Why would you…" I didn't finish the sentence, because it wasn't clear what had happened.

"It's different."

"You're not with one of them… are you?" I peeled a potato, not daring to raise my eyes. The long strip of skin curled in a perfect, unbroken spiral before dropping into the bowl.

Mother laughed.

"Well, don't you know?"

In truth, I did know. At least in theory. They taught us about it at school. And yet I could not understand why something had suddenly become opaque. I raised my eyes to Mother. In the half-light, her face was light blue, filled with gentle sadness. Her hands hung at her sides and one foot was poised as if ready to step forward, though there was nowhere to go. As though there was something missing. And yet we had everything.

Back then, I could not have imagined that it would be Jonas who, many years later, would prompt me to write about the Western city as I remembered its order and its way of life.

Ingrida lived in the town hall with her mother and some ten women who worked there. Some oversaw the household, and others handled various administrative tasks. We were all a little afraid of Aurelija, Ingrida's mother. Her voice carried command; there was power in her gestures. Ingrida didn't yet possess those qualities, but the girls already looked at her as a future leader, the one who would inherit Aurelija's position. Women usually came into such roles through elections, yet no one doubted that this would be Ingrida's fate as well. Among all of them, she stood out less for her appearance than for her maturity and subtlety.

I often went to visit my friend. I liked the bustle of her home – the steady stream of women pouring through the doors, each intent on settling one matter or another that required greater or lesser approval or support from the community. A few of them hovered about as well, sweeping the yard, pruning the trees in spring, mending fences, or carrying out other tasks that we could just as easily have done ourselves. But we had to allow them to feel like useful members of the community. To tell the truth, not many women saw them that way. They said aloud that we were equal, though they believed otherwise.

The square, with its round ancient cobblestones, had been undergoing endless repairs for quite some time. I walked slowly, watching with curiosity as the new tiles were being laid. Sweaty and flushed, the workers wiped their faces, even though the day wasn't very warm. In the middle of the square stood a damaged statue of a woman with one hand pressed to her chest. No one knew what it represented.

I stepped into the vast vestibule of the town hall, which hosted celebrations and dances during the colder months. The floors were laid with worn dark wooden boards, and a lingering scent of flowers hung in the air, even though there were none there today. I ran up the wide staircase to Ingrida's room. Tucked behind the curtain, she sat in a patch of sunlight on the wide, low windowsill, reading. I parted the curtain and sat down opposite her. From my backpack, I pulled out Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. We often spent time like that, and afterwards we would discuss what we had read. I longed, someday, to see Aurelija's library, for I had heard it contained rare books. They were not forbidden. Things were not forbidden, only forgotten. Later, Aurelija would tell me that this was far more effective.

I couldn't seem to concentrate.

"Listen… Have you ever wondered that they have mothers too?"

"Well, of course. They didn't just appear out of thin air," my friend replied without raising her eyes from her book.

"But the women they live with usually aren't their mothers," I persisted.

Ingrida sighed and closed the book. A shadow of irritation passed over her face; she clasped her hands and cracked her knuckles. She often did that when something displeased her. It didn't affect me. That wasn't what I was asking. I was asking what lay behind all of it.

"Yes, and?"

"Why is that?"

"Someone has to live with them," Ingrida said, beginning to suspect that my questions concealed something, and a note of doubt crept into her voice.

I wouldn't let it go:

"Then why not with their mothers? We all live with ours. At least until we find a partner. Is living with them a punishment – or the opposite?"

Ingrida shot me a strange look.

"What do you think?"

"Someone must want to live with them. It seems that my mother… Just don't tell anyone!"

My friend's eyes widened; for a moment I regretted having said anything. She gently touched my hand.

"Don't worry. I won't."

A noise broke out downstairs, something fell with a crash, and a woman cried out sharply, the words indistinct. We exchanged glances, jumped down from the windowsill, and hurried noisily down the stairs toward the kitchen, where the commotion was coming from. Even before we entered, we noticed drops of blood leading into the room.

In the kitchen, Jonas sat on a chair, pale as a ghost. Morkus stood stiffly beside him, along with several women, while Aurelija knelt at Jonas's side. One of the clerks brought a first-aid kit and handed it to the leader. She opened the case, found the disinfectant and a curved medical needle threaded with suture. All of us were trained in first aid and would have been able to stitch the wound, so I was surprised that it was Aurelija performing the task rather than one of the others.

Jonas's left forearm had been badly slashed. He must have been cutting tiles for the square with Morkus when the accident happened. Shuddering, yet unable to look away, I watched the procedure. Ingrida looked on the verge of fainting. I pulled a chair away from the table and seated my dazed friend in it. She held her breath as if Aurelija was stitching not Jonas's arm but her own. Jonas began to cry without a sound, biting his lip to keep from sobbing out loud. Large tears rolled down his dusty face, leaving shining tracks behind them. I was astonished. We had been taught that most of them didn't experience emotions the way we did, and that those they did feel – usually anger – they were unable to control. We had also been told that they lacked the innate ability to recognize their own feelings, which was essential for a harmonious life in the community. I had never seen any of them cry.

Jonas wiped his tear-filled eyes, and I felt sorry for him. It was not his fault that he had been born one of them and labored every day at the endless construction sites and farm work. Besides, he was very young, though I found it difficult to tell their age at that time. I think he must have been about eighteen.

Once she was done, Aurelija wiped her damp forehead and rose heavily. Her legs must have gone numb.

"I didn't notice when it slipped from my hands…" Jonas tried to explain in a hoarse voice, but no one paid attention.

"Stay here until you feel better," said Aurelija. "Take him to your room, Ingrida," she added, turning to her daughter. But my friend remained stiff in her chair, as if she hadn't even heard her mother.

"What if his hand had been cut off? What then? And what if…" she spoke quietly, then louder. "He's always getting hurt! This work isn't right for him!"

She looked as though she were about to cry, though it was anger rather than sorrow.

Aurelija looked at her daughter indifferently.

"This isn't about you. We'll talk later."

Ingrida sprang to her feet, struck the table with her hand, and ran out of the kitchen.

Aurelija watched her leave without blinking. Then she suddenly turned to me.

"Take Jonas to Ingrida's room and see to him if he needs anything. I have to go out, but I'll be back soon." She gave Morkus a meaningful nod and, turning on her heel, strode out of the kitchen with her entire entourage.

I didn't understand which of us was in charge. Morkus lingered in the dim light, his arms crossed over his chest, staring at me. Then he lowered his head and gave a faint smile. He was the oldest in the room. I was only fifteen at the time.

"I need to get back to work," he said, patting Jonas on the shoulder. "We'll see each other later."

Jonas turned to Morkus with a silent plea, but he only shook his head.

"We have to finish today, and we're short on workers. There's a girl here, if anything," he added, jerking his chin in my direction.

My cheeks burned.

"Come on, Jonas," I muttered, gesturing for him to follow.

He rose sluggishly – he looked as though he might faint – and followed me upstairs. I was so lost in thought that I didn't notice him reaching for Ingrida's door handle. He knew which room was hers.

"You're terribly dirty," I said as we stepped inside. "If you're going to sit down anywhere, take off your clothes."

My voice must have sounded too commanding, because Jonas began pulling off his shirt so quickly, as if Aurelija herself had ordered him. He winced when the fabric caught on his wound.

"Wait! I'll help you."

I stepped closer, and he involuntarily took a step back – almost funny, when you think about it: he wasn't tall, yet he still towered over me. I was smaller than most girls my age; my development had been slow. Jonas could have knocked me to the ground with a single blow. Beside him, I looked like a child.

"Don't be stupid," I said as gently as I could and stepped forward again.

He reeked of sweat. He stood rigid and motionless, his head lowered. I couldn't imagine even the most timid among us behaving that way.

"All right, all right – you can probably manage yourself," I said, though I was curious to see his strange, flat body. "I'll bring you some water."

He nodded without lifting his eyes.

In the kitchen, Ingrida was sitting stiffly again, as if glued to her chair. Morkus was nowhere to be seen.

I filled a glass with water and was about to head upstairs when Ingrida lowered her head onto the table.

"I don't know how she can do it," she said. "Just leave to attend to business."

"So what? Why do you care so much? Nothing's happened to Jonas, even if he's

acting like he's about to die. I've had much worse cuts than that," I reminded her, thinking of the scar that runs across half my right arm.

She looked at me with such anger that I realized I'd been terribly foolish.

"He's my brother," said Ingrida.

One of the last flies of the season buzzed restlessly below the ceiling. Muffled voices of the workers returning from their afternoon break came in from the street. Morkus was shouting.

I had heard that word before. Not in real life, but in old books. Ingrida covered her mouth with her hand.

"Forget it. I didn't say that."

"As if I could," I snapped, unsettled by what had just happened. I had no wish to keep talking. I took the water to Jonas. He was lying on Ingrida's bed with his eyes closed. Bold of him. Perhaps he was pretending to sleep. I was unsure what I was supposed to do next – after all, it was the leader herself who had ordered me to see to him. I parted the curtains, intending to go on reading. I made myself comfortable, but my thoughts drifted at the edges. The noise in the yard distracted me. Outside the window, Morkus was arguing with the women from the construction crew. He threw his gloves to the ground and, spreading his arms in exasperation, sat down on a tidy stack of tiles. Morkus was one of those men – yes, I avoided using that word, for it sounded like a curse – who embodied all the worst traits attributed to their sex, the very traits that had led to the Last War. I couldn't understand how our geneticists had allowed Morkus to be born. Admittedly, I also didn't know if qualities such as volatility and anger were genetically determined or the result of upbringing. In the laboratory, the best fertilized eggs were carefully selected and then carried to term by women who wished to have children. Each woman was given one chance, unless she declined. In that case, the honor was passed on to one who desired more offspring. Every woman had to accept the risk that the lot might fall to her to bear a male child. Such was the price we paid to live in this society. Population control was essential if the community was to meet all its needs. That was what we were taught at school. During sexual intercourse, fertilization occurred only rarely, which is why we needed artificial means. In this way, we could regulate the sex of newborns and create only as many men as were required to sustain the population. Occasionally, a woman conceived naturally, but in our society, by unspoken rule, such matters were not discussed. Most of the time, no one ever found out. I learned that only much later.

Morkus rose from the stack of tiles and returned to work. In many respects, he met the most desirable genetic standards – he was very tall, strong, seemingly made for construction and welding, the kinds of jobs men usually performed. And yet I was beginning to suspect that there existed another quality that determined one's aptitude for a given task, a quality unrelated to physical attributes.

It is said that the world is better without men. There were no wars – the wars they used to start and in which they themselves perished, taking many women with them. Community life was better organized, from ecological planning to the care of psychological well-being. And yet I now felt the urge to question these things. Even

when the sight of Morkus reminded me why all of it was said to be true. Perhaps that was precisely why he was needed – as a bad example, a reminder of why we could not allow the male population to grow.

Watching the workers outside, I nearly dozed off. The sun was already sinking lower in the sky when Aurelija entered the room.

"Hello again," she said quietly.

I turned. Jonas was no longer asleep. He was sitting up in bed, leaning against the wall.

"You probably have a few questions," said Aurelija. "Ingrida must have let something slip." She sat down on the bed and looked at Jonas. I couldn't tell which of us she was addressing.

"I…" I began, suddenly aware that I hadn't had any water in a long while and hadn't eaten since breakfast.

"It will be worse if you start asking others and learn about it indirectly. It's no great secret. Many people know. Jonas is my son."

"Your son?" I managed to climb down from the windowsill. My legs had gone numb and my head was spinning.

"A male child."

"Yes… yes, I remember. A brother – a male sister?"

Aurelija laughed.

"You could say that."

Jonas shifted uneasily beneath the blankets.

"And why…" I ventured, though I was still standing at a distance, by the window, as if the fading light might shield me from this strange conversation. My mother would not have wanted Aurelija to tell me these things. She had always tried to protect me, though I had never felt in danger. For the first time, I began to sense that there was another side to things – some distant, indistinct horror I had glimpsed in Jonas's face. In truth, I didn't even know what I wanted to ask the leader. She, perhaps, sensed that as well.

"Many things seem self-evident because you've grown up in an environment where a certain story is told to you," she said. "Why the world is the way it is. Why we behave as we do. So many things are merely imposed, and in fact have almost no real foundation."

I wasn't sure I fully understood what she was saying in such abstract terms, yet her words caught hold of me.

"So it's possible to create your own story?"

"Not only possible, but necessary," she replied, gracefully tucking a loose strand of her wavy hair behind her ear. "Otherwise, you will always skim the surface and never reach the depths. What you can't see is often the very air you breathe.

"The depths…"

I wanted those depths. They would become my aspiration. I gripped the edge of the windowsill, feeling the slick wood beneath my fingers. Then I remembered that Jonas was still in the room. He had been listening, but saying nothing. Suddenly our eyes met. His eyes, so much like Ingrida's, glimmered with sadness, as if he had grasped something in Aurelija's words that I had not.

Nobody Believes in Devils in The City

Translated by Eimantė Liubertaitė

The devil is not at fault for tempting us,
that's his vocation and trade.
Jonas Bretkūnas, „Postilla"

Chapter I
TRY THE SIMPLE LIFE

– If Rokas' head were a pot, you could lift the curly lid and let out some of the unnecessary thoughts, – the Duck said. – Like when you boil pasta.

– With them out, only his common sense would remain. Alas, Rokas' head is not a pot, – lamented the Wolf.

Rokas Kėsus tried to focus his gaze on the green forest in the distance. The July sun was beating down on his brown curly hair, a huge backpack was pressing against his back, and sweat was accumulating under his black jumper. Was this really what he wanted? At this time of day, the young man would usually be sitting in a cool office, sipping vitamin water and slowly compiling a text with tips on how to create a good account password or some other topic that had already been explored a million times. On this afternoon, instead of staying in the capital, he found himself in the middle of nowhere, where a stretch of gravel road seemed to go on forever.

The Duck suddenly turned on its heel and, kicking up a cloud of dust, tried to move forward in a moonwalk. Kėsus couldn't help not speaking up:

– If my head were a pot of pasta, I would scoop you two fools up with a fork and throw you out, first thing.

The young man knew that such talk was futile – after all, it's impossible to win an argument against yourself. The hyperactive Duck and the gloomy Wolf had been with him his whole life. His parents and teachers, as well as psychologists and psychiatrists with years of experience, had tried unsuccessfully to fight them. One such specialist even suggested that Rokas' mother convince her son to imagine an old hunter who would put an end to his "inner pets". In response to this idea, the Duck asked a rhetorical question, which Rokas passed on to his mother: what would a child have to talk about with an old hunter, then? He was not taken to the psychiatrist again.

– Hard to believe Guntis is from these parts, – said the Wolf, looking around. – Of course, Vilnius does that to you. Allows you to feel at home, become part of something bigger than your origins.

Guntis. He knew every bar in the Old Town, and for more than a decade has been living in Užupis, in a two-room apartment in an attic, the walls of which were almost completely covered up with the photographs he took. Like most die-hard

Vilnius residents, he came from a little-known village in the depths of the country – in this case, Kalniškis. Rokas' friend often boasted about his idea to turn one of the rooms in his family home into an Airbnb and, with the help of tourists thirsty for rural life, brighten up the lonely days of his mother.

Now Rokas has become one of those strange tourists. Because, as he told himself, it was time for a change of scenery. For some time now, he had been unable to shake the feeling that made him long for days when he would open his eyes and actually want to start a new day. Now, every time he woke up, he involuntarily remembered what a bad situation he was in, and it weighed heavily on him. "The darkness will go away, I just need to change my surroundings", he repeated to himself.

But the darkness seemed to have caught up with him in the countryside. At first, the gravel road behind Kėsas became dim, and soon the greyness flooded the ground around his shoes. The arrival of the dark rider was announced by the sound of a horn: Rokas was signalled by a Ford pickup truck from the previous millennium, which had stopped right behind him, its faded light blue facade covered with a thick layer of dirt. A cap-covered head immediately appeared in the side window of the truck.

– Can I tow your invisible car? It's driving so slow! Where are you going, young man?

– Hi! To Kalniškis, – Rokas replied somewhat hesitantly.

He was traveling in the countryside, and in the countryside, you must get along well with the locals.

– Hop in, I'll give you a ride!

The driver shouted because the music was blaring in his truck. Kėsus recognized the voice of Blur vocalist Damon Albarn:

Caught up in the century's anxiety
Yes it preys on him
He's getting thin
Try the simple life!

Once he got inside, Rokas was struck by the smell of cigarette smoke in the truck. The driver who offered him a ride was a tall man in his mid-seventies, with limbs resembling spider legs and barely fitting in the driver's seat. He wore a worn denim jacket and black trousers, and under his beige cap with a visor hid huge glasses and a greying sheriff's moustache. As the truck started moving, his eyes, magnified by the glass, turned to Rokas.

– I'm very curious to know, what will you do in my village, traveller?! – asked the moustachioed man, continuing to shout over the loud song. He didn't even seem to consider turning down the volume.

Kėsus was grateful for the opportunity to rest his legs and take the load off his shoulders, so he willingly answered the driver's questions, not thinking about his throat, which kept catching when he spoke in a raised voice. It turned out that the bespectacled truck owner was Darius Miškinis, commonly known by his surname among the locals.

– I pick mushrooms, berries, all kinds of medicinal herbs, and sometimes I play around with a double-barreled shotgun – that's my lot in life. Born in the woods, you can't become a gardener*, – he laughed. – But I do have a garden, how can one live without a garden?

Rokas liked the cheerful old man, even though what he said seemed frighteningly unusual. The young man knew very well how to live without a garden, a forest, or a hunting rifle.

The gravel road curved, and after the turn, as Guntis had told Rokas, the first roofs of Kalniškis were about to appear. The truck moved along a pale strip of road, with rye fields stretching out on the right and a small lake tucked away in the shade of the forest on the left.

– Sometimes, I go fishing for carp in the lake, – said Miškinis, gesturing toward his window. – And if you go further into the forest, there are lots of blueberries. Of course, I'm not the only one who knows that, so I usually have to get up before dawn. And tiptoe so as not to wake up the competition in the village. – A mischievous smile continued to shine behind his bushy moustache. – If you ever want to join me, let me know. I have spare fishing rods and empty buckets.

Kėsus nodded, thanking for the offer. So that's what country life is like, he thought. I was just in this man's way, but instead of Slavic swearwords, I got a lift from him, and now I'm being invited to go fishing.

The gravel road rose sharply, and soon they were slowly passing the village houses. One of the buildings seemed strangely larger and more ornate than the others, but Kėsus decided not to ask Miškinis any more questions. Closing his eyes, he listened to the lyrics of the song that had won the Britpop battle:

It's the century's remedy
For the faint at heart
A new start
Try the simple life!

Chapter II
GARDEN COLOURS

Saulė's light hair, covered by a straw hat, fluttered in the wind. Squinting slightly, she watched the waves come and go. Sitting next to her, Rokas looked at her intently: it seemed as if Saulė's profile, surrounded by a veil of soft colours, had changed beyond recognition.

– I know what you're thinking, – she said, without taking her eyes off the sea. – How could I choose a damn food delivery guy over you. It makes no sense – you think you're so successful and everyone likes you. Unlike him, you consider yourself an intellectual, and you would never have the kind of job that high school students and immigrants do. – She paused for a moment. – Any job is a job, Rokas.

* Word-play: Darius' last name, "Miškinis", translates directly as "of the woods".

Every adult earns money in some way. Some are better at it than others, some consider their job prestigious, others are ashamed of it. But that doesn't matter because life begins when work ends. That's when you have to prove your worth. By the way, Norbertas likes his job. He says that people show completely different colours in their doorways.

Now Rokas also turned his gaze toward the sea. A little boy was running around on the shore – for him, it was the best vacation of his life. Fun, carefree, without an ex-girlfriend, whom he had begged to meet up with him. Kėsus began to look around for the boy's parents.

– What does this Norbertas look like?

– He's… about 6'2, with long blond hair, like a surfer. And blue eyes. And, sure, it doesn't matter, but he earns quite a lot. They say that food delivery guys can easily earn as much as office workers in a month. What a nice profession, huh? – She tried to smile. – I know you're going to blame everything on his height, his surfer hair, the fact that he earns more. But that's not the point. The sooner you understand and accept that, the easier it will be.

Kėsus turned to her.

– Do you think that kid might be lost?

– Do you think you might not be listening to me again? – Leaning over her right hand on the sand, Saulė turned to the side and scanned the beach with her eyes. – As long as he's having fun, we should let him enjoy himself instead of looking for his parents.

Their eyes met and the young man felt a wave of warmth wash over him. Some people associate this feeling with butterflies.

– You should have fun too, Rokas. Summer is coming. You can experience some really nice things in the summer.

Sunlight was streaming through the window at the foot of the bed and painted the floorboards a rich yellow – the thin curtains couldn't stop it getting through. "I'll have to practice more before I can wake up with the first roosters crowing", Rokas thought, picking up his phone and seeing that it was almost ten in the morning.

Yesterday, after saying goodbye and thanking Miškinis, he found himself in front of a whitewashed wooden fence, separated from the gravel road by a small ditch overgrown with grass. After crossing the pile of sand that served as a bridge at the gate, Kėsus entered the kingdom of Rima Medvaišienė.

The light clay brick house stood on the left side of the farmstead, surrounded on three sides by huge apple trees. Opposite it stood a somewhat dilapidated barn, which, as the hostess later explained, was now home to only a pig and a flock of chickens. The hostess used the word "only" because, as she herself said, in the past this barn had housed a more diverse range of guests. Walking further and passing the well in the middle of the farmstead, a big space stretched out to the back fence – a vegetable garden. At the end of it, in the right corner of the property, stood a glass greenhouse.

However, it was a small structure with a sloping roof leaning against the barn

wall that brought Kėsui the most joy. As soon as he opened the farmyard gate, a hairy clay-coloured rocket shot out of it.

– Jerry, no! – came a shout from the house door.

– Hi Jerry, – whispered Rokas, kneeling down.

Jerry responded with a bark.

Kėsus sat up in bed and looked around the plainly furnished room. There was a bed in one corner, a table with a chair in another, a wardrobe in a third, and a coat rack in a fourth. The crowning jewels of this décor was a faded emerald-coloured rug on the floor in the middle of the room and a picture of the Virgin Mary hanging on the wall opposite the bed. "This room encourages one to spend more time outside", the Wolf remarked when he walked through the door yesterday. Rokas quickly got dressed and went downstairs for breakfast.

Tea was already steaming on the kitchen table, and breakfast had been prepared for a family of at least six: there was a plate with slices of ham, fermented cheese, and cottage cheese for sandwiches, a bowl with homegrown tomatoes, cucumbers, and spring onions, jars of jam and honey, waiting for the pancakes being made on the stove. Guntis had warned him that his mother might go a little overboard with food in the first few days, so Kėsus mentally prepared himself to overeat before going downstairs.

Rima Medvaišienė, Gintaras Medvaišas' mother – that was Guntis' name in his passport – was, as Kėsus had discovered during the few hours they had spent together, a remarkably lively woman. As soon as he arrived, the grey-haired woman with a plump face enthusiastically showed him around her property and the rooms of her house, listed the names of the flowers and shrubs growing in the yard, and in the evening brought out several photographs of Guntis as a child. Rokas wondered whether this was just her nature or whether loneliness had such a strong effect on her. When guests don't visit often, one naturally starts to consider them more important than they really are. And when guests don't visit at all, there is nothing left to do but get bogged down in daily chores.

Kėsus sipped his tea and watched the hostess bustling about in the kitchen. A stove, sink, and several cabinets were huddled against the wall, and above them, the view of the garden spread out through the windows. "I must remember to take some ham for Jerry", he thought.

– Gintaras said you're a writer, – said Medvaišienė, pausing briefly between words as she flipped the pancakes. – So, you work for a newspaper or something?

The young man smiled.

– Unfortunately, I am only a writer in the broadest sense of the word. I am a copywriter, a writer of texts. I write texts for websites. About products and services, how they work. Well, basically about anything that helps to increase interest in a product.

– Will you write about Kalniškis, then?

– I don't think so. It would be a completely different thing, writing and not trying to sell anything, not thinking about whether it would be easy to find it on Google. – Rokas fell silent, because he caught himself talking about things that his interlocutor probably wouldn't understand. – I don't even know if I could write

like that. I came here to relax, so I don't plan on spending a lot of time at the computer.

The hostess put a batch of pancakes into a bowl and, chatting with her new tenant, joined him for breakfast. When Rokas thanked her for the meal, Medvaišienė stopped him.

– Look, before you run away… – She got up from the table and returned with a handful of letters. – My reading glasses are gone, I haven't been able to find them all morning. Could you read what the postman brought me this morning?

Kėsus nodded. There were three letters in his hand: two standard size, one larger. He pulled the envelopes closer and began to read:

– Bill for digital television. Nine ninety-nine. The magazine "Garden Colors", July issue, – he announced after opening the large envelope. – You subscribe to this, don't you?

– Ah, I thought so. Yes, I get it every month. I'll have to flip through it when I find my glasses.

Rokas' eyes settled on the third envelope. Strange: no sender info, no postmark. He opened it. Inside the envelope, he found a folded A4 sheet of paper. The young man unfolded and smoothed out the paper, held it up to his eyes, and prepared to read. He suddenly felt the lower part of his body go numb and his throat tighten.

– Well, what's in there? – asked Medvaišienė.

– I... Some advertisement, for car parts, – he replied without looking up from the paper. – Thanks again for breakfast. I think I'll stay in my room for a bit.

Clutching the paper in one hand and holding onto the railing with the other, Rokas Kėsus climbed the stairs. The ham promised to Jerry lay forgotten on the table. The door to his room creaked as he opened it.

Chapter III
RUNNING

His fingers instinctively typed in the password and found the Enter key. Yes, he didn't plan on sitting at the computer much, but this was an exception. In the taskbar, he had to click on the red, green, and yellow ring with a blue center, type the letter F, and, when the browser suggested the address of the most frequently visited website, press Enter again. *Press F to pay respects*, thought Rokas. No, it can't be.

There are moments that remain etched in your memory for the rest of your life. The first day of school, the world turned upside down when you fell off your bike, the decisive 11-meter penalty kick by your favourite team. You can relive these moments over and over again with your eyes closed. But this time, he didn't even have to close his eyes.

Rokas' eyes scanned his Facebook friends list, searching for the name Gintaras Medvaišas, but on his computer screen he also saw a yellowed piece of paper, folded twice to fit into an envelope, with words written in large, clumsy letters:

Dear Rima,
Your son was murdered. I did it with my own hands.

The Devil of Kalniškis

"Active 26 minutes ago", Rokas read and turned away from the computer screen. The Virgin Mary was looking at him from the light green wall. After maintaining eye contact with the Mother of God for a few seconds, Kėsus wrote a short message to Guntis: "Hey, what's up?" Then, he waited for a green dot to appear next to his friend's name, indicating that the user had logged in to read the message.

Everything is fine, he thought; Guntis must be working, eating, or sleeping. No one is active on Facebook all the time. And no one sends letters about murders they haven't committed yet. After waiting a couple of minutes for the green dot, Kėsus opened a new tab in his browser. He thought for a moment and typed the words "medvaišas dead" into the search box. Rokas knew that such a search would either yield no results or offer some irrelevant headlines. In this case, one article on a news portal caught his eye.

"Gintaras sent you a message", read Kėsus in the left corner of the screen and immediately returned to Facebook. The text read: "Hi, so you know those single cat-ladies? Like in the movies. It's not just the movies, though – you can actually meet them. At least at the Bukovsky bar you can. I'm currently lying in bed with three cats on me..." Guntis continued writing, but Rokas closed the computer screen and picked up the letter again.

What does all this mean? Maybe some kind of inside joke of the villagers? Maybe things like this are normal here? Realizing that he was asking questions of Virgin Mary's portrait, he added:

– I don't think this is normal. The old lady might have had a heart attack if she read this.

Hiding the letter under the mattress, he decided to go for a run.

Kėsus was not a huge fan of running culture, but he enjoyed the activity itself. If people had a scenic route near their home that they didn't have to share with middle-aged men who had become marathon maniacs, hiding behind rainbow-colored sunglasses and glaring at amateur runners with disdain, everyone would run, Rokas thought. Now, the countryside landscape, flowery meadows, and winding forest paths awaited him – all of which would belong to him alone while he ran.

Of course, compared to marathon maniacs, amateur runners usually have a problem: they don't really know how to run. Therefore, it's not surprising that, with the houses and fields of Kalniškis left behind, the young man began to look for a place to sit down and rest. A few dozen meters away, he noticed a fallen tree, where the Duck and the Wolf were already waiting.

– I think you can't catch your breath because you don't have those tight running panties, – the Duck chuckled.

Rokas sat down nearby. His T-shirt was wet with sweat and he tried to dry it.

– They're called running tights, – the Wolf clarified gloomily. – But it seems to me that this suffocating activity is just another attempt to deny what is really happening. After all, let's not lie to ourselves, you were hoping to spend this day under an apple tree, reading a book. Like Biliūnas*, only without the tuberculosis. What happened, my friend?

Kėsus considered how to respond. After all, nothing had really changed; it was just someone's ill-advised joke. If she had found her glasses, Medvaišienė would have read the letter, snorted, and thrown it into the fireplace. She would not have thought twice about it.

– Something strange happened. But this strange thing is more interesting than anything I experience every month in Vilnius. I came here to relax, reflect, and calm down. But they're sending each other letters about murders here?

– This happened because when you came out to the countryside, you thought you knew it, even though you had never lived in the countryside yourself. After all, Kalniškis' motto is not "nothing ever happens here". Of course, I don't know if Kalniškis has a motto at all, but if it does, it's definitely not that one. You want to escape your problems, Rokas boy, but the countryside is not a vacuum. Here, you can find new ways to distract yourself; they will help you forget what you left behind in the city for a while, but they can cause even more trouble. We hope that you will forget about Saulė, but there is even more of her here.

The Wolf waved his paw at the treetops.**

The countryside is not a vacuum, unfortunately. "Perhaps a vacuum could fill up my head", thought Rokas. He stood up, took a couple of deep breaths, and slowly began to run into the depths of the forest. He heard the Duck shout after him:

– It's such a shame to run without rainbow glasses!

As the sun set, the sky turned red. Rokas Kėsus stood in front of his bedroom window and watched the apple tree branches swaying. He was wearing a black T-shirt with a picture of ninja turtles enjoying pizza. "If I want to get up early like the people of Kalniškis, I have to go to bed as they do, too, as soon as it gets dark", he repeated to himself, but sleep did not come. Noticing the computer lying on the table, he grabbed it. He was still planning not to sit at it too much.

When he got into bed, the blanket pleasantly cooled his tired legs. Returning from the woods, Rokas volunteered to help his hostess water the cucumbers – his body, unaccustomed to physical activity, was not impressed by this altruistic gesture.

Watching the sprinkler poking its head between the cucumber beds, Rokas decided to ask the hostess how to get to know the locals better. After he firmly rejected the idea of "just going to the neighbours and introducing himself", Medvaišienė remembered that on Sunday, the Vaštagiris parish priest would hold his annual open-air mass. "Our parish priest comes up with very interesting things",

* A classic Lithuanian author.

** Word play: in Lithuanian, "Saulė" is both a girl's name and the word for the sun.

she said. For some reason, Rokas thought of silly student initiatives at uni. It's unlikely that he'll be able to connect with the locals at a village mass, he thought as he sat on his bed, but the Wolf's words came to mind. He doesn't know the countryside.

Rokas opened his laptop and entered the password. The Facebook window appeared on the screen. Guntis had already finished his story about the cat-lady and asked Rokas how he was doing, living at the Medvaišai farmstead. Rokas replied that he too had woken up with a beautiful woman that morning. Jokes about sexual relations with your friends' mothers are engraved in gold letters in the canon of Lithuanian humour.

Smiling modestly, Kėsus looked at the top of the screen. There, in a small rectangle, he saw the logo of the news portal – the article he hadn't read that morning. He moved the mouse to the rectangle and clicked. The headline read: "The Devil's Eye claimed the life of a local young man". Rokas read:

> *Early on the morning of July 8th, tragedy struck the village of Kalniškis. At 4:45 a.m., the body of local resident B. M. (20) was spotted in a body of water known locally as the Devil's Eye and brought ashore. According to local news representatives, the young man had recently been studying in Kaunas and had returned to his native village for the summer holidays. Alcohol was found in the young man's blood. A pre-trial investigation has been launched to determine the cause of death.*

The lake in the photo accompanying the article bore no resemblance to the one he had seen while riding with Miškinis, but Kėsus knew that news portals did not have galleries of all the country's bodies of water and often chose associative pictures for such articles. B. M., Rokas read in his mind. Twenty years old. He remembered the letter he had read that morning. "Your son was murdered". The word "was" seemed out of place at the time, but now everything seemed much more logical. The author of the letter was not talking about the present, not about Guntis, but about... his brother?

Rokas decided to try one more option. With the fingers of his left hand, he quickly typed the combination Ctrl and F. *Press F to pay respects*, he remembered again involuntarily. He tried to enter the word "medvaišas" in the search box that appeared in the article window. Before he could type all the necessary letters, the page moved down and finally stopped in the comments section. There was a single comment left by an anonymous user: "Rest in peace, Benas Medvaišas".

Outside the window, night reigned supreme, and crickets chirped patiently. "It's much quieter in the city", Rokas thought. He couldn't decide whether this thought was provoked by the chirping of the crickets or the throbbing in his temples. Finally, he put his laptop aside and closed his eyes.

Chapter IV
WHITE BREAD

The hinges of the wooden gate designed for large vehicles creaked strangely, so Rokas was afraid that he had broken something and stood around for a while, looking anxiously at the dark oak structure. Finally, he entered the grass-covered front yard.

Miškinis' farmstead perfectly matched the cool, cloudy day: a small, pale green house covered with a brown tile roof and a modest tin-roofed garage, which, as Rokas guessed, was too small for the pickup truck, as it was parked outside. At the back of the farmstead, a few poor-looking fruit trees awaited their harvest.

The blue Ford would have been considered somewhat bleak in a typical farmstead due to its thick layer of dust, but here it looked quite presentable compared to other objects in Miškinis' garden.

Rokas noticed that the door to the house was open, so he knocked on the doorframe. While brushing his teeth that morning, he had decided that he would visit Miškinis. Seeing that rain clouds were gathering, he took a pair of long pants out of his backpack and put on his favourite hoodie. Before leaving, he managed to exchange a few words with Guntis' mother – she frowned a little when she heard Miškinis' name.

The old man appeared in the doorway after a couple of minutes.

– Hello, Vilnius! Why didn't you come inside? Oh, is it rude to do so in Vilnius? Do they call the police for breaking and entering? – His moustache moved up and down as he chuckled. Rokas waved his hands, and Miškinis asked, – What are you going to tell me today?

Rokas mentioned Miškinis' invitation to go fishing. Then, he cautiously added that today's weather might not be the most suitable and, if the man was busy, he would come back tomorrow. Miškinis chuckled again.

– This weather is perfect for fishing, – he said with the obvious smell of alcohol on his breath. – On cloudy days, the fish are more active. They don't like light, you know. I'll just gather a few things and we can go.

When he returned, he found Kėsas sitting on the steps of the house. The Kalniškis resident had exchanged his usual footwear for khaki fishing boots; he was holding two fishing rods in one hand and a large toolbox with handles in the other.

– You'll need a bucket for your catch. Grab one, behind the door. You can take two if you plan on catching a lot, – he added with a smile.

Nothing could spoil his mood.

The floats lazily poked out of the water. The two men sat at the end of the pier on buckets they had brought with them and threw the fish they caught into Miškinis' toolbox, whose drawers, it turned out, were stuffed with floats, lures, fishing line of various thicknesses, and strange bait. Kėsas couldn't hide the fact that he was fishing for the first time in his life. Everything would have been fine – he just repeated what Miškinis did – until it was time to cast the rod. Rokas worried that

if he swung the wrong way, he would pull his ear off or, even worse, injure his companion.

Miškinis used white bread as bait, while Kėsus used corn. According to the villager, carp preferred corn. However, for some reason, the fish were magically attracted to bread today. Carefully placing his fishing rod on the pier, Miškinis opened one of the drawers of his toolbox and deftly pulled out a small bottle and two glasses. He quickly poured clear liquid from the bottle into both glasses and handed one to Kėsus.

– Here, take this, Vilnius. To tasty fish and bad weather.

He gulped down the glass. Rokas asked if it was moonshine and if Miškinis had heard of cases where people who drank it went blind. The man from Kalniškis looked surprised for a moment, then laughed and waved his hand.

– You watch too many American movies, young man, – he said. – I don't know of anyone who has gone blind from this.

The old man adjusted his thick glasses. Kėsus shrugged his shoulders and drained his glass. His body was flooded with warmth, and it felt as if a fire had been lit in his throat, warming his entire body. Kėsus managed to remain calm and realized that now was a good time to start a conversation.

– Do you know Medvaišienė's son, Gintaras, well? – he asked.

– Of course I do, – confirmed Miškinis. – I knew him better in the past, of course. A lot of water has flown under the bridge since he lived here. But he came back a few years ago, took pictures of everyone, and then gave us each a framed photo. I still have mine hanging in my bedroom.

He vaguely remembered seeing those photos. Guntis used them for one of his exhibitions, in which he wanted to show how different people can live side by side – and get along. His friend summed up that series of photos with some pretentious title. Was it "Dissonances of Closeness"?

– And you – have you known him for a long time? – Miškinis interrupted Rokas' train of thought. – Do you get along well?

– For three years, maybe? We used to share a workspace. I write, he takes photos; we were both looking for a space where we could work comfortably, and that's how we met. Now Guntis has his own studio, and I moved to work for a company, but we've stayed in touch. If we hadn't, I probably wouldn't be here.

Rokas nodded toward the village.

Miškinis stood up and, after fiddling with the reel for a moment, pulled out another fish. Kėsus watched his movements closely. Well, it was now or never.

– That being said, although we've known each other for a long time, I've never heard of his brother Benas, – he began cautiously. – You probably knew him too?

Rokas stared at Miškinis' hook. The man from Kalniškis tried to put on a new ball of bread, but his hands were shaking a little, and he only succeeded after several attempts. The line cut through the air, and the float splashed quietly into the water. The man waited for it to rise to the surface and sat down. His smile had disappeared.

– Of course, I knew Benas. – As he spoke, Miškinis paused for unusually long

periods, as if weighing his words before speaking. – He was a great kid. Quiet, polite, skilled. Gintaras was an artist, always rebellious, but the younger one, he was also a creator with golden hands, but completely different – he was interested in more down-to-earth work, farming. He was made for Kalniškis.

– What happened?

– People say it was because of tragic love. The Staponkai daughter, Jurga, got married that day. It was the seventh of July, you know, two sevens, a sign of good luck, everyone goes out of their way to get married on the seventh of July. – He poured himself another glass and emptied it in no time. – They grew up together, they were the same age. Benas, her, and little Antanas. Gintaras is eight years older than them.

Rokas nodded. He rarely thought about the fact that Guntis was twelve years older than him. But comparing the characters of the brothers made him feel that he was closer to Benas than to Guntis. Closer to the drowned man.

– Benas was in love with her. To be true, who wasn't? She grew up in this village like a daisy in a manure pit. – He chuckled again, but the smile was no longer visible under his moustache. – And then came the fateful wedding. The dancing, singing, and feasting began. While everyone was celebrating, he went to the lake and threw himself into the depths. – Looking up at Rokas, Miškinis added, – That's what people say.

A young man madly in love decides to end his life. So many years pass, and now someone decides to send his mother a horrible letter. Why?

– That's what people say, but you don't seem to believe them? Do you have a different version?

– There is a story that everyone who lives here can tell. It's a legend, a tale. They say that a devil used to live here in ancient times, which is why this lake is called the Devil's Eye. In those days, he would come to the village at night and take people to Paskanda, his kingdom. Over there. – He pointed his finger at the bottom of the lake. – To prevent the kidnappings, the locals built a huge hill. Did you notice that Kalniškis sits on a hill? Standing on this hill, people could see everything that was happening below, so they could easily spot the devil coming. They would hide from him, sometimes even chase him away with fire. The devil realized that he would not get any more prey from here and left Kalniškis. But legend has it that he still lives nearby, still waiting for a villager to come by the lake. Then... you know what happens.

– So, you think Ben was taken by some supernatural being?

– Nobody believes in devils in the city, do they, young man? – Miškinis leaned closer. – But in the countryside, there are still forces at work that we ordinary people are powerless against.

Kėsus looked at his float and wondered what would happen if he accidentally caught the devil – after all, that sometimes happens in legends. Then his thoughts returned to the tragedy of Guntis' brother. He drowned himself for love. Saulė's face appeared before his eyes. Would it make sense? Such an ending, sacrificing one's greatest treasure, one's life. Perhaps suicide, rather than marriage, is the best proof of love?

– You know, sometimes I wonder, – Miškinis said after clearing his throat, – How would Benas be living now if he hadn't been taken by those waters? Then I start to wonder how I would be living now. – He paused for a long time. – If my life hadn't been predetermined by my surname. If I weren't Miškinis.

Kėsus looked at his fishing partner and smiled.

– We have Richard Berankis, who plays tennis*. And Saulius Balandis** doesn't walk around town picking up crumbs, does he? – Rokas thought for a moment. – To be honest, I don't know what Saulius Balandis does in his free time, I've never seen him. But seriously, "what if" questions are meaningless. We all live the way we choose to live. – Rokas fell silent, realizing that meaningless questions ruled his everyday life. Finally, he added, – Your life is good, isn't it?

Kėsus saw Miškinis' gaze traveling somewhere far from the lake, toward the woods in the distance, through the thick lenses of his glasses. The float sank beneath the water again, but the old man didn't seem to care.

– Yes, you're right. It is quite good.

They returned to the village at dusk. Rokas carried two buckets, one of which was half-filled with the bodies of thirsty carp, and Miškinis staggered along with his fishing gear.

– Wow, look at that catch! Probably used white bread today?! – came a shout from the garden where Kalniškis' most luxurious house stood.

Miškinis stopped to greet his neighbour. It was a stout old man, about the same age as Miškinis, with a broad bald head and ruddy cheeks complemented by a grey, sloping moustache. When he saw him, Kėsus remembered the sea lions he had seen in documentaries.

– I used white bread and corn, but they still bite best on a hook! – Miškinis joked, his good mood restored. – Young man from Vilnius, this here is Valentinas Jurkus, the legend of Kalniškis! Valentinas, this is Rokas from Vilnius!

Reaching his hand over the fence, Rokas shook Jurkus' firm hand. As they moved on, Rokas wanted to ask his companion what the red-cheeked man who had built such a house in the village did for a living, when Miškinis stopped and began whispering in Kėsus' ear:

– Valentinas was a big politician, so he built a big house. Now he's retired. I mentioned his son, little Antanas, to you today. And over there, – he said, turning to point to the garden across the road, opposite the Jurkai farmstead, – the Staponkai family lives. And Jurga with her daughter. She had a divorce, it didn't work out, those lucky sevens didn't seem to help much.

After saying goodbye to Miškinis and closing the farmstead gate, Kėsus heard Jerry barking. Realizing that the dog was tied up and would not run up to him, he walked up to the door.

* "Berankis" translates directly to "without hands"
** "Balandis" translates directly to "pigeon"

Chapter V
MASS

Celebrate Sunday – this was engraved on one of the tablets that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai to the people. In Vilnius, Sunday is often not celebrated. On Sunday mornings in Vilnius, people try to avoid mirrors because they are afraid of what they might see in them. They avoid their neighbours because they are most ashamed for them to see the grotesque sight of someone avoiding the mirror. They avoid looking at the other side of the bed because the situation there may be even worse than in the mirror. Sunday in Vilnius is the loneliest day of the week.

In Kalniškis, on the contrary, Sunday is celebrated according to all Christian traditions. Rising early, washing up and dressing in their best clothes, all the villagers prepare for their journey – to the market, to the shop and, of course, to church. Well, almost all of them. Some people sometimes make the mistakes of city dwellers.

Before leaving for Kalniškis, Kėsus tried to familiarize himself with his future home on Wikipedia, but the encyclopaedia entry consisted of a single sentence stating that it was "a village southeast of Vaštagiris". The town of Vaštagiris was the usual destination for Sunday trips for the people of Kalniškis.

The locals praised the town for three reasons. First, for several years in a row, the population of Vaštagiris had surpassed that of Panemunė, the smallest town in Lithuania. Second, it was home to the center of the Vaštagiris parish – the baroque Church of St. Michael the Archangel, where the sermons by parish priest Marijonas Neziamovas attracted believers from all corners of the district. Third, the town had a grocery store.

"We won't be going to Vaštagiris today", Rima Medvaišienė's explanation rang in his ears. "The only time of year we don't go: the priest comes to us". Standing in front of the mirror, Rokas Kėsus tried to untie his tie. His smartphone lay on the sink counter, and on the screen, a pleasant-looking American with Eastern features presented five easy ways to tie a tie. Rokas managed to comb his usually messy brown curls, but the accessory, decorated with red and green stripes, was causing him problems. It's the middle of July, Christmas is still six months away, Kėsus thought angrily. He asked himself why he had brought this particular tie, but the answer was obvious. He didn't have any other.

The Duck sat in the sink and, tapping its webbed foot slowly against the ceramic surface, read to Rokas from its notebook:

"Attention: plan for the day! Number one. Tired of the good life, the young man joins the ranks of the faithful community. Number two. His hand forms the sign of the cross. Number three. He looks around to see if any of the villagers look suspicious. Signs of suspicion: staring at Medvaišienė, smiling strangely when greeting her, attending mass wearing a devil's mask, etc. Number four. Everyone wishes each other peace. Number five. In parentheses – optional. If there are good people sitting nearby, you can joke around a little. Maybe there aren't enough children at Mass and the village ladies should try for one? And remind them of Abraham's wife Sarah, who gave birth to her first child at the age of ninety. Hmm... – the Duck rubbed the back of its head with its wing. – Let's cross that one out.

– Add a comment that confession is not recommended, – added the Wolf. – We don't need another innocent person to get bogged down by talk about Saulė.

Rokas prepared for Mass as if he were taking an exam. He tried to focus his thoughts and feel as alert as possible, because he might not get another chance to see all the members of the community. Today, he had to see and hear everything, note any unusual behaviour, and find something to latch onto. Something that would help him discover the identity of the author of the letter.

The previous day's cold weather had dissipated overnight, which must have greatly pleased the parish priest Marijonas Neziamovas. Watching the chairs from the trunk of the parish van being taken and gradually arranged on the village meadow, where barbecue enthusiasts usually gather, Neziamovas was reassured that poor weather conditions would not disrupt the annual tradition of open-air mass, and he quietly gave thanks for this to the Almighty.

The priest was tall and straight as a string. His tanned face with a hooked nose, laugh lines, and grey hair combed to the side would have been more suited to an Italian businessman than the head of a parish. The black Audi A8 parked nearby and the modest-looking but expensive watch that Neziamovas kept glancing at would also have been more suited to a businessman. He didn't seem to be worried, though, he just liked people to be punctual.

Rokas and Medvaišienė were among the first to arrive. The woman humbly kissed the priest's hand and, after exchanging a few words, chose a seat in the far corner of the first row of chairs arranged in a semicircle. Nodding to the priest, Rokas followed her.

Soon, the empty seats began to fill up. In the front row, Rokas recognized Valentinas Jurkus, the local legend he had met the day before. Jurkus turned around and looked at the gathering believers; when their eyes met, Kėsus nodded to the politician, but received no response.

After returning from fishing with Miškinis, Rokas researched the retired politician's past online. Born and raised in Kalniškis, Jurkus rose steadily through the ranks, becoming village elder, head of Vaštagiris, and, with the help of one of the left-wing parties, achieved heights that seemed unattainable for an ordinary countryside man – after two terms on the district council, he was elected district mayor.

An elderly woman was sitting next to the politician – Rokas guessed she was Jurkus' wife. Her shoulder-length curly hair covered her prominent cheekbones, and her light floral dress with short sleeves almost blended in with the white and blue polka dots on her skin.

– Who's that couple sitting next to Jurkus? – Kėsus whispered to Medvaišienė, leaning over.

– That's his son, Antanas, – she replied. – He's also a politician, working at the municipality. Next to him is Patricija, his fiancée.

Antanas Jurkus was bald, thin, and white as a sheet of paper – it was clear that he took after his mother in appearance, and his father's achievements and fame did not make his life any easier. You could bet that Antanas never dreamed of a career in politics, but nepotism did its job. His fiancée, sitting next to him, was focused entirely on the priest, even though the mass had not yet begun. Women with

such a determined gaze usually get what they want. Maybe it's a good thing, Rokas thought, as members of such couples can complement each other.

Father Marijonas glanced at his watch one last time and approached the wooden pulpit set up in front of the assembled audience, and the people immediately stood up. Before addressing the Mass participants, he smiled modestly. The clergyman's eyes were filled with the naive hope characteristic of people who have not encountered the difficulties of life.

– May the Lord be with you, – he said.

– And with you, – replied the congregation in unison.

Marijonas Neziamovas gave a long introduction about the importance of summer farm work, the warmth of sunny days that brings joy to every heart, and the importance of every good Christian to our world. Although Rokas saw that the audience was listening to the clergyman with bated breath, he quickly lost track of Neziamovas' thoughts. Soon, the Duck emerged from under a chair, and the Wolf made his way through the nearby weeds. The animals sat down on the grass in front of Rokas.

– What's the situation, Captain? – asked the Duck.

Kėsus looked at the Wolf, as if trying to read the answer in his eyes, but his dark companion seemed to be more interested in the priest's insights. Rokas mentally asked the Duck to give him some time and peace. This method of communication was fantastically convenient and did not disturb the solemnity of the mass. Telepathy is one of the most useful inventions of mankind that has not yet been implemented.

As the Duck spread its wings, the young man tried to focus on the priest's words but failed. His gaze drifted to his right shoulder, where the other believers of Kalniškis were sitting. The audience was small – less than twenty people. To be honest, he didn't know what to look for. It didn't seem likely that this group of villagers would include a maniac who sent strange letters, but Rokas believed that every little detail was important. Maybe someone would glance at Medvaišienė? Maybe they would come up to her after Mass and say something innocent and mundane, thus conveying a coded message?

Rokas' eyes slowly scanned the solemn faces. Miškinis, catching Kėsus' gaze, winked. Today, the old man was wearing a faded beige jacket, which matched the cap with a visor on his head. A burly man and a woman of similar build, whom Kėsus guessed to be the man's wife, were sitting nearby. Rokas thought that if she wanted to jump him and take his phone, he wouldn't be able to do much about it.

People began to stir, and Rokas realized that he had to stand up. The liturgy of the word began. Father Neziamovas stepped away from the pulpit and sat down on a chair nearby. Obviously, he's giving the stage to some old village woman, thought Rokas. She would read the passage from the Bible chosen by the priest expressionlessly, her legs would tremble, she might even mix up the words, and then she would sing a psalm in a trembling voice. And she would consider it the greatest achievement of her year. Rokas glanced at the Mass participants, looking for the lucky one.

A young woman rose from her seat at the end of the row and walked firmly toward the pulpit. She was petite, about five foot six. She wore a white, form-fitting

sleeveless blouse, black pleated pants, and black Dr. Martens boots. Dr. Martens, in this village? Rokas was surprised. A few steps behind her, clinging to her left arm, was a blonde girl, dressed in white from head to toe. Two braids stuck out from the sides of her head.

– Jurga and her daughter, – Medvaišienė whispered casually.

Jurga, Kėsus repeated in his mind. Now she was standing in front of the people, and Rokas could see her face. Jurga Staponkutė's forehead was a little too high, and her eyebrows were close to her huge green eyes, so when she lifted her head from the sacred text she was reading, she looked angry. Her light, wavy hair, reaching her shoulders, was tucked behind her ears and framed her pretty face with a narrow nose. She seemed to be approaching thirty, but this did not detract from her smooth skin or graceful figure; the young man came to this conclusion after staring at the sunflower-shaped pendant around Jurga's neck. He quickly realized that this was not appropriate behaviour during Mass.

Her voice was unique – low, with a barely audible tremor. She read, as she herself announced, an excerpt from the Epistle to the Philippians:

– And let each of you look not to his own interests, but to the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus. Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. – Jurga paused. – And being found in appearance as a man.

Try the simple life, Rokas remembered. Live like a country person, look like a country person, befriend country people. That way, you'll probably forget the city. You'll forget your hopeless life. You'll forget Saulė.

The priest resumed his position and the Mass continued. After a while, he recounted how Jesus had imparted his peace to his disciples. Kėsus had seen how in Vilnius people wished each other peace by standing in their places and shaking hands with those around them, but here the wish for peace resembled an icebreaker game at a leadership conference, where the goal was to shake hands with as many people as possible in one minute. Leaving their seats, the people of Kalniškis walked around and tried to make sure that no one was left without a handshake. They enthusiastically shook Rokas' hand, who was a little confused when he saw the sincerely smiling faces of the villagers who had never seen him before.

When it was time to shake Jurga's hand, Kėsus tried to force a sincere smile, but it came out looking more like a grimace, involuntarily formed, like he was hit in the ribs. Jurga accompanied him with a questioning look. You idiot, Rokas repeated to himself, returning to his chair, you could only have made a worse first impression if you had thrown up from nervousness. And that Christmas tie... He ignored the large lady who, after wishing Medvaišienė peace, joked that she had found quite a handsome husband.

– And what curls! Nothing like the horrible straws of my old man, – she added and laughed, but then remembered she was at Mass and hurried to her seat.

After Mass, Rokas sat down in a secluded corner of the field and watched for a while as wooden chairs were loaded back into the van. The house of prayer was gone: tomorrow, this would be nothing but an ordinary meadow again, with cows

indifferently grazing on the grass. Today my curls are here, he thought, and tomorrow I'll only have the horrible straws of an old man.

Rokas Kėsus slowly walked home, wondering if he had wished everyone enough peace.

Chapter VI
MOONLIGHT

Kėsus opened his eyes. The Duck was sitting on his chest.

– Something's happening, something's happening! – it repeated.

Leaning on his elbows, the young man looked around the room. His hand groped for the phone, and his thumb pressed the power button. He squinted at the light from the screen. Half past one. What's going on here?

– Something is happening, indeed. Come here, – the Wolf's voice came from the window.

Rokas slowly got out of bed and walked barefoot towards the Wolf. Something hit the glass. Rain? Approaching the window, Rokas pulled back the curtains and was blinded by the moonlight. It illuminated an apple tree below the window, behind whose branches stood a lonely figure. A khaki raincoat with a hood, perfect for mushroom picking, covered the upper part of the body and cast a shadow over the face, but it was not difficult to recognize the protruding pants and Dr. Martens boots.

Jurga held several small stones in her left hand, but when she saw that she had attracted the attention of the second-floor resident, she dropped them on the grass. She took off her hood and waved to Rokas. "Come down", the young man read from her lips. He glanced around the room: there were no ropes, let alone a ladder. Was it possible to jump? He opened the window and asked quietly:

– How do I get down?

For a moment, it seemed that Jurga didn't understand the question. She blew out her cheeks demonstratively, threw up her hands helplessly, and rolled her eyes. Rokas realized that at that moment he was like a sick cat that had peed in its food bowl again.

– Go down the stairs, – she replied, using two fingers to indicate legs walking down.

He read the word "fool" from her lips. But maybe it was just his imagination? He quickly put on his clothes, tiptoeing so as not to wake the hostess, and went downstairs. He found Jurga crouching by the corner of the barn, stroking Jerry. When Rokas appeared, the dog began to bark. "You stay quiet and let a stranger pet you, but you bark at me? I live here", Rokas thought reproachfully, looking at the dog.

Jurga led him to the other side of the road, across the potato fields, toward the edge of the forest. She didn't say a word as they walked. Rokas didn't dare ask any questions either, but he felt flattered: the most beautiful woman in Kalniškis was taking him on an unexpected date. Perhaps he had actually managed to smile

charmingly when he wished her peace? Looking at the figure in front of him, Kėsus silently thanked Guntis for offering him a place to stay in the village.

The full moon was shining, so all the potato rows stretched out like the palm of a hand. Jurga stopped at the far edge of the field and turned to Kėsus. The moonlight illuminated her face, and Rokas looked closely at her green eyes for the first time. Saulė's eyes were blue, but his mix-up of their colour did no harm – Jurga's eyes looked impressive. Only this time, her gaze, pressed down by her high forehead, spoke of danger.

– Are you insane? – she asked bluntly, pulling a piece of paper out of her pocket. – I have a pepper spray in my other pocket, so don't do anything stupid.

She waved the paper in front of Rokas' nose. "What's going on here?", Kėsus asked himself. With a trembling hand, he took the paper from Jurga's hand.

– Tomorrow, I'll be waiting for an envelope with five hundred euros in the same mailbox. Otherwise, I'll call the police. I don't know what kind of perverted games you're playing, but this won't end well.

– I... – Rokas began, but the words stuck in his throat.

He glanced at the paper.

A yellowed A4 sheet with a short text. Rokas recognized the large letters, the salutation, and the signature. He looked up in alarm and stared at Jurga's face.

> *Dear Jurga,*
> *Although I now look like everyone else on the outside, darkness still reigns within me. You probably didn't expect to see me at Mass, did you?*
>
> *The Devil of Kalniškis*

So, this wasn't a one-off incident, Rokas thought. Some rural maniac was indeed sending letters in an attempt to intimidate the people of Kalniškis. But why? He turned the page over, looking for stains or marks, then tried to sniff it – to find something that would help him figure out who wrote it.

– Give it back, – Jurga said, and Kėsus, somewhat frightened, came to his senses – he was not alone here. – I'm going home, I'll wait for the money until noon.

– Wait, – he said. He knew he had to choose his words carefully because the situation was complicated. – What's your name?

A small spark of doubt flashed in her eyes.

– Jurga. My name is Jurga, – she repeated. – And you know that because you wrote it in your letter.

– Nice to meet you. – Realizing that the young woman was hesitating, Rokas felt a little bolder. – I'm Rokas. I arrived here a few days ago and haven't had a chance to meet everyone yet. I'm vacationing in Kalniškis; Guntis suggested it. I mean Gintaras. Gintaras Medvaišas, – he corrected himself. – He's my friend; we met in Vilnius. You probably know him too, right?

– Yeah... – Jurga muttered.

For a while, she stared at a spot somewhere behind Kėsas' right shoulder and thought intently. Finally, she announced:

– I don't believe you. I have a master's degree in psychology and five years of experience in the field, which tells me that this isn't the first time you've seen the letter – your facial micro expressions give you away. I'll repeat: five hundred euros. You have until noon.

She turned to go back. Rokas again searched intently for the right words. What the hell are micro expressions?

– Okay, you're right, – he admitted. – I got the same letter myself. A couple of days ago. Well, not me, but Rima Medvaišienė. And, to be honest, it wasn't exactly the same, but it was from the same sender. – Seeing that Jurga had stopped, Kėsus continued: – Listen, I'm a normal guy, not some kind of a maniac.

– Normal guys go on vacation to Palanga, Nida, or Turkey. Or Egypt, – Jurga replied, turning around. – What did the police say?

– About what? Oh... I thought it wasn't worth bothering the police about this. Maybe someone is just joking.

– Joking? And anyway, what do you have to do with this? If the letter is addressed to Rima, it's her decision what do to about it, not some tourist's.

Kėsus realized that there was nowhere to retreat. He explained how Medvaišienė had misplaced her glasses, how he had decided not to reveal what was written in the letter, and how he had taken it so that the hostess would not worry unnecessarily.

– And what was in that letter?

– It was... similar to yours. – He prayed that he had managed to lie convincingly. – Could anyone else have sent you such a letter?

Still thinking intently, Jurga shook her head.

– I don't get it. I've been seeing all these people at Mass my whole life. All of them except you. When I found the letter tonight, I immediately thought it was from the weird guy from Vilnius.

Kėsus felt his ears burning. He tried to change the subject:

– How did you find me in the first place?

– Everyone's saying that some guy from Vilnius moved in with Medvaišienė. News travels fast around here.

– Yes, but I mean, how did you find out which room I sleep in? They probably don't talk about that in the village, do they?

Jurga laughed. It was a strange laugh, like that of a frog with a particularly powerful voice.

– I spent a large portion of my childhood in that house. Benas, your friend's brother, was my best friend. First, I checked the windows in Gintas' room, but the curtains weren't drawn, so I moved on to yours.

– Benas, – Kėsus said. – Benas, who drowned?

– Uh-huh, – she said. – Okay, time to go home.

– If you really need five hundred euros, tell me, I can help. No need to threaten me with pepper spray.

– I don't need anything, forget it.

When they reached the village gravel road, they parted ways. Rokas stood by the gate for a while, looking at the moonlit front yard. Perhaps he wanted to make

sure that Jerry wouldn't start barking again. Or maybe he paused to reconsider the thought that had been bothering him on the way back. Rokas Kėsus was no expert on micro expressions, but he could have sworn that when talking about Benas Medvaišas, who had committed suicide because of love for her, he did not see the emotion on Jurga's face that anyone would logically expect when turning the conversation to this topic. He did not see guilt on Jurga's face.

The Red Album

Translated by Kotryna Garanašvili

YOUTH

Elena was a teenager whose maturing womanhood made itself known every month by five days of bleeding. She knew when it would begin and when it would end, and that was one of the few constants in her life. Elena liked the word *cycle*: every month, as though with a stick in the sand or a piece of chalk on the pavement, it traced a temporary circle in which she felt safer than she did in her own room, the room that her humiliated, strangely flustered parents could enter at any moment to ask to borrow the very money they had given her for small expenses. Her mother continued selling cosmetics and looking after her friends' children, while her father took on extra repair jobs around the neighbourhood. They were constantly looking for other ways to make money, but never learned how to save.

Indian summer arrived, and one of her father's colleagues took the family to an isolated farmstead outside the city, surrounded by vast stretches of apple orchards. First, they were introduced to the owner of the orchard. She was large and tall, and so wrinkled and scarred that she resembled a canvas sack stuffed with dried apples, liable at any moment to split open and fall apart. It was not only the woman herself that was scarred, but her voice too, rough as sandpaper. As she walked through the enormous farmhouse, opening and closing heavy wooden doors that creaked and rattled, and recounting disjointed stories about the people who had lived there, the pumice stone of her scarred voice seemed to scour away at the walls beneath their several layers of paint, walls hung with portraits of the dead in oval frames – it seemed that the old woman, who had lived here for many years, might have erased some of the building's spaces or rooms, or perhaps even other people who had once lived there.

Elena couldn't take her eyes off the woman's fingers – they were disproportionately slender for her hands, not only because of the many gleaming rings set with tiny stones that resembled the roe of shimmering fish, but also because of her ivory-coloured skin, which instantly mesmerised Elena in the same way as an old film her father had rented on video, which she would often replay in her mind when she couldn't sleep.

Elena went to the farmstead several times with her parents and Nikita, and later they would drop her off there on her own. She picked apples, sorted them into different boxes and stuck labels on them with the names of the varieties, but in reality she was making plans to escape – plans that would allow her to break away from home and, once she had earned enough money, leave for the capital. Elena knew the way to the bus stop, had calculated how long it would take her to reach it on foot, and agreed to work there at weekends – helping the old owner look after

the house and orchard and prepare apples to be taken to the juice press. At that point, she would probably have accepted any offer that allowed her to escape her gossip-ridden town. She had lost all hope: remembering that filthy crows nested in the strip of trees separating the music school from the park, she decided to test one of her mother's absurd superstitions: if a bird marked you, you would become rich. And so, on one of those countless occasions when she couldn't stop thinking of ways to get rich, Elena stood in the triangle of crows until she had been shat on from head to toe. Of course, it didn't help – on the contrary, her mother complained about the unexpected load of washing and the detergent it had used up.

Even so, she lasted only a few weekends in that house. When the two of them were alone, the old woman would sit down at a large dressing table with its many lockable drawers, pull-out mirrors of different magnifications, metal chests and wooden boxes carved with scenes of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, and perform her evening toilette. As she slipped off her rings one by one and placed them in different boxes, Elena could see up close the lions and panthers emerging from the surfaces of the wooden carvings, the walnut trees and towering palms, climbing roses and birds, their feathers coated in layers of varnish and gold. There were pomegranates, bright water lilies, fountains sprayed in vivid colours and vines inlaid with tiny stones that could be mistaken for snakes – in the carving on one of the boxes, flora and fauna merged into a single whole, at once spilling luxuriantly from the amphora depicted there and entwining themselves around it like a magnificent lichen.

Once she had put away her countless pieces of jewellery in their designated drawers and boxes, the woman would let down her hair. Her long grey hair settled over her shoulders like a dirty cloud saturated with smoke, which Elena then had to carefully break apart with a comb. The closer she came to the woman, the stronger the pungent smell of medicine, liquorice and decay became. The smell had permeated every corner of the house – the heavy, suffocating bedding stuffed with chicken feathers, the hollows of the silver spoons, every cupboard in the kitchen and the wardrobe in the bedroom, from which the old woman would take out dresses and ask Elena to iron them for the following day.

But her evening toilette didn't end with her hair combed and the next day's dress prepared. The culmination was her gaping mouth, from which Elena, using a special pair of tweezers, had to remove one by one all thirty-two worn teeth screwed into her jaws, wipe them clean with a cloth soaked in alcohol, and place them in the designated box – where she discovered several more spare sets of teeth. The stench from the woman's open mouth was so strong that Elena held her breath every time. But the woman would stare at Elena's tightly pressed lips and ask her to smile so that she could inspect her teeth and remember that she herself had once had teeth like those – back in the days she recalled with the deepest nostalgia and would gladly have turned into objects, trophies to be arranged behind glass in elegant display cabinets beneath a label that read *youth*.

For lunch, Elena would make stews and soups according to the woman's recipes – vegetables that had been frozen no one knew how many years ago, tipped into a pot of boiling water, would soon disintegrate and come to resemble the contents

of the woman's diaper. Several times a day, Elena would hear her draw oxygen in through her nose and hold her breath, as though oxygen were something edible, something that had to be digested; for a few seconds later, having passed the gulp of fresh air through her failing digestive system, with its paper-thin liver and shrivelled stomach, she would expel it through her anus. The loud sound echoing through the rooms would signal to Elena that she could start running the bath and prepare the diaper, while the usual smell of liquorice, medicine and decay was joined by the stench of decomposed vegetables and ammonia.

The pungent nausea of those days was soothed by the orchard – the complete opposite of the house, its old owner, the empty cavities in her stinking mouth and the diaper soaked with faeces, dissolved salts and layers of intestinal gas. As Elena picked the gleaming apples, their thick, almost lemon-yellow skins revealing patches of crystallised sugar beneath, she would think that the hundred-year-old apple trees had seen everything a thousand times over. They had absorbed the storms that had swept through here and torn the roofs from the buildings of the settlement; countless times their trunks had bent, knelt and lain prostrate before the shapeless yet all-powerful bodies of the elements, only to straighten again. Once the cycle had traced another circle in the earth with an invisible finger, the apple trees would shed their leaves again, let them rot, and then ripen fragrant apples whose freshness could be matched neither by the fruit of the great pear trees in the yard, nor by creamy bananas, nor by tinned pineapple.

The White Transparents, light and almost papery, as though fashioned from gusts of wind and summer rain. The Canada Reinettes, massive as rubies. The Raspberry apples, acquiring a marble sheen in the full glare of the sun, their skins suffused with spreading crimson. The autumn apples, conical and ribbed, with thick, waxy skins streaked with pink that seeped towards the flesh like watercolour soaking into heavy paper. Countless thousands of apples, hundreds of different varieties, theories of their origins and instructions for their care, which she could read on the signs hanging nearby – and one Elena. For the first time, away from home, closer to another world. All she had to do was press herself against an apple tree and close her eyes – on those long October afternoons filled with a vibrating electric rustle, the orchard itself became an elemental force, more thrilling than any erotic scene she had ever seen in a film or imagined in her mind. And so she was never alone here – the orchard was a place where she could become an inseparable part of everything.

When she returned to the house in the evening, the woman would greet her with an even more pungent stench. After changing her diaper, Elena would prepare dinner, and during the meal she would begin to feel tired – she would go to lie down before it was even dark, and the woman, her face strangely illuminated, would cover the teenager with heavy bedding. Elena knew that she watched her sleep, but she couldn't resist – a cool drowsiness scented with apple flesh would approach like an inevitability she had no strength to fight. Her sleep was deep, her dreams damp and sticky, bursting with apple juice. She dreamed of herself grown together with the trees; she could feel the branches bending from within into incomprehensible shapes and forms, reaching into cavities that had opened in the

trunk, dripping with slick, gluey resin, and filling them with the sugar of the fruit. Elena wanted it never to end. The dreams were a sweet ecstasy induced by some obscure mixture of medicines the old woman had given her, to which she became instantly addicted and had no desire to give up.

Elena would wake drenched in sweat, while the woman sat in a round armchair with wooden armrests, smiling as though she knew what the teenager had experienced. At those moments Elena would feel a tenderness towards the old mistress of the house – as though she had unlocked one of the rooms erased by the pumice stone of her scarred voice. But one time she woke to find the woman's fingers in her mouth. Elena's body was still asleep, petrified like a lump of resin or a giant piece of amber, while the old woman pinned her against the mattress, preventing her from closing her mouth. Her ring-covered hand, with its strong fingers, resembled the tentacles of a squid pulled from the water, clotted with roe, probing her mouth for open mollusc shells containing pearls. Elena screamed and hurled curses into her face, but the woman couldn't understand them. Elena's lips, tongue and entire throat were paralysed.

Her body woke in the night. Blood returned to her lips, her jaw regained its usual shape, and her tongue could move again. By then, the woman was asleep in her own room. Holding her breath, Elena sat up and quietly climbed out of bed. In the bathroom, she was afraid to turn on the light, not because she might wake the woman. She was afraid to see what she had done. The lights built into the mirror didn't come on immediately, so Elena had time to feel the throbbing pain. From her jaw it spread to her ears, from her ears to her forehead, and from her forehead it travelled down the vertebrae of her spine, into her pelvic bones and legs. As the light grew brighter, she saw her face. It resembled a Raspberry apple, suffused with spreading crimson, except that the red came not from its waxy skin but from dried blood from her gums. She opened her mouth. Two molars were missing. The same number as the rings set with glittering gemstones that Elena found slipped onto her fingers.

But no one believed her. Not her mother, before whose eyes the mistress of the house had once again transformed into an innocent old lady. *Maybe those teeth would have fallen out anyway; you eat all sorts of rubbish.* Nor her father, who brought her home on Sunday along with twenty tonnes of apples Nikita had picked. Together they unloaded them from the lorry beside the remaining furniture from the closed-down second-hand shop. Nikita intended to sell the apples, and her father said: *You're lazy, so you make up all sorts of excuses just to get out of working. If he weren't ill, your brother would have stayed.*

Elena kept the rings in her backpack and showed them to no one. Eventually, she dared to climb up into her uncle's attic. If the carpet – the only possession from the days when Ksaveras had been a designer that he had not traded for ink – had not been nailed to the floor, it would have torn itself free and flown away – just like Elena when she found out where she could get the most money for the rings.

And one night, when the house had fallen so deeply asleep that it seemed to be snoring, she put on her father's steel-toed work boots and went down into the former shop. In the half-light gleamed the apples Nikita had picked, still brimming

with freshness and carrying the scent of the hot August winds – apples he intended to take to the press and sell the juice at the market – and she couldn't resist. She stamped on them for as long as she had the strength. She stamped on them imagining the whole world, in which she longed to be alone but no longer could: the world had already poisoned her. She stamped and kicked at them all – the light, papery White Transparents, the Canada Reinettes gleaming like rubies, the Raspberry apples coated in melted pink wax, the conical, ribbed autumn apples – one after another the apples vanished, dissolved, burst beneath her feet. Elena was part of everything, an inseparable whole that she wanted to crush, though she didn't yet know that this was impossible.

More than anything, what she really wanted to stamp out was her blossoming womanhood – the surges of desire she felt so distinctly as apple juice ran down her thighs, the sticky dreams filled with heat and the wetness gathering between her legs as she imagined touching the firm trunks of trees. She wanted to pluck off her rounding breasts and buttocks, every swelling curve – to gouge them out with woodcarving chisels and leave them to rot. She already knew what old age was and how it stank; she had seen what it meant to wither and conceal a failing body beneath glittering gemstones. She already understood that she could condemn herself for ever to watching younger women and to the searing daily confirmation that everything ends with youth, with that blossoming, poisonous lily-of-the-valley flower whose scent, if inhaled for too long, begins to smell like urine.

That night Elena knew so much that she promised herself she would never become a woman and would avoid everything associated with it. But she was lying to herself, just as experienced juice makers lie when they swear to their customers: *no sugar, no preservatives*. She didn't yet know the most important thing – that her body, swollen with the desire that frightened her, would soon become a chisel she would use to carve herself into other people's skin, trying to turn passion into a porcelain figurine and place it alongside glass perfume bottles, naïve love letters kissed with easily extended lipsticks, and gleaming eyeliner pencils in the columbarium of youth.

After all, her youth was only just beginning.

IEVA MARIJA SOKOLOVAITĖ. POZUOTOJA

Poser

Translated by Jayde Will | From literary magazine *Vilnius review*

January 16th, 2021

That piece of paper that had caught V.'s attention at the bus stop, that piece of paper hanging from that grimy advertising board, now firmly gripped between her fingers, was already yellowed, wrinkled like the cheek of an eighty-year-old, repeatedly getting soaked by the rain and then drying. A simple scrap of rough, thin paper, a palm-sized rectangle with the lower section cut in strips.

There is a telephone number on the strips; a few of the pieces are already torn off, of course carelessly, haphazardly. The advertisement itself is just a few words.

"*Models needed. Desperately. I paint,"* the smeared old letters announced. Letters like old women.

And that strange note underneath: "*I live above a canteen. They give leftovers."*

May 29th, 2022

I write V., because it's easier that way. A stroke down, a stroke up, and a period. V. It doesn't hurt.

Veronika, Ve-ro-ni-ka is already something entirely different. Veronika is a plant, a spring flower with bright blue blossoms; they are so delicate that they never last till morning in a vase. They still make it through the evening, they make it through the night, they make it till the first crows of the rooster; no, most likely they are still outstretched where they were until the very last second before a human-like figure glides into the room, but after gliding in, noticing, and stopping – it's always just bare green stems that crowd the vase, while the table is blue from the plentiful wrinkled blossoms. It's always like that. It's impossible to witness, to film, to record how it occurs. I think if someone managed to, that person would be struck by lightning before noon, run over by a car, or have a brick fall on their head from a balcony. That's simply how it is and how it should be; the unexplainable falling off of the veronica petals is a fundamental law of this planet. The unconscious pull of the eyes to still happen upon the blueness of its blossoms, for the fingers to reach out and pick them, make small bouquets, take them home, put them in glass vases and allow the night to come is a fundamental law of this planet. To await the morning, go to the kitchen barefoot, steal a glance towards the vase in the sterile silence and take in the irreversible tragedy of beauty. To be silent, not utter a word, to breathe. To make scrambled eggs for breakfast, wipe the blossoms off the table, go for a walk, return with a new bouquet of veronica, and once again put them in that same glass vase – all of that is a fundamental law of this planet.

But I am not a fundamental law either of this or any other planet. I am not fundamental. I am not a law. Which is why I write V. – it's easier that way. I write *she*, because it's easier that way. *She* burned the scrambled eggs today, *her* hair is tangled and is asking for shampoo, it's *her* pajamas that are caked with a tomato sauce stain around the navel, which she doesn't scratch off because she likes the color, because it's like blood.

I write K. I won't explain anymore why. It's simply K., and not Konstantinas. It's strange just how much a letter can change things. K. is K., V. is V. In this world there are no contexts, no blue blossoms, there is no one preparing to die, there's no Čiurlionises, nothing. Just letters and numbers – it's quicker, easier, cleaner that way, so why not. They could even not be people – with names like these they could be washing machines, SUVs, or anti-aircraft missiles. K. could be an AK-47, discarded on the side of the road in Mariupol. V. could be a five, a Roman numeral V of a church which had a road leading to it, carved in stone, broken off from the other numerals that had marked the date of its construction during the bombing; a lonely stone, immortalizing the present date and tossed indiscriminately beside the AK-47. And that's how they would meet. That's how their stories would merge, and that would suffice. It could also be the other way around – in this world there is no one that is hurting or that can be hurt. It's just an endless game in which they chase one another. In this world, V. is certain, matter is unable to keep up with form anymore, and the act of entelechy occurs where it can – under a bush, by a fountain, in an archway – it isn't important, it's a lot like drunk or drug-fueled sex, which is why things as well as people do not fulfill their function, don't represent what they want to represent, last for a short time, and expire so quicky. It could be that the matter that overtook them was not really meant for them and took on their shape by accident. It could be that their names, Veronika and Konstantinas, are a total coincidence, having nothing to do with the laws of this planet.

That's why I write V. A stroke up, a stroke down. That's it.

November 5th, 2011

"Your left eye…your left eye is a little…" V.'s voice is barely audible in the kitchen air paralyzed by the morning dampness. She has goosebumps under her nightshirt.

You can see the sky out the window – rain clouds are gathering. They have been gathering the entire week and slinking off to the side, ultimately not letting a single drop trickle down, heavy, exhausted, barely holding in their bloated dark gray stomachs. But they don't burst, they can't, they come up short in weeping over their home, they come up short – that's that. In this home, in V.'s childhood's home, there is no crying. In this home the laundry is never put out to dry on the balcony, so it won't become white flags being blown about on which someone could notice a blood-red color that hadn't been vanquished by the detergent. In this home there are no mirrors. Not one. In this home one speaks quietly in the morning. She and her mother sit like this on their stools in front of each other every morning, their legs stuck under themselves, wrapped in their nightshirts, having yet to groom

themselves, having yet to crack open the shell of the coming day, and replacing the mirrors for one another with words. It's chilly, but neither of them gets up to get their clothes until their ritual is finished. Barely a matter of a few centimeters separates their faces. V. is eleven years old, and she doesn't know how to describe a wound so the person listening won't feel pain.

"The left eye a little… I think it's a little bigger, Mom," she tries once again.

"Bigger?" Mother touches her eye with her finger. The finger is slender and very white. That finger on her face is like a foreign body – a lonely swan in a dark, muddy, dying lake.

"Yes, a little…"

"Bigger than yesterday?"

"No, I don't know. Probably not. Bigger than the other."

"Ah."

The swan reaches for the corner of the eye, and shudders after grazing the swollen, blackened mucous. Afterwards it slides along the eyebrow and sits on a scab that little bits of hair have gotten stuck to. V. sees how it's shaking. It trembles, as if it had flown thousands of kilometers and has finally returned home. It finally found its nest, where it will grow old.

"And how's the color?" her mother asks.

"Like grapes."

"Blue ones?"

"No, those reddish ones. Like reddish grapes. Those ones we ate last night after dinner, Mom."

"Ah, that's right. Good. There aren't any left?"

"What?"

"The grapes, dear."

"No."

"I'll bring some home."

"You don't have to, Mom…"

"It's fine, I'll buy some. You like them. And how are the lips?"

V. forces herself to look at the lips.

"They're cracked."

"Where?"

"Up top."

"Show me"

She takes V.'s hand, takes her fingers into her own and presses them against her lips. V. feels a hot liquid burning her frozen fingers. The lips under her fingertips pulsate furiously, even her heart doesn't pulsate like that – V. could swear that her heart beats slower. She moves her index finger from the corner of her mother's lips to the little furrow under her nose, marking the hot, throbbing river of blood to its source so her mother will know how long it is. She had already long ago learned to suppress the nausea in her windpipe, not allowing it to rise further and erupt either through sound or gesture. She's a good daughter, a daughter-mirror. The ritual doesn't take long. Soon she will need to get ready to go to school, whereas Mother will need to heat up breakfast.

"Thanks, Veronika." Her mother lets go of her hand, and her bloody palm lies once again on her skirt.

"Now it's my turn, Mom," V. reminds her.

"Yes, your turn." Mother's eyes, the left one narrow under a swollen eyelid, perch on V.'s face for a long time.

"There's an eyelash under your right eye."

V. rubs under her eyes.

"Now it's fine. Then… The pimple on your nose has almost healed. The neck rash is still red, but it's nothing to worry about, it will probably be gone by tomorrow. Your lips are as they always are. Your ears… The left one is a little dry on top, but maybe… No, further up. Yes, here. There you go, it came off. It's fine now."

"Thanks."

"…"

"…"

"My daughter, you are so beautiful."

V. picks at her nails. She tries to discreetly clean the blood from under her nails; the coagulating blood becomes even stickier, and the more she tries, the dirtier she feels.

Mother keeps smiling, and her lip cracks once again.

So, January 16th, 2021

So, she is standing at the bus stop, clutching the piece of paper, which she has just torn off the wall of the stop, and stares at it, barely blinking. The seconds, minutes, heartbeats tick, and she is standing and staring. Her fingers are almost imperceptibly trembling from the cold, with the piece of paper trembling along with them.

An out-of-the-way part of town, the line's second-to-last stop, a dry frost; it's not yet late, but it's also not early, that time of the day when shoes, tires, and dust flood the streets from offices all at once, there's an insane amount of shoes, tires, and dust on the streets, everyone is moving, rushing to overtake one another. They disappear from sight and then appear again, the trajectories of motion intersect, repeat, break off, and bend, weaving between one another and merging into a uniform kaleidoscope of moving lines that draft an uninterrupted sketch too immense to be taken in. That kind of time, where until night, until the *in between*, which separates one day from the next – there is still an entire evening, but there's a strange sense of lateness, hurry, an incurable neurotic exhaustion hanging in the air. A sixth sense of an impending daily miniature catastrophe, a nagging feeling of a train wreck that has become normal and routine.

Everything's in motion, he pauses at the crosswalks or corners are just barely discernable ruptures of emptiness crossing a dotted line, which don't slow down the glimmer. The figures of passersby, cars, buses, dogs, pigeons, old women, children, cyclists, and plastic bags rippling in the wind – at such an hour, everything that's alive is in motion. V. standing at the bus stop is the only motionless vertical thing in this frenetic kaleidoscope.

In her hands is a piece of paper, and they are trembling a little bit. A few of the telephone numbers have been torn off, and the rest quiver as they await what their fate will be. Art models are needed. Apparently, there's someone that paints. And that note about the canteen. A fisherman's trick, there's no question.

If only more fishermen knew how easy it is to lure their prey by offering it its own meat – we most likely would only know about fish from legends and museum pamphlets. Like woolly mammoths or dodos.

V. scoffs and sticks the scrap of paper in her coat pocket. She had yet to have the thought enter her mind that someone could paint *her*. That someone would dare to allow themselves to look for *her* body, be her Eskimo, take on the role that she has always assigned to herself.

In the end, it's making her simply incredibly curious.

January 17th, 2021

Of course, she is afraid. And who wouldn't be?

With fear, for fear, out of fear, in fear, acted-upon fear. V. is the most scared animal in the world. That's how it is, that's who she is. Sometimes she really regrets that she can't allow herself to have a pit bull, mastiff, or other large dog that doesn't understand a joke. That she never learned karate or how to box. Or at least fencing. Now she keeps a little pepper spray bottle in the right pocket of all her jackets and coats, she has maybe fifteen of them so she doesn't have to take them out and put them back in her pockets as the weather and her clothing change. While walking alone on the street, she constantly brushes her fingers up against those little bottles. This has already become a habit, an unconscious action to calm herself, just like a baby sucking its thumb. It's not clear if she'd know how to use the weapon if trouble arose, but by gripping it she still feels calmer, returning from class in the dark or running to the shop for milk, paint, or tinned beans. Every figure that emerges on an empty street raises alarm, but it eases when that figure turns out to be of the female gender. Whereas she is afraid of all men.

The worst thing is that much like her forefathers, who would tickle their imagination with horror stories on winter evenings in their timber homestead, V. scares herself senseless imagining how she would live if she had that organ dangling between her legs. Sooner or later, the bridge between mind and body would collapse, she (he) would be unable to control her (his) might, but she (he) didn't need to control herself (himself), as that might belong to her (him) anyway and would be totally available at her (his) disposal. While a disgusting sweetness seeps into the grooves of her brain, she sometimes imagines how the gates suddenly open up to the body's potency towards any moving creature that is nearby. She (he) rushes to schoolgirls in short skirts in overcrowded buses, whistles at the single moms walking by, follows some long-legged woman in a different part of the city, follows her and corners her. She belittles, rapes, destroys her. She revels in her might and laughs, laughs, and laughs; sometimes V. awakens drenched in cold sweat, and her cheek muscles ache from laughter. In her dreams, she sows her seed left and right,

she sows and whistles. She awakens with cheeks aching from laughter, then she climbs out of bed and drags herself to the toilet to change her tampon.

Of course, she's afraid, and who wouldn't be? What are the chances that the guy who is looking for an art model isn't an alpha male? That's why before going out, V. doesn't only feel around in her coat pocket so she's sure that the little bottle of pepper spray really is there, but she also sticks a small razor blade wrapped in a tissue behind her heel. If the need arose, she could disfigure his face, hands, or eyes.

V. finds the studio (if you could call that half-empty room with a high ceiling, old, deep windows with outlets, and bare white walls a studio) according to smell. The smell of fat, fried potatoes, coffee, oil paint, and sweaty anxiety – all of that is blended into a uniform, indivisible olfactory conglomerate. In fact, there is a cheap canteen located on the ground floor offering lunch specials, but when V. appears in front of its window, it's already slowly getting dark; inside, in the darkest recesses, there sits a lone red-faced straggler hugging his glass and nodding off, while the fat barmaid with a perm and yellowed flowery apronwipes the last compote glasses, sniffling loudly and sighing, hoping that this will compel him to take the hint and scram. V. watches that scene through the display window with heartfelt interest, feeling like she is in a natural history museum, as if she is looking at a diorama with extinct animals. It's precise, impeccably constructed, the poses of the subjects are true-to-life, but the scene isn't real, because you are fully aware of your own existence, of Homo sapiens as such, which appeared at least a few thousand years later, you are the eye of the here-and-now, presented with a spectacle that you will never see in your everyday life.

After tearing herself away from the display window, V. turns towards the inner courtyard. She finds a door there and beyond it, stairs to the first floor. While walking up, the building is silent as if it is holding its breath, not wanting to scare off the newcomer. It is old, hulking, dirty, having lost its elegance long ago and most likely thought that itself, while she is wearing white gloves and a thin blue silk skirt. Though normally she doesn't use makeup, this time she has powdered her face and even highlighted the small mole on her right cheek. Why? She couldn't explain it.

Most likely it was because of the razor that was pressed tight against her ankle with a clandestine, serpent-like coolness, so that that it would have a reason to be there.

Having reached the first floor, V. comes up against the only door. She knocks. No one comes to open it. She knocks again, again nothing, then she pushes down on the handle – the door is unlocked – and she goes inside.

There are only three pieces of furniture in the room – a couch the color of red brick, an easel, and a simple white stool. Nothing else. The easel is huge, and the paper shell attached to it almost covers one of the windows. The walls are white and bare as can be – no clocks, paintings, or shelves with trinkets. No plaster heads, pencil cases crammed with God knows what, or dirty palettes. Not one used coffee cup, not one pizza box or beer can – nothing like V., of course, had hoped to see. Nothing. Even the white dust is right where it needs to be.

It's not the studio of a painter, but rather the operating room of a surgeon, the igloo of an Eskimo, ready for the field dressing of an animal they have hunted their

entire life, V. thinks. It's a surreal de Chirichoesque universe of waiting, of budding necessity, of desire that swells quietly and irrevocably. This light is stifling. The dust sticks in your throat. This emptiness is severe. Severe and tender. Genius armless children that see the future are born in such light, in such silence. In such light Buddhists die smiling. Something very important is not yet born, something vitally necessary could come to fruition in any of this room's contours, in any of its forms or lines, which is why the shadows don't move, which is why the building has silently held its breath. But that something is stalling, the walls and the space's four corners expand, but it still doesn't show up. V. feels that just after coming in. She is waiting, but no one comes to meet her, doesn't offer her a seat, doesn't ask for her to take her coat off. The gleam of the streetlights slides unbearably slowly across the ceiling, and the frozen toes in her shoes thaw, whereas the sheen of silence doesn't recede. There's nothing else that can be done, just surrender to the order of such a universe, sit on the red couch – red like lips, gigantic, absurdly grandiose, almost like the church-shattering lips of Man Ray, relentlessly wishing to utter a last syllable – and turn into yet another piece of furniture, the last detail completing the map of waiting.

It is after some time that V. notices a little whisp of smoke from behind the easel, coiling towards the ceiling. He is sitting with his legs raised on the windowsill and is intentionally acting as if he is not there. V. can't hold back and smiles. She wipes a crumb off her skirt, and it falls on the ground, but it seems so large and vulgar in that whiteness that V. picks it up and sticks it to her thigh once again. She closes her eyes. She opens them. The cigarette isn't on the other side of the easel anymore, the fingers grasping it are already visible. Insect fingers, boney, unbelievably white, sensual fingers. That's his left hand.

The right hand is drawing on the paper. V. hears the lines slashed by the charcoal. She hears how they appear, how they come to an end, how they cross one another. The cigarette smolders, the ashes hold to the butt, hold and don't fall, they can't fall on the whiteness of the floor and desecrate it after all. But the lines – the lines that she doesn't see – multiply at breakneck speed. his hand draws and draws and doesn't stop; the poor paper, the drawings are like an itch, like a plague that leaves no reprieve, there are so many that they begin to wrestle with one another, to fight for survival like animals, seized by an unavoidable, natural cruelty. They hurry, they chase one another but can't catch up – too late, too late, too late. V. can't look at the ashes on the end of the cigarette anymore. She won't survive if they fall – it will be her fault. She finds a crumb on her skirt with her eyes and stares at it, while the squeaking of the charcoal is amplified, and she doesn't know what to do. How to run away. This sound should be calming. This process should be simple, eye-hand-paper, the plan is not complicated, after all, this way of existence is written in one's blood, preserved in the song of our prehistoric ancestors, in the milk of a doe, in the damp wall of a cave. This process should be quite simple and familiar, and it would be like that, if not for one detail. V. can't stand it anymore. She really wants to go to the bathroom, but what is really bothering her is asking, asking frankly. What the hell is she sitting there for? For what ends did this person search for an art model if he has yet to, even with the briefest of glances, look at her? V. can swear that he hasn't looked. He hasn't even looked up.

Perhaps he's blind, she suddenly thinks. But those lines – they can't be blind.

She finally drums up the courage. If she doesn't ask now, she'll pee right here.

"Why are you hiding?"

The flow of lines stops for a moment, and the cigarette quivers, but the ash doesn't fall. Only a small see-through flake peels off.

"I'm not hiding," says a voice in which V. hears a smile. "You're the one that's hiding."

"Me? I'm here."

"I know."

"Did I really speak with you on the phone, and did I really understand correctly that you are looking for an art model?"

"Of course."

"Are … are you sketching me?"

The cigarette is still hiding behind the easel, and soon a new tumulus of smoke swirls up.

"Yes."

"Am I doing something wrong?"

He laughs.

"No, of course not. Wrong? I don't think that's possible. Why did you think that?"

"You haven't looked at me once. I have been sitting in front of you for a whole hour, and now you're saying that I'm hiding."

"I know."

"Isn't that why you were looking for an art model, so you could depict them as precisely as possible?"

"Yes. Precisely that."

"So?"

"What?"

"I perhaps don't quite fully understand you."

"That can't be."

"Sorry?"

"I think you understand. That's all."

"Why do you think that I should understand?"

"You already pointed it out yourself. I haven't looked at you once, and you've been sitting here for a whole hour – an hour and six minutes actually. I think you understand."

V. doesn't know if she is smiling or baring her teeth out of loathing. That feeling burns like fire. Blood rushes through her veins. A blood river, an irreversible river. She is late, her brain lags woefully behind – but not even that hurts, because she doesn't escape anywhere from herself, she is as late as the lines embodying her on the paper made by insect-like fingers. When she finally understands that he, K., is behaving in the most serious way, isn't lying and isn't mocking her, that his only desire, the only crazy, fanatical desire is to see her – all she can do is sink deeper into the red couch. Of course, he is ever attempting to see how she looks *in her entirety*, and no one has yet desired this so strongly before. Of course, he is ever attempting

to create her portrait, and he needs an art model – which is precisely why he doesn't look at her, precisely why he is waiting, until she herself looks from the paper at him, which is why he allows the lines to breed and mutate; how painful this kind of waiting must be, a lonely path that no one has yet trodden. If he takes the task of creating her portrait only so as to fully fathom her, how inhumanely much of his own existence he is able to endure. How he is unafraid to admit that upon seeing, he only ever sees himself – so why should one pretend? That's how it's always been and how it always will be, and that is like a verdict, which one cannot change. Unless you learn to dance and laugh while rattling the chains.

When V. finally understands this, it's not too late. The strokes die one at a time, gradually, peacefully and undramatically like wild animals. In this room there is no – and cannot be – tragedy. In this room no one becomes disappointed in themselves or in others, they don't look for the guilty ones, they don't expect forgiveness, they don't desire victims. Shapes appear and disappear. Some of them, for example, K.'s fingers, grasping the charcoal pencil, and V.'s waist, leaning on the back of the sofa, remain long enough that at one point they appear in the very same unit of space, and this coincidence is beautiful, because it's totally meaningless. Time passes. The cigarette burns as the charcoal squeaks.

V. sits until she feels that her bladder can't hold it in any longer. Then she gets up and leaves without saying anything. While going through the door, she hears how K. asks her to take a steaming plastic bag in the stairwell, which she hadn't noticed when she came in, in lieu of payment. In it lies a box of four gigantic, greasy potato pancakes from the canteen downstairs.

Julijonas Vilkas

Translated by Philomena Marmion and Kotryna Garanašvili

I.

That girl was an angel but nobody could have known it yet.

By the end of the road, Julijonas Vilkas was already running. Four years had passed away from home – four years of death, hunger, wounds and blood, four years of hell. At last, he was back in his own village, drawing deep into his young chest the air of his homeland, fragrant with apple orchards. He ran along the sodden, potholed road, paying no mind to the pain of the broken blisters on his feet. He kept looking over to the right where he eventually laid eyes on his childhood home, its roofs peeking out behind the trees. The day was drawing to a close, the sky glowing red with the setting sun. Wisps of late Indian summer brushed against Julijonas's face, and as he swept them away, he felt weary, but indescribably happy. Finding himself in the same landscape as the trees of his parents' homestead under the clear autumn sky filled his soul with a sense of wholeness, unusual for his young age. He slowed his pace so he could relish the new blissful feeling a while longer. The scenery of wartime nightmares disappeared backstage: the wail of an injured friend and the smirk of the enemy soldier who unbuttoned his fly, pulled out his cock and emptied his stinking piss into a prisoner's soup can. For how long would these ghosts haunt the stage of Europe and the mind of an ordinary Lithuanian cavalryman? Would memory fade and lull sanity to sleep? The silence of the homeland's fields was as comforting as the ending of a childhood fairy tale, sending you peacefully to sleep, knowing that you wouldn't see any faces distorted by pain or cruelty against a red background. Julijonas could scarcely believe that he was here, in the silence of the fields, where he had grown up without appreciating its innocence and purity, where the wind carried the scent of apples instead of rotting blood and gunpowder. The feeling of wholeness was completed when he saw a small scene of this comforting reality, a girl who looked like a Romantic painter's sketch come to life.

Where the path leading home branched off from the dirt road, he caught a glimpse of a small dark-haired head, poking out from the tall weeds, heather and juniper. It must be Adelė, my dear sister, Julijonas thought. He jumped over a ditch and clutched the girl in his arms. In his joy, he lifted her up and drew her to his chest.

'Look how you've grown, Adelė, and how beautiful you've become. What are you doing here all by yourself?' Julijonas asked, kissing her on both cheeks.

'I'm not Adelė. Adelė lives over there,' the girl said, pointing to the Vilkas homestead. 'I'm Veronika.'

Julijonas put the girl down and took a step back.

'And whose child are you, Veronika?' he asked.

'I'm a Bartkus. My home is over there,' she replied, gesturing to the other side of the road where the Bartkus house stood.

'I know where the Bartkus family lives. So what are you doing here, Veronika Bartkus?'

'Waiting. Adelė told me that you'd come back from the war, so I come here every day to wait for you. I usually wait with Adelė but she always brings Bronikė, who soon gets bored and Adelė has to go home with her. Then I wait by myself. I don't get bored.'

'So you know who I am? How can you know?'

'Your jacket and your hat. Nobody here has clothes like that, only soldiers. And you were walking towards the Vilkas house. Who else could you be?'

'Well, now that you've greeted me, you'll be wanting to go home, won't you? Your mother must be cross with you for wasting time here in the thistles and shrubs all by yourself. Look, your dress is covered in burrs,' he said, reaching to take one off her dress.

Veronika jumped back, laughing.

'Don't touch me, I'm ticklish.'

'Don't worry, I shan't tickle you. I'm afraid of being tickled myself. Come over tomorrow to play with your friend, will you? But ask your mother first. It's important to ask your parents.'

'I know. I'll come,' she promised.

And she ran off laughing at the thought that a big man like him, a soldier, a hussar at that, should be afraid of tickling. Her scratched up skinny calves flashed as she leaped over the ditch. She hurried home with the good news that Little Magda had been waiting for a long time. What a sweet girl, what a beautiful child, Julijonas thought. Veronika disappeared from his sight so quickly that it was almost as if he hadn't seen or talked to her at all. What had happened here? Perhaps the girl was an angel but he hadn't realised that. She appeared and disappeared like a ghost. But Julijonas wasn't one to see apparitions. He stood there watching, half-expecting her to reappear around the bend. But no, she was gone, shooting out of sight like a little bullet – zing! – and disappearing altogether. He took a step backwards and all thoughts of the girl vanished when he turned and caught sight of the homestead, squat against the ground, which belonged to his parents and his ancestors before them. He felt joyful anticipation surge through his body. He came back with all his arms and legs intact, alive and with a bit of money. How many times had he said goodbye to life? In his mind he had already bid farewell to Mum, his brother Augustinas and the entire family! No, he would never break their hearts, he wouldn't tell them about the horrors he had lived through, all the blood and despair he had seen, the wails of the dying he had heard. He would kiss Mum's hands, hug her and never let go. He stood rooted to the spot, unable to get enough of the sight of home. His didn't even notice that a piece of the fence had been broken, or that the storks' nest on top of the barn roof was gone. Or that the weathervane was also missing…

His longing eyes caressed the windows of the house and the doors that swung open as the children scurried about. The boy with a halo of white hair must be

Motiejus. And the two girls standing hand in hand in the middle of the yard were Adelė and Bronikė. Vincas was nowhere to be seen. No, there he was, emerging from the garden with a large basket. But where was Petras? He should be all grown up by now. Slowly, Julijonas walked towards the house. He wanted to capture this moment and inscribe it in his mind and in his memory for good. Such ease, such warmth! The war was over. Over, over – his heart was pounding like the earth under a galloping horse. No one yet knew how the fate of this land would unfold, and where God's hand would guide Julijonas himself, like it had guided his eldest brother Pranciškus. Only one thing was certain: he was home now and nobody could make him leave.

He was wrong. But neither he nor the joyous autumn evening could have guessed it yet.

Suddenly, Mum's voice rang out:

'Children, inside, right now! It's time for supper. Petras! Come on in!'

If she had called out: 'Children, look, here's a bag of gold,' it would not have sounded any nicer. So beloved and familiar was her voice! So comforting and delicious was the word 'supper' itself! Julijonas picked up his pace. Mum was calling them for supper! At that moment, his brother Petras also appeared, stepping out of the barn with a pitchfork in his hand. From afar, you could mistake brother for father, they looked so much alike! Julijonas called out his brother's name and they warmly embraced one another.

'I'm so glad to finally see you back,' Petras exclaimed. He was covered in sweat from working in the barn, or perhaps from the joy of seeing his brother return. He kept repeating: 'I'm so glad, so glad!'

'I could melt away myself. I'm so happy and so excited!' Julijonas said, laughing.

They began to wrestle, testing their strength. They fell to the ground laughing, rolling around and gleefully shouting until their mother rushed outside to see what was going on. Julijonas jumped back on his feet and ran up to her, but she took a quick step backwards.

'Oh Lord! Take pity on me, Julijonas, please don't go lifting me up!'

The three of them laughed and his mother brushed away a tear of joy. Petras could barely contain himself. Julijonas took both of Mum's hands, kissed one after the other and pressed them against his cheeks.

In the farmhouse, his father greeted Julijonas with a firm handshake and, as was his custom, a joke:

'Just in time, Julijonas, just in time. Any later and the supper would have gone cold.'

There was no offense to be taken from father's jokes. That was the kind of man he was. You were not supposed to say affectionate words to him, and he didn't say them either. He didn't even know what they were and he had never embraced another person in his life. Or perhaps he had, only his children had no memory of it. Nobody knew what went on in his heart. Nobody knew or understood, and he didn't explain it either, and so you could never tell whether he didn't care what others thought or whether he simply had no feelings at all. The family was used to it, but they were afraid of his temper. None of them puzzled over why he was like that.

They just made sure to keep out of his way. But their father had never laid a hand on any of them. The children grew up between their mother's loving arms and their father's cold gaze. That's just how it was. That's what life was like here, and an evening when Julijonas returned from war alive and well would not change the course of this life. At the table, mother's face was radiant, father slurped his soup, keeping his eyes fixed on his plate, while the children were clamoring, each trying to touch their returned brother, asking Julijonas all sorts of smart and silly questions, talking one over another. Having finished eating, father got up from the table and sat down on his bed, watching the familial commotion from the dark corner.

'Julijonas, grandpa has been waiting for you. Here, take him this plate of soup and sit with him for a little while. I'll make up a bed for you in his room soon.'

Julijonas was glad, for he had missed his grandpa sorely, perhaps more than anyone else, and had been waiting impatiently to see him again. But he didn't want to offend his brothers and sisters by running straight to the little chamber where the old man always slept. Although he had not yet tasted so much as a spoonful of soup, his mother's encouragement gave him the chance to leave the table at last.