

NOISE MAKERS: CATHOLICS

Excerpts translated by Emilija Ferdmanaitė

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Introduction

Nobody has time for long stories anymore. So I've cut off some of the time for you, which felt nice. You can choose what you like in your own time.

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The Beginning

Not far from the centre of Brussels, in Laeken, there is an old cemetery where the chapel of the original church is still standing. The wife of King Leopold I of Belgium, Louise Marie Orléans (1812-1850), expressed her wish to be buried there. However, the King found the church too small for his liking. Just three days after the funeral, he commissioned the construction of a grander church worthy of the King (the Belgian kings, queens and princes now rest in its crypt). As time passed, both aristocrats and common folk wished to be buried in Laeken Cemetery, to be closer to the royal family. The cemetery expanded rapidly and, when space became scarce, the bürgermeister decided not to look for a new location, instead opting to expand vertically. Today, the cemetery extends perhaps eight storeys below the ground.

While strolling through the cemetery, a particular monument caught my eye: an open bronze book. On one page, there was a letter in French addressed to a deceased wife, and on the other, a Chinese version of the same. The letter bore the signature of a certain Célestin OSB, with the abbreviation suggesting he was a Benedictine monk. Why is one of the letters in Chinese? Why would a Chinese man become a Catholic monk? And why would a monk be writing a letter... to his wife?

The Hero

The quest led me to the central character of this book, Lou Tseng-Tsiang. Born and raised in China, he received his education there and was sent to serve as a translator at the Chinese Embassy in St. Petersburg. It was here that he met and fell in love with Berthe Bovy, the daughter of a Belgian general. His political journey was nothing short of remarkable, progressing from a translator to the position of Chinese Prime Minister. However, after his wife died, he chose to forsake his political career and worldly affairs, embracing the life of a Benedictine monk, dedicating precisely two decades to serving God. Not all Catholics were pious apologists; there were also bold missionaries and

extraordinary personalities who aspired to change the world, and indeed succeeded in changing certain aspects of it.

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Time and Space

'The Noisy Ones: Catholics' revisits centuries-old, long-forgotten tales. The narrative canvas stretches across China, Belgium and Lithuania, encompassing a timeframe from the missionary Andrius Rudamina's sermons to the Chinese people, up until January 1949, when the Communists took over Beijing.

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The Story

Fragmentary yet historically cohesive, 'The Noisy Ones: Catholics' draws from biographies and correspondences of missionaries, monks, and priests, as well as historical and museum records. The history of Church, language, and wine. The First World War and the Treaty of Versailles, examined from a relatively unexplored perspective within Lithuania. This book offers you the freedom to read it according to your preferred time period or theme, or to traverse its pages sequentially, crafting your own narrative and writing your own historical novel.

Zhuangzi

A drunkard remains unscathed even after a harsh fall from a wagon. His bones and their compounds are no different from others, yet his injuries differ, for his soul is whole. He boarded the carriage unwittingly and tumbled out unwittingly. Thoughts of life and death, awe and dread, have found no place in his chest. Thus, when he encounters an obstacle, he does not collapse in fear. If wine can bestow such wholeness upon a man, what innate wholeness must he possess by nature?

Rabbi's Tale

When Noah finally landed, he decided to plant a vineyard. The devil offered to help him. He used a knife to prod a lamb, cut a lion, butcher a pig, and pierce a monkey. The soil, thus fertilised, was ready to plant grapes. After the first glass, the man is calm as a lamb, bleating happily. After a few, he is like a lion – full of pride, tossing his mane. In the third stage, the lion is gone, only a pig is rolling around, puking on itself, and at the very end there is just a drunken monkey, a screaming naked ape.

The first time Noah had wine, it was rosé. Not red and not white – the colour of a midway rose.

1656-1730

Joachim Bouvet (a Jesuit mathematician sent to Asia by Louis XIV) engages in correspondence with Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. In their exchange, Bouvet introduces Leibniz to the Yijing, or 'Book of Changes'. The German philosopher and mathematician concludes: these Chinese hexagrams are a proof of binary mathematics.

Opium

Relieves pain. Reduces hunger and thirst. Immerses you in a healing sleep.

1721

Élixir Asthmaticum, an opium-based medicine, was formulated. It was available in French pharmacies up until 1986. It is still available in the US, but only to babies of drug addicted mothers.

Élixir parégorique

A remedy for diarrhoea in both children and adults, and for babies to prevent them from crying during teething. The formula was registered by Jacob le Mort, a resident of Leiden from 1650 to 1718. The ingredients of the miracle cure include honey, liquorice, lindera, opium, camphor, anise, and more.

1691

St. Casimir's relic was brought from Vilnius to the Jesuit College of Mechelen.

Peace Collapses and War Ensues

A tale of endless sorrow.

Army of Saints

Archangel Michael spears Lucifer. Saint George spears the Dragon. Saint Martha spears another Dragon. Saint Margaret holds the Dragon by a chain. The beast, black with a gleaming collar, devours Margaret, but she wears a cross around her neck. The cross pierces Satan's palate, making it belch, and the Dragon regurgitates Margaret. Saint Margaret is the most excellent patroness of madmen.

Saint Barbara also has a sword. And Saint Catherine has a sabre. Summon all the saints with their cutlasses, bayonets, firearms and incendiaries to form a squad. What a cloud, glittering with lightning bolts, is the army of holy virgins! And at the front of the army walks the Virgin, crushing the head of the Serpent-Beast with her bare feet.

O grant me wings like a dove; I would fly to seek thy servants, O God.

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1848. *The Mission*

WHO: Joseph Gabet

WHOM: the Pope

The missionaries do not know the language (Chinese) well enough and do not pay any attention to Chinese culture as they ought to.

Indigenous priests are scarce and not considered equal to the missionaries, whose teachings often clash with local customs.

Missionaries from different orders are constantly quarrelling over territories, drawing the attention of local authorities.

This turmoil perplexes the faithful.

WHO: The Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith

The letter should be prohibited from being read and should be destroyed.

1849. *Bishop Motiejus Valančius*

Pope Pius IX appoints Motiejus Valančius as the Bishop of Samogitia.

Hildegard of Bingen

Wine is the lifeblood of the earth, flowing within it much like blood flows through a man's veins; hence it absorbs the heat with a swiftness akin to a whirring mill-wheel, drawing it from the bladder down to the marrow of the blood, and produces the hottest of heat, so that the marrow gives to the blood the hot warmth of delight.

That is why, when a man desires to drink strong wine, he must temper it with water, so that the potency and heat may be at least somewhat dulled and mellowed. When consumed undiluted, wine scorches, harms, compromises health, and drives one towards carnal pleasures.

Teachings of Shu King-Shen

Europe's power, its true strength, does not lie in its armaments or even its scientific advancements, but rather in its religion. Throughout your diplomatic career, you will have the opportunity to explore the Christian faith. It has many branches, each with its own distinct societies. I encourage you to delve into the oldest branch, one that traces its origins to the very beginning; go there. Study its doctrines, adhere to its commandments, observe its leaders, and closely examine its artistic achievements.

Later, when you have finished your career, you may have the opportunity to delve even deeper. Choose the oldest community within the faith's oldest branch. If possible, get inside it. Become a disciple and gain insight into its inner workings and secrets. Once you have grasped and embraced the mysteries of that life, when you have reached the very heart and power of Christ's religion, then bring and gift it to China.

Shu King-Shen

Shu King-Shen is a Mandarin from the old imperial regime. He speaks only Chinese, spent only a few days in Rome, and has never personally interacted with anyone from the clergy.

1893

Sister Agnes enters the Benedictine convent of Maredret on 14th September. She soon sets up a drawing workshop.

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1934. Japan. Chiune Sugihara leaves the Manchuria Railway

I resigned due to the cruel treatment of the Chinese by the Japanese. They do not consider them human beings. I couldn't bear that.

1934. The Adventures of Tintin

11th May

WHO: Father Neut

WHOM: Hergé

To achieve an even greater impact than Tintin's previous adventures, send him to China. That could substantially contribute to fostering interracial comprehension and genuine friendship between the races.

16th May

WHO: Hergé

WHOM: Father Neut

There are many things that need to be changed about our attitudes towards China and the Chinese, especially those of our children.

For quite some time now, as I've been preparing for my stories, I've pondered how many misconceptions I myself might have and how literature could alter these notions. Presently, I find myself developing a growing fondness and admiration for this nation, and a burning desire to understand and embrace it. Dearest Father, thank you once again for your encouragement and reassurance that what I am about to embark upon will not be useless.

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1946. *The Mission to the Belgian Congo*

A novice Belgian missionary. Sent by the monastery with their blessings, she sets off for the Congo. To teach the ignorant. To nurse the sick. To pray and work.

On the plane, she becomes overheated, gasping for breath and air. So, just before landing at a stopover airport in Morocco, she quickly unwraps the newspaper, which is tightly wound not only around her head but also around her face.

The newspaper was meant to shield her from the harmful atmospheric pressure that weighs down on you during the plane journey, a precaution advised by the sisters who had either embarked on flights themselves or heard tales of such travels.

As the newspaper became soaked with fear-induced sweat, its inked letters began to run, tracing lines upon her forehead and cheeks. Oh, and the nose. If she had a pocket mirror, she would have seen herself looking like a chimney sweep. As if she had indulged in too much ash on Ash Wednesday. But the nun doesn't have a mirror in her pocket.

Once the newspaper was removed from her head, the remainder of the journey became rather enjoyable. Free from pressure and constraint. She tried not to look out of the window, devoting her time to prayer and introspection instead, the clouds outside being denser than on the rocky peaks of her village.

It was scary to watch. It was scary to see. Scary to discern anything within those clouds.

THE WHITE AGAINST THE BLACK

Excerpt translated by Julija Gulbinovič

One morning, I received a call. The man introduced himself as a relative. A relative? Yes, yes, Dalia my dear, your relative Zenon Vaibzdys, from your mother's side... Vaibzdys? Vaibzdys?! Oh, I didn't mean to frighten you, NOT THAT Vaibzdys, not Genezijas, calm down, I'm from the later generation of Vaibzdyses, my relationship with my old man is such that one could say – there is NONE. He and I are like oil and water. No longer even relatives! If you wish, we could have a frank conversation... Yes, yes, you and I are COMPLETE strangers. But we will get to know each other. Dalia my dear, I have some news for you. Oh, I'll only be able to reveal it when we meet in person, not on the phone. It's an urgent matter that requires immediate attention, so we should meet as soon as possible! Ok, so in the beer garden of Griūk negyvas? His tone was that of a self-confident person in the habit of commanding others, yet his voice sounded soft.

God knows why I agreed to meet that son of 'not our' Vaibzdys. To dispel the slightest doubt about our status as non-relations and prove to myself that being on the opposite side of the fence gives me a sweet feeling of superiority? Or was it simple lack of resolve and will to refuse? (It does happen that I spend a good fifteen minutes being pushed into a corner by a smooth talker pontificating about food supplements, having informed me that, besides, she is recording this conversation, until I finally summon my strength to shout "No!!!"). Intrigue? Curiosity? No, it was probably that "urgent matter that requires immediate attention" – you never know...

He was already waiting for me in the beer garden of Griūk negyvas overgrown with climbers. Come autumn, those climbers turn blood-red and come to evoke a sense of longing akin to dull tooth ache, later changing into dark blue, the colour of bruises, but now they were still filtering the shimmering late summer sunlight. The green plastic chairs around small round tables, each with a tiny vase of purple asters, were empty: four o'clock, not a popular time for customers.

Large, fleshy, squashed as if stuck between the chair and the table, he pushed out another chair with his foot – oh, what a cheap, pitiful piece of plastic! - and got up to his full height, arms outstretched like those of a football goalkeeper. He was smiling broadly, so broadly it gave me a fright: he was about to grab me into a familial bear hug and squeeze me, but luckily something held him back.

Around forty five. Trimmed – not untamed – longish russet beard. He could have been a young-generation Orthodox priest – there was something missionary in his face. Cleverly disguised balding at the back of the head. Unbuttoned suit jacket and, as is frequently the case with men of his age, the flaccid, over-fermented dough of his stomach spilling over his belt. No tie, the top button of the shirt undone. Plump hands with tapering fingers, on one wrist a white gold Cartier Love bracelet that had rolled into the wrist

line, on the other a Rolex. Only when you lock your hand with that deceitfully soft bun of his palm you discover how powerful its muscle actually is ...

“Oh, what wonderfully familiar features! Grandpa Vaibzdys’s lips... The chin.. The eyebrow line... The cheekbones... All grandpa’s, my grandpa’s long-lost brother’s, for whom he longed so much but was never to see again... The eyes... My God, those exact eyes! ...”

He welled up, emitted a sort of snort, and rolled his eyes to the sky, as if his speech was suddenly abandoning him, but in a moment – a real virtuoso of shifting gears – he stood in front of me completely composed again, so that it even crossed my mind: here’s what it means to be able to control your emotions. Pleasant and soft, he set off with a panegyric of me, praising my fifty-year-old beauty: it’s at this age that beauty turns into mature fine wine - matured in no less than barrels of oak from France, from the woods of Nevers, Vosges, Tronçais. Wine as fine as Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, Emmanuel Rouget or Domaine Armand Rousseau, or even... Wines of the highest quality – oh, Burgundy! – dark, velvety. He’s a wine connoisseur, and I am worthy of every one of them!

But the instant a young woman in a little pleated skirt and apron appeared by our table, notepad ready in her hands, he, like a gemstone, suddenly revealed another facet. His smile disappeared as if covered by a cloud. Suddenly I saw how finicky he could be, someone who would tyrannise waiters because of an olive, which at present appears to be looking rather sad on his plate – has it perhaps, kindly tell me, had the misfortune of losing both its parents recently?, and where are those capers we were promised?, there’s no sign of them, equally unknown are the whereabouts of the salad sprinkle, and may I advise you not to test my patience because if I don’t get what I’m paying for, I’ll raise hell and send the plate back to the chef, and be so kind, DO ME A FAVOUR, bring another plate!

“I would have liked to order some wine for myself and the lady, but I see that you don’t have anything suitable here...” Zenon was poking the menu with his fingers, his facial expression that of a sulking child. “No... No... Do you call this wine? It’s just swill that’s never even come near oak. Dalia my dear, they can’t push this on us, our palate doesn’t deserve such punishment, in general, wine-growing in Lithuania, you know, I needn’t waste my words...” The young waitress, a high-schooler or university student, was kneading her notepad, hot in the face. “That’s why they import such, excuse my language, slop - those hicks from a third-world country will drain it anyway... Shouldn’t the two of us perhaps just have coffee? I do hope at least they don’t cock that up here. What do you say? Nothing?... Sweetheart, we’d like some good, strong, REAL coffee. And I trust you keep your beans out of the reach of cockroaches?”

The girl, as if scalded, disappeared backstage through the climbers.

“So, you... Perhaps you don’t mind that we – as relatives – drop the register a notch... Communicate on a first-name basis, so to say. You don’t? Really? Oh, wonderful, wonderful, how quickly we seem to find a common language!” He was already cheerfully getting into the saddle. “Firstly, you would probably be interested to know who I am...”

I would, Zenon, I won’t lie, I would...

“Great.” He tried to conceal his satisfaction – modesty adorns a person – and, having held a pause for intrigue, began introducing himself. Oh, that really needed a

deep breath: an expert in human behaviour, business coach, public speaker, business consultant, change management consultant, special education specialist, strategy consultant, business organisational change consultant, working in thirty countries around the world, but translated into human language, if we were to introduce ourselves in one word, simply a coach, of course, if I know what that means... Oh, I'm sorry, things happen, it's not unheard of people seeing the sea for the first time only in their old age... He found my puzzlement charming, that is exactly what he said with a smile: he can see this as material he will be able to work with, ya, to roll up his sleeves, as the fellow says, all the while openly piercing me with his gaze: "I observe people closely, Dalia my dear, three minutes is all I need to tell what my future client has going on in their head – it's a professional habit, no need to be so self-conscious. Let's loosen up. He doesn't want to brag, but for now, he is the only practitioner of such calibre in the country. "So where should I begin", he shifted and the pitiful plastic cheapie creaked under him.

So, first and foremost, he, Zenon Vaibzdys, practises freedom. Complete and utter freedom. In his country house near Trakai he always walks barefooted, because bare feet are a wonderful way to ground yourself, they connect you to the universe, open your chakras. He could easily walk barefoot in Vilnius too, front panels of his Calvin Klein jacket flapping in the air, he'd see no shame in that! He doesn't follow any conventions. Any restrictions. Even at large-scale events he takes off his shoes in front of everyone and walks around in just his socks - he doesn't give a toss about what they think, he sets the tone. Let's remove our blocks! Let's breathe freely! Let's be rid of our manacles - us, descendants of serfs!

It was all so unexpected that I found myself becoming more and more bewildered, as if sinking into dreamlike cotton wool, while Zenon the silver tongue was unstoppable, gradually metamorphosing into his public speaking persona, which he had clearly mastered in assembly halls and stadiums, simultaneously entering the state of trance. Thank God he didn't ask me anything, only occasionally, when his gaze paused on my face, as if a golden fish floated through his mind and his nostrils quivered sensually... "I don't want to brag, Dalia my dear, but once, as my wife and I were about to set off for Harrods, you know, for some shopping – you haven't had a chance to visit it, I suppose? Oh, one shouldn't give in to an inferiority complex, anyone can go there, like to a museum, even just to look! - I received a call from Imrid Rudgerin's assistant. Have I ever heard Rudgerin speak? I haven't? How is that possible?! Oh, he's simply God! Absolute God!.. So, his assistant's voice asked me whether I had requested Mr Rudgerin's consultation. Of course, yes, I replied immediately. Only, Dalia my dear, a swarm of bees was buzzing in my head: how unexpected, what unfortunate timing, my Lydia, our plans... Deep inside I even growled in frustration... So today at 6 p.m., said the assistant, a slot has become available, the fee for an hour's consultation is £3,000. She made a pause, you know, a meaningful pause. Am I willing to proceed with the consultation? Hello, hello? I held my breath, as electric shock ran through me all the way to my feet, not because of the cash, of course, such a sum is child's play for me, I earn between five and six, sometimes seven and eight per hour. Seven and eight what? Thousand, Dalia my dear, hello, what are you on?! But that meant that my wife and I would need to forgo the pleasant pastime that we'd planned, and I knew that my Lydia would be disappointed, very disappointed, because the two of

us were looking to spend some serious cash... Nonetheless, without even thinking, I answered: sure! Such a chance comes around once in a lifetime. I called off Harrods immediately, Lydia, of course, got disappointed, but only briefly, without a scene, she's a reasonable woman, I'll make sure to introduce you two. And you know, Dalia my dear, I didn't regret that decision for a second... Rudgerin's perceptive questions – absolutely all on point - followed by advice that can't be overrated... I'm telling you, he's God. For example, how many hours do I spend in the office and how much money does it generate for me? In the presence of the maestro I finally properly evaluated myself. I identified gigs that don't bring me a single euro. Yopshikmat, not a penny! It turned out, I had as many such gigs as lice, I was covered in it! Bank transfers. Pointless business meetings. Futile wheel running that doesn't generate a single euro. Zero! I've got to toss it all out, pasholvon from my life. Delegate to others. To those whose purpose on this planet is different. My work must bring exclusively actual money. You know, Dalia my dear, that consultation was such an eye-opener for me that I didn't sleep at night - when I came home, I circled the entire Žvėrynas quarter three times and made a decision to attend Rudgerin's course, and even become his official representative in Lithuania. I don't want to brag but I am now a certified human behaviour specialist and organise transformative weekends titled Break Through The Ceiling... My work is not what it is to others, because I DON'T WORK. I LIVE work. I BREATHE work. Morning till evening, seven days a week, and that, believe me, is a completely different quality. That's why I don't even need holidays. Holidays are needed by all those miserable churchmice who keep running in their hamster-wheel and never have the courage to do what they like. I, on the other hand, want to do the world a service. Yes, yes, a service! And for that I need a not unreasonable sum: two billion, no more. Scary? You see, I have a mission... I crave to give people back their lives that were snatched from them by the government, the media, by all sorts of crafty crooks, vultures, or even by themselves, descendants of serfs!

I sat there in stupor, I could even say, no longer fully present, while his words flowed endlessly... I only learn from the best, Dalia my dear. I transform creatively. I take from the world and give straight back to it. I'd like you to be able to understand me... Life has bestowed on me amazing gifts – nearly insurmountable situations that I actually managed to come through, emerge on the other side, and now I want to share that experience, share it... share... As Zenon was growing increasingly ecstatic, his eyes rolled back and he began making conductor's gestures with his plump, Love-adorned arm, humming something. Just two sweet little billion... billion... sweet billion... He gets into such a trance every time he speaks to those thousands-strong audiences, I thought, when they start droning, swaying as they stand shoulder to shoulder and howling in unison like wolves of Wall Street.

Suddenly I felt like a glass of wine. It could be of the worst kind, the kind that's never even come near oak, made from pressed apples, or rhubarb. It could even be made from tree bark. Or an ankle boot! I scanned the menu just for form's sake and ordered the first wine my eyes landed on. I noticed Zenon, who by then had come round (he slid in and out of his persona as smoothly as an eel), becoming horrified. Am I betraying your company? Not my company, Dalia my dear, you're betraying good taste! You're betraying yourself. And that's much worse! I can already discern what was done to you. Oh, we'll have plenty

to do together, believe me... I'd like you to be able to understand it. I'm explaining to you as to a complete beginner. Recently I was in Macau where I had a lot of work, many live sessions. One day, I popped into one marvellously designed building for a coffee and a dessert. So what, you'd ask? Let me tell you that, as I was eating that dessert, Dalia my dear, suddenly my chakras opened and tears of gratitude welled up in my eyes because the thing I was eating was nothing short of a miracle – that dessert was simply divine. Its every bite. Every atom. I would like you to understand what REAL things are. For example, I carry a Louis Vuitton handbag, I don shoes bespoke-made for me in London, I casually swathe myself in Calvin Klein, accessorise with Cartier and Rolex, likewise, everything my Lydia owns is exclusively Chanel as she cannot tolerate anything else, cannot tolerate it physically, do you understand, because 'else' makes her break out in a rash. Rash! Do you think we are like that just because we made it? No! Because we support only the best, because only the best can change the world! I know that when I wear £5,000 shoes, I'll reach 5 million people, that's a hard fact. It's been proven! But I digress... I often have to repeat to people: your every minute which is wasted through being not with me, causes irreversible damage, so think about it... Of course, you might find yourself wondering - and it's a very reasonable question - don't I ever get tired? I get asked this in every auditorium – small or large. You see, I belong to that modest percentage of people who know what they want in life – what they REALLY want. And who tirelessly follow that. No, I haven't yet made the rich list, but it includes a number of my clients, and they are as settled there as Sosnowsky's hogweed. I don't want to brag but, if I wanted to, I could stop working entirely. Send work packing, nachui, Dalia my dear. My monthly fee of 60,000 euro that was made public in the press by some dolt is purely symbolic. The goal of my work is to make people confident and help them stop telling themselves 'no'. Help them reach their inner 'me'. Help them peel their inner 'me' like an onion! For that, people must change their relationships with others and their behaviour, but, most importantly, they must restructure their value system. Yes, yes, they must raise their self-esteem. And stop pissing their pants. I've always said, and I don't tire of repeating: stop telling yourselves 'no'! You miserable dirtbags, you padla, just stop that! Remove your blocks. Only: "I can". Only: "I will go". Only: "I will do". Only: "I will make it". So I help people make that true – I do it quickly, effectively and precisely, like a laser. And that – without a general anaesthetic. I'm a surgeon's scalpel! Without a scalpel there's no chance: you know, Lithuanians simply have to be incised and bled a litre of blood before they finally prick their ears and start thinking, because from time immemorial Lithuanians are idlers and sluggards, and on top of that, serfs, here's the Lithuanian spirit for you, yopshikmat! I don't want to brag, but, Dalia my dear, I like it when people start thinking about the price of them not getting my advice. That price is very high: it's their entire unaccumulated wealth. Their entire unearned earnings. So, my invoice is what helps you pay your bills. And it's in the interest of my business clients to interest me in working with them. And that's when the time comes for me to put my package on the table...

I ordered another glass of wine. I should just get up from this chair and leave. Walk away into the imminent autumn. But, God is my witness, I just sat there flabbergasted...

...Of the same slop? Dalia my dear, you're in serious need of my help. Oh, dear child, I will absolutely work on you. Because the way things are now simply cannot continue!

The two of us will run the marathon of reviewing your value system together. We will activate this thing called 'life accelerator' – it was developed based on my latest method – and I will help you find out who you are. Finally, you will understand WHO YOU ARE. Dalia, yopshikmat! I will be your wake-up call. My coaching sells across the world, and sells for a lot of money, but for you it will be for free. Your brain will be rewired through neuroplasticity. I will simplify complex things for you, and you will be able to celebrate your rebirth. You'll come to feel comfortable with yourself.

Before I had a chance to blink, he suddenly bellowed in the beer garden of Griük negyvas, as, I assumed, he did in those full to the brim halls and stadiums: "Do you feel comfortable with yourself?" And those wolves, to be more precise, the sheep of Wall Street reply from every direction: "Nooooo!"

But he had digressed again... So, I make a fair deal with a client: a verbal agreement – I don't need anything in writing – and a percentage of profit. I can end the relationship at any time - in such cases I raise hell and the client knows that I'm done with them... Failure? What failure are you talking about, Dalia dear? In my line of work, failure is almost nonexistent. Failure would be completely illogical. Some hack from Vakaró žinios accused me of selling fresh air. Can you imagine! I, Zenon Vaibzdys! Later, I explained to that halfwit in a corner by the bogs at one restaurant opening: "My clients see the results of my work in their bank accounts, capish?" That's it. As for me, I must see at least five-fold profit – if it's not happening, I don't mark time. I'm not a donkey. I raise hell and bye-bye. As the Holy Bible says: "In the beginning was the word, and" – I'm paraphrasing here – "after the word was dough, and after that – more dough". He giggled into his fist like a pickpocket who had managed to nick an old lady's handbag in a church. "So, I find all the answers in the Holy Book and pass them onto my clients. At the moment, I have one hundred twenty four satellites, my customers, orbiting me. Also, though I don't want to brag, I've already acquired numerous followers. I should tell you that someone being at your heels is quite nice actually – it forces you to push on. And the money... The money is like fish: it swims where it likes it best."

"But why did you want to meet me?"

"Why? Why?! Do you still need to ask? Because we are relatives, yomayo! Don't you feel anything like that? No vibe? Nothing?! But I do! For me, kinship is of great value. You know, blood relations and so on. Genes..." He emitted a snort again, as if about to get tearful once more, but in the last moment figured that it would be a bit over the top. God knows, he deserved an Oscar for the best actor – never for the best supporting role, naturally, as even a nomination for that would be below him. "A blood relation in this mad fluctuating world is - do you know what, Dalia dear? It's stability, stabiliziec. And I'm not a recluse. Not a mankurt. Besides, I can see it in your eyes that we have a lot in common. We just do. It's there. And all those lawyers, those small-minded dimwits, they should go and tear their... balls off. The two of us could use our inheritance for something big... You know, I'm working to stir up the world, to shake it awake... I want to do the world a service it deserves... And speaking of Luxembourg, isn't it so low-lying it's practically in a pit? Divided into cantons? Have you been there? Had you met that grandpa... He was a factory owner, if I'm not mistaken? Had a cork factory? Not cork? How many factories, did you say, he had? Where? Italy and France? Not in

Poland? What? Wh..at?! A n...urse? Are you saying that our grandpa was a ca-re-giver?! Yopshikmat, what are you on... talking about, Dalia dear? Certainly, I must have misheard? Got hold of the wrong end of the stick? Wh..at? No?! So, are you saying that our grandpa emptied potties?! Changed adult nappies? Scrubbed hospital rooms? Dalia darling, don't joke like that with me! Dalia darling...

Just as the smile that was glued to his round, sweaty face seemed about to come unstuck, and fall down painfully, suddenly there appeared He. Lulled into trance by Zenon's coaching, I hadn't noticed that all the tables around us were now buzzing, fusing and bubbling were the best cocktails in town, green and orange, which were said to knock you out so you fell backwards and only came round 24 hours later, and beer was foaming past the brim of pints, as students, so fond of this place, had densely huddled around the tables. The man emerged from the depths of the climbers. Bearded, in denim overalls, with a Che Guevara face and tattooed blacksmith's arms with large, red fists - only a wrench and a hammer were missing - he walked straight up to Zenon:

"So I see you've moved your chirping here, you bullshitting lark?" The buzz suddenly subsided and the next moment died down completely, as the Leviathan voice resounded through the beer garden, portending no less than the Third World War. "Quick to forget, are you, you parasite, how you showed us a clean pair of heels leaving Bočiai? Must've forgotten to settle your bill, have you? Thought you could just walk out like nothing happened? And what about the festival at The Three Kings? And your little function at the Marriott for three hundred bullshitters like you? And that conference at the Ambertone? And your forum at the Forum Palace? And the snail festival at The Philippines? You reckon those snails slid down your throat for free, do you?!"

Oh, what a great scene it is people raising hell! My coach jumped off the chair - how incredibly gracefully he managed to avoid the snare of his position by the table this time! - wearing a guiltless expression, a presumption of innocence etched on his face and, his torso suddenly wooden and only his little legs moving, but in a panic moving fast like those of a centipede, rushing ahead of the brain, he made for the exit. Before I could blink, the front panels of his Calvin Klein were already flapping in the wind down the street. Catch him if you can... The bearded man, leaning forward, was intently listening to his inner voice: should he or shouldn't he chase after him, eventually settling on, screw it, all the while twisting an invisible wrench in his arm and looking around ferociously, as if expecting support from the public, but the carefree buzz had already begun to resume: students are an absent-minded audience. Then suddenly his eyes landed on me and his glare pierced me. Resentfully, as if I was Zenon's accomplice. I wanted to quickly tell him that between me, The Philippines and snails there really wasn't any connection at all, that the world of snails in his sense of the word was completely alien to me! I only know (and swear by!) grape snails as they slide, after the rain has fallen, down a well-trodden path along the river or up a burdock leaf, and, when touched on their little antennae, retract into their tiny shell, like microns of microns in our boundless universe, and in it, have their incontestable place! He swayed back and forth for a moment, then finally spat and went off, leaving me with my rhubarb wine, disappearing just as he appeared - through an opening in the climbers. Had I just seen a ghost? Was it all a vision? Still dazed from the hypnosis, I was left to pay for Zenon's coffee.

THE NEWBORNS

The story translated by Romas Kinka

Paulė and Elžbieta's Travels

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

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

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

'Mum?'

'What is it?'

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

'It won't be long now.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Are you the daughter of the mistress of the house?’ Elżbieta asked the girl who was staring at them intently.

‘No, I’m just hired help.’

‘I thought the owners themselves would be greeting us.’

‘I’m the one to greet guests.’

‘Like a lackey,’ interjected Paulé, a little proud of herself for knowing what function a lackey performed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Mum, I want to eat ...’ she whined irritably, pulling on Elżbieta’s sleeve.

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

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

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

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

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

'Your sixth?'

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

'Where is she?'

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

'She's there.'

'Which of you girls is the oldest?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Mum?' she shouted.

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

‘Mum?’, she muttered.

‘Sleep, sleep,’ whispered her mother.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘And what about you...’

‘That’s my problem.’

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

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

‘Paulé, would you like to do that?’

‘No, mum, I want to go with you.’

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

‘No, I’d rather go with you.’

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

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

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

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

‘Where are you?’ the young woman shouted irritably.

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

‘Oncè, tell me where the other girls are. I’ve brought along a friend to play with them,’ said Prancè.

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

‘The devil take her, the old woman’s sleeping with her eyes open,’ Prancè grumbled unhappily.

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

‘Whom have you brought here?’ the old woman shouted pointing at Paulé with her chin.

‘The daughter of someone from town.’

‘What?’

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

‘I can’t hear anything you’re saying!’

‘Where are the other girls?’

‘What?’

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

‘The girls are probably outside,’ said Prancè.

‘So, I’ll stay with you.’

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

‘Do you do all the tidying up here on your own?’, Paulé asked.

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

‘You’ve worked her for a long while?’

‘Yes.’

Don’t you get bored?’

‘No.’

‘And what’s your favourite colour? Mine is lilac.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Chose what you want to put on, come on now.'

'I'm afraid of your dog,' muttered Paulè, slowly buttoning up her fur coat.

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

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

Hey,' Paulè shouted at the top of her voice.

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

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

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

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

'Perhaps you've seen where my mum is' Paulé asked.

'Who's that?'

'Her name's Elżbieta. We came here on the train.'

'I don't know anything, I haven't seen anyone.'

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

'Are you still here?' he asked, finally paying some attention to Paulé.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Where are you?' asked Paulé.

'Come closer, I'll light a lamp,' a voice answered.

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

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

'I'm not afraid,' said Paulé.

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

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

'How do you like that?' he asked.

'Why do you keep them in a barrel?'

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

'How?'

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

'And what happens?'

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

'And what'll happen if you are?'

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

'You live with the houseowners?'

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

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

'We'll see.'

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

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

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

'You need a new lock.'

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

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

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

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

'What man?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Shut your mouth, Genovaitè,' hissed the older girl who had cuffed her.

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

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

'I'm really bored, mum,' Paulè finally said and closed the book.

And then she sniffled again.

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

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

'Mum, mum, open the door!' Paulé shouted, rattling the handle.

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

'Help!' Paulé wanted to scream at the top of her lungs but not a sound came out of her mouth.

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

'Shh, shh, don't scream,' said Elżbieta, stroking her daughter's head.

'I was having a nightmare,' the girl cried.

'You'll soon forget it.'

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

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

'And when are you going to finish?'

'The day after tomorrow.'

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

'Fine, I'll take you with me,' Elżbieta unexpectedly agreed.

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

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

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

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

Paulé got one with bacon in it.

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

'I'm used to travelling with mum everywhere,' Paulé answered with her mouth stuffed full.

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

'Paulé gets on better with adults,' intervened Elżbieta. 'Besides that, she's already seen such a lot and been everywhere with me there's nothing strange in taking her with me.'

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

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

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

'Aha,' Paulé answered in a serious tone of voice.

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

'My uncle,' she blurted out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'It's all very interesting,' said Elżbieta smiling.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Paulé got a cup with a broken handle.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Can I go with you?' Paulè shouted.

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

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

'No, I'm sure not,' Paulè exclaimed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘You say you sailed away? Did I understand you correctly?’

The sweet voice said something in response.

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

Paulè yawned.

‘You’re not talking nonsense, are you?’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Gabrielius perhaps ...’

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

FOUR

Excerpt translated by Kotryna Garanašvili

The Seaside Reading Club

Little L was published by Angry Letters, who presented it as off-beat and provocative, “an offensive novel”. Offence there was, to great effect. The book was popular: a reprint, a few local prizes, a few interested foreign publishers, a film adaptation by a trendy director.

At first, Urtė was genuinely happy about Lukas’ success. She couldn’t understand why he agreed with Tank’s suggestion though – it was the glasses with a metal khaki frame which earned the publisher this nickname – to market the book as autofiction.

Lukas hesitated upon hearing the publisher’s strategy.

‘What does autofiction mean, anyway? What’s a “semi-autobiographical novel”?’

‘Precisely that,’ Tank seemed to have thought the whole thing through. ‘Think about it: the action takes place in a London borough, the protagonist is an emigrant from a Post-Soviet country. He’s around thirty, right?’

‘Viktoras is twenty-seven.’

‘Same as you? You were an emigrant yourself a couple of years ago. An outsider in London, just like Viktoras. An unrecognized artist, a loser, no?’

‘What about Leila?’ Lukas had no desire to make excuses for seducing a thirteen-year-old.

Tank laughed and put out his cigarette on a huge, incessantly clean ashtray.

‘What about Leila? Autofiction is not a confession. Besides, no one knows what actually happened between you and that girl,’ the publisher grinned. ‘Viktoras tells one story, the girl’s mother insists on another. Seriously though, what inspired Leila’s diary?’

‘Urtė, my girlfriend. She let me read her girlhood diaries. I looked through some teen websites, read some blogs – you can find stuff there that’s even worse.’

Tank nodded with satisfaction and filled Lukas’ glass which he had barely touched.

‘You’ve done your research, then. That’s good. And don’t go into detail about what you copied and from where. Who cares whose idea it is. Ideas are in the air. The emigration thing is splendidly done. Makes me feel like I’m there, standing by a sink in a slimy junk food joint, holding a hose.’

The publisher’s compliments were gratifying. Lukas took a sip of wine.

‘All in all, your book is going to be a hit. And if it’s not, we’ll make it one.’

*

As the popularity of Lukas’ novel grew, so did Urtė’s vicious sneers at him for selling out – having interviews with anyone, agreeing to present Little L at regional book fairs. And the idea of him taking part in the Seaside Reading Club was completely ridiculous: to an artist, this kind of event was humiliating.

‘Suburban ladies having a party. Booking you like a stripper. Haven’t you thought about that?’

‘Don’t be a snob!’ Lukas tried to brush it off as a joke. ‘I see it as an adventure. A chance to garner some ideas.’

Urtè does have a point. But even more often her words betray no more than common envy. It’s probably inevitable: he’s successful and she can’t even finish her dissertation.

‘You better see it as a paying gig. Those Balzacian women might pay you extra for having wine with them on the beach.’

‘How do you know they’re Balzacian? I picture toned up thirty-year old bodies, sunbed tan, silicone boobs.’

‘That’s what the Balzacian age is, thirty.’

So much for peace and quiet before the meeting with the Seaside Reading Club.

*

Lukas looked over a tidy pile of clothes on the bed. A white T-shirt, two pairs of white underwear, three pairs of white socks. Minimalism. A tall slim man with blonde curly hair was smiling in a full-length mirror hanging on a yellow wall. He was wearing a white T-shirt and faded blue Levi’s jeans with a ripped knee. He’s going to wear Converse – he doesn’t have any other shoes for the summer. He’s going to take a light yellow cardigan, similar to the one that Kurt Cobain wore at the MTV Unplugged concert. His shabby classic look will contrast well with the group of fancy ladies.

Lying next to the underwear pile is a plastic toiletry bag with a green zipper. Inside there’s a toothbrush, a half-empty mangled toothpaste tube, a travel-size bottle of shaving foam and a heavy, perpetually cold ‘Jagger’ razor. Sheffield, says the note on the handle.

He’s never been to Sheffield. When he bought the Jagger two years ago, he was living in Feltham, a dull borough in London. Hangars of shopping centres, dirty windows of the fast-food restaurants. He washed dishes in one of them for almost a year. He hated every dawning day but never tried to look for a job closer to the city centre.

London was supposed to offer him opportunities he didn’t have at home. Lukas’ English poems were supposed to appear in British literary publications and magazines. He imagined being invited to readings and parties.

The naivety.

Everything started and ended in scabby Feltham. Within a few months he was overcome with an actual melancholia. The state was hardly reminiscent of a bell jar, more like a translucent plastic bag with a few air holes. All but suffocating, unworthy even of air. He would only pick up on his days off, when he went to London.

It was on one of those trips that he bought this vintage razor in an antique shop in Camden. Stainless steel. Jagger was his first and only serious purchase during the emigration. He paid practically all he had – forty two pounds. He only kept the train fare to get back to Feltham. In the darkest moments, he would shut himself in the mouldy bathroom that he shared with his four neighbours who lived on the same floor. He would take the blade out of the razor and stroke it against his wrist, holding the edge up so that he didn’t cut himself. He didn’t want to die. But he had to do something.

What he feared more than anything was the thought of him losing control and one of his neighbours then finding him unconscious in a pool of blood on the dirty floor and laughing and laughing.

*

Lukas didn't die in Feltham.

It was just in time that he returned to his homeland – it was September, the start of the semester, and he easily went back to his philology studies. Before the New Year, he got a call from the editor-in-chief of *The Arc of Arts*, offering him a post of a section editor.

In exactly a year, Lukas' first and thus far only poetry book, *Albion in a Plastic Bag*, came out to critical acclaim. One of the reviewers compared the poems to sharp-edged shards of the world which the poet collected in an attempt to reveal the beauty of the breakage. And the success of *Little L* was even greater than he had dared to dream of.

*

'Proper biography, nice appearance, decent English skills and an okay novel – good enough for a start,' a representative of a small French publishing house whom Lukas was meeting in a VIP café at the book fair was speaking with a nasal twang.

'Authors from Post-Soviet countries are hot right now, we need to use that,' added the Frenchman, seemingly addressing himself.

During the conversation, the agent kept peeking at the black-and-white portrait of Lukas on the cover of a lifestyle and culture magazine. However much it had cost Tank to put him there, it was worth it. In the portrait, the curls fell on Lukas' forehead in the fashion of Michelangelo's David, only his countenance was derisive rather than indifferent – it took half a day's effort with the photographer and a chubby stylist to achieve this effect.

*

A shy but confident and provocative intellectual – this was Lukas' image. Although he couldn't really decide how suited he was for this role, the Davidesque curls that reflected in the window of a train rushing towards the seaport reaffirmed his likeness to the photograph of himself.

"Straight out of the cover of a magazine," he smiled.

Sitting in front of him was a young girl with carefully straightened black hair. She seemed to have recognized him. She might have even read about him, because she kept glancing in his direction. Lukas wasn't in the mood to chat. He was gathering his strength for the evening. He focused on the views behind the window.

Endless fields. A lone wooden house. Two men in an old garden drinking beer from dark brown plastic bottles behind a table. Their calm empty expressions. For some reason the drunkards' faces, their dense calmness annoyed him.

*

He didn't manage to find out any more about the questions or the detailed programme of the event from Eva, who invited him to present Little L at the Seaside Reading Club.

'The women would like you to read from your work. We might have a little chat afterwards. And then we'll have dinner. You don't have to prepare anything. We're going to get everything ready. We've read your novel. We're great fans,' Eva was whispering, as though in fear that Lukas was going to refuse and hang up.

'I see. And what would you like to chat about? What would you like me to read?'

'You can choose whatever you like,' Eva's voice was becoming even softer. 'It's our first meeting with such a famous writer – we used to invite authors local authors before.'

'I see. But I'd still like to know.'

'To know?...'

'Well, yes, at least the topics for the conversation ...'

Does he have the right to interrogate a woman who for an hour-long meeting offered him as much as The Arc of Arts paid him in a month?

Eva didn't seem offended:

'I'll inquire about the questions and call you back. All right?'

Throughout the whole conversation, Lukas was trying to picture what Eva looked like.

*

Eva never called him back. He didn't want to call first, anxious that it would make it seem petty and overbearing.

"Finally," he sighed triumphantly, seeing an unknown number on his phone screen on the night before the meeting. But it wasn't Eva. The caller introduced herself as Sara and reconfirmed that they would cover the expenses of the journey, and accommodation if he decided to stay in the seaport for overnight. She wanted to know what time Lukas' train would arrive.

'Don't get out at the main station though. Go to the very end, to Purrrg...' Sara's voice faltered for a second. 'Don't be alarmed if you find yourself alone in the train. It's mostly workers from the port and the depots who take it. The carriages are empty in the evenings. There will be a car waiting in the car park – a white jeep. When you walk out of the underpass, turn right, and then go straight ahead along the street.'

"White jeep," Lukas grinned.

'We can't wait to hear you read. And to see you. We're very excited.'

Lukas said he was just as excited. Even though he would have given anything so that he didn't have to spend six hours knocking around towards the end of the world. And what for? To share his work with housewives? To explain that he never seduced a thirteen-year-old and that he's not an alter ego of Viktoras?

*

'... station. Would all passengers please ensure they don't leave any belongings? Thank you for travelling...' he was woken up by a crackling, electric voice.

The carriage was empty. His first impulse was to grab the backpack and get out as fast as possible before the door closed. Then he remembered Sara's warning not to get off at the station, but to go to the very end.

Behind the dirty window he could see the platform of the grand station, reminiscent of imperial times. People milling around under the arches which rested on the top of curved columns. Everyone looking very small. It was probably the tall arches and immense columns that made it seem that way. The clock stabbed its knife-like arrows to half past five.

The first time he visited the seaport was with his parents when he was six or so. They spent a few hours in one of the station rooms, waiting for a train to take them to a seaside resort. The room with stained-glass windows and a cupola with Zodiac signs painted on it reminded him of a fairy tale castle. Lukas had dozed off. He dreamed that the celestial bodies on the ceiling had angry faces, which were stretching and distorting, and that the columns were bending. He woke up terrified, and his mother took a long time to soothe him.

He found out later that madness did indeed lie in the architecture of the station building. The dramatic life of its architect was recorded in *The Sacrifice of a Heart*, a story which was included in his school syllabus. It focused on the architect who sold his heart for an opportunity to create eternal buildings. Of course, the devil had deceived him and when the time came, he demanded the heart from Rosenblum's fiancé rather than Rosenblum himself. In order to outwit the evil one, Rosenblum strangled his innocent wife on their wedding night and then shot a bullet through his own heart. "He sacrificed himself as well as what he cared about more than anything in order to defeat the devil. To banish the evil from his heart. The heart is the symbol of sacrifice and the sacrifice is the highest form of love," explained the literature teacher.

Rosenblum's attempt to kill himself didn't in fact succeed. But he didn't create anything afterwards and died in the seaport madhouse.

DEADLY ARQUEBUS SHOT

Excerpt translated by Jura Avizienis

The oppressive sky above Vilnius portended a downpour. The endlessly inclement summer of the year 1559 CE had exhausted the townspeople. It had rained buckets the entire month of June. Basements were flooded, roofs were leaking, streets had been turned into impassable swamps. July arrived, but sun and warmth were still scant. Instead, there were more clouds, more sopping, waterlogged clouds. Rather than chitchatting, Vilniusites compared notes on wind and rain damage every morning.

And to make matters worse, the nobles of the Duchy had begun gathering in Vilnius for the session of the Sejm scheduled for the third month of summer. Pompously overdressed noblemen arrived from every direction, on horseback and in carriages, accompanied by servants and carts carrying copious belongings. Because, of course, there was no way of knowing how long the Sejm would be in session. Matters of state are no joke. And besides, the nobles were keen to taste the pleasures of the big-city capital. Of course, no self-respecting nobleman would deign to lodge in a tent or some hole in the wall. No, the city would have to arrange appropriate accommodation for each guest in the homes of the townspeople.

The townspeople were less than pleased to host these honourable guests. But what was to be done? They had no choice but to grit their teeth and welcome the nobles into their humble homes. Along with their numerous entourages. Many a guest, forgetting he was only a guest, made himself quite at home, at times so much that the host found himself squeezed out of his own home.

Adas, the executioner's apprentice, observed the unwelcome guests with indifference: no one had requested lodging in the home of the executioner, Ignacas. Thankfully not, because the executioner's wife, Ana, was expecting. Indeed, she was in her final weeks of pregnancy and their home was beset with unease. She was no spring chicken and there had been issues finding a midwife: no midwife in the city of Vilnius was willing to bring into the world a future executioner with her own hands. They all considered it to be a bad sign. Ignacas begged and pleaded, but to no avail. His only hope was to find a less superstitious midwife in the outskirts of the city. To that end, the master would leave his apprentice behind at home and trudge through the villages searching for a midwife and frightening people in the process.

On one such occasion, when the executioner had set out, Ana called Adas over and timidly admitted that she had such a craving for the tangy brine of sauerkraut that she felt weak.

'Go into town, my dear,' she said. 'You'll find Tamošius' stall in the first row where they sell salt. He has such delicious sauerkraut. Bring me a bowl.'

It wasn't possible to say no to the wife of his master, and besides, Adas hadn't been into town for some time. He glanced up at the sky, and just in case, threw on a coat and

hurried off. He had been wise to dress for rain. He was barely out of the door when it began to pour again. The street from Subačius Gate to the houses of the Russian merchants became a muddy stream. Adas tried to avoid the puddles by hopping from one side of the street to the other, but despite his best efforts, his old shoes were soon soaked and sloshing unpleasantly with each step. His narrow-brimmed hat was of little use either: the cold rain poured down his collar, giving him a chill. His hair was soaked, sticking to his neck and to the scar that stretched right across his cheek. A nervous crease made a furrow between his brows.

Adas had good reason to be nervous. The executioner Ignacas had been clear: if it was a boy, he would inherit his father's trade and Adas would be freed of his despised apprenticeship. But, if a girl, Adas would be forced to marry her once she was of age and he would become the executioner of Vilnius. As the fateful day approached, the young lad grew increasingly nervous. Sometimes he would fantasise about Ignacas entering the yard to announce that he had a son. Then Adas would run – no, he would fly – to Benigna, the love of his life (he only dared to call her that in his dreams), to announce the happy news. He was free! He was no longer the executioner's apprentice! He could become a decent townsman and build a new life for himself. Adas tried not to think about what he would do if the executioner's child was a daughter.

Soaked to the bone, and suffering from these nervous thoughts, he finally reached the central square of the city. Before heading to the marketplace, he stopped to say hello to his buddy, the city sentinel Motis, who, as was his custom, stood at the gates of the City Hall.

'So, Executioner's Apprentice, what news do you bring from the butcher's residence? Has the executioner's spawn been delivered?'

Motis, who knew how to make light of even the most serious of matters, smiled at his friend. Adas only shook his head in response.

'Then you can relax for the time being,' Motis consoled.

Just a week ago, his own wife had delivered a baby daughter and their home was now a bustle of excessive care and baby's cries.

'Enjoy it!'

He called his friend over to join him under the arch of the gates:

'Come over here where it's dry. I have some interesting news to tell you.'

Motis always knew about everything going on in Vilnius. Some of this information he extracted from his sister's husband, who was a court official at the City Hall, some he learned by badgering the civil servants, but most of what he knew was due to his undue inquisitiveness and tendency to stick his nose into everyone else's business.

He explained in tedious detail to Adas that there had been a rash of robberies in Vilnius the night before last and the thieves had killed one of the noblemen who had come to town to serve in the Sejm. What was puzzling, however, was that they had left the dead man at the altar of the town church, right next to the Rectory. In the small hours of the morning, one of the Rectory's guests, a Spanish friend of Alderman Augustinas Rotundas, returning from a night of drinking, stumbled over the corpse and fell. In the morning, a huge commotion befell the Rectory. Now the entire city government and the officials of the Superior Court of the Duchy were running around the city searching for the thieves responsible.

‘But I wonder,’ Motis surmised, ‘whether the thieves are actually to blame. My brother-in-law Marcius tells me that the nobleman was still dressed in his fine clothing and shoes, with his sword at his side. Even his pouch had not been pilfered from his belt. So you tell me what self-respecting thief would leave such treasures untouched?’

‘Perhaps someone interrupted his work?’ Adas suggested.

‘Right! Just try to get between a thief and his money pouch!’ Motis laughed but immediately turned serious. ‘The Alderman himself is pushing this version of events to protect his Spanish friend from suspicion, but that in itself is suspicious. If you consider my version of events, then some very important people may be involved here.’

Adas didn’t know what to say. The last time he had investigated a case, he had nearly sent a man who kept honourable company with the Alderman Rotundas to St Peter. Since then, he no longer allowed himself to even think about such cases.

‘I wonder how things will turn out here,’ Motis worried. ‘Of course, with so many nobles preening about town like peacocks, one noble more or less hardly matters. But people do talk and you can’t sew their mouths shut. The Alderman’s friend will have to explain himself, perhaps even to the Grand Duke himself. And then, I imagine, you and Ignacas will be busy..’

After exchanging a few more words with Motis and cursing the never-ending rain, Adas said goodbye. As he walked off, he thought that it was nevertheless rather odd that the thief had committed murder without taking anything... But almost immediately, he berated himself for thinking such thoughts.

He sauntered over to find the vendor of the delicious sauerkraut. The pleasant storekeeper filled to the brim the bowl that Adas had put prudently inside his jacket. He asked for five dinars, which even Adas, who normally never haggled, realised was too high a price. The shopkeeper shrugged his shoulders guiltily, blaming the times and the poor harvest, and explaining that the city was teeming with newcomers, causing prices to rise whether you liked it or not. Adas was forced to count out his change and hurry home with the expensive delicacy before the rain washed away its tangy brine.

The executioner Ignacas returned towards evening, soaking wet and in quite a state. He still hadn’t found a midwife. He directed his fury upon his student, calling him a lazy, uneducated scamp, and forced him to practise brandishing his sword outside in the courtyard until dark. Then, he took the sword away and ordered Adas to chop firewood, for a sluggard such as he was incapable of anything else. Adas was not angry at his master. He understood that his anger was due to nervousness and fear for his wife’s health. It was only a matter of days now and somehow he would endure them. Lately, nothing made Ignacas happy.

Even the executioner’s tools which he had ordered from abroad lay in the foyer, like old pieces of scrap wood. A good six months ago when talk had begun about the summer session of the Sejm, the executioner had made plans to update his inventory. He thought that, if the grand nobles or even the Grand Duke himself gave him an assignment, he would have to rise to the occasion and not make a fool of himself. He therefore requested from the Magistrate of Vilnius a ‘Spanish boot’, a device which applied pressure to the leg of a person being interrogated, eliciting the appropriate amount of pain to get the truth. He had ordered it all the way from Nuremberg and had had to wait for quite some time.

It finally arrived at the beginning of summer. The 'boot' was made of dark hardwood, with iron wedges. It was easy to use: you just had to turn the iron crank and the wooden blocks closed in round the leg as required. Ignacas picked up his purchase and threw it into the corner, but Adas didn't even want to touch it.

During his second hour of brandishing the sword, Adas had an idea: Benigna's grandmother was a healer adept at using various herbal remedies. Perhaps she would know how to bring a baby into the world? The executioner's apprentice knew as little about herbal remedies as he did about midwifery – they all seemed identical to him. But an opportunity to visit Benigna always brightened Adas's day. If Adas could find a midwife for the executioner's wife, perhaps he could bring some peace to their homelife. He decided to give his plan a try the following morning.

A HISTORY OF SILENCE

Excerpt translated by Kotryna Garanašvili

The Space Flight

My name is Elžbieta. I was born in a village called Snow. I can't remember what century it was. I never had a chance to ask my mother while she was alive. All I'm left with is a record from the parish register, but the organist, who was half deaf and half blind, might have confused not only the years but also the centuries.

It's not that important.

Today, Teresa told me Snow doesn't exist anymore. What do you mean it doesn't exist? I asked. Where did it go? It would have gone anyway, Teresa started saying instead of answering the question. Out of thirty houses, only ten were left. All the others were destroyed by wars, fires, people and time. The remaining houses are next in line. They're going to build apartment buildings there by the road. Do you know how much the land costs so close to town?

I don't know.

... It's not important. Sasha lived there, remember? Your grandchild. His wife threw him out a couple of years ago. We let Sasha stay in the Snow house. Temporarily, until he got back on his feet. We nourished a snake in our bosom. He drank every day, turned the house into a pigsty, and one night he fell asleep while smoking and caused a fire. All the neighbours came rushing in with water buckets. Aldona used to live there, remember?

I couldn't remember Aldona. But I did remember Sasha. Just because I'm old doesn't mean I'm crazy. Teresa seems to think so sometimes.

... The one who bought the brothers out so that the house belonged only to her. She didn't want to share with anyone. She didn't want to move from Snow. She insisted she was going to die there. And so Aldona called the fire department, but before they managed to find Snow, the house was completely burnt. To a cinder. You know, the person who founded Snow probably didn't want it to be discovered later.

And what happened to Sasha? Was he burnt along with the house?

... What could happen to him, that old lunatic, Teresa scoffed. He's not that old. Only three years older than you. It's easy for us to think that we're younger. Much younger than we look. The years recorded in our documents don't seem our own. Neither does our picture.

Teresa keeps rummaging in the wardrobe, shaking old sheets. She's checking for moths. She could hang them out in the balcony. She could air them before the winter, but she's the one running things here. She gives me a strange look, as though she's worried that the news about the fire will make my heart stop. Perhaps it will. I don't know. Perhaps they bulldozed through my heart when they razed my house to the ground. I don't know. It's so hard to hear my heart at night. It beats quietly against the sheets like a

mouse scratching in its little hole. At night, I wake up and listen if it's stopped. I'm waiting for it to stop. Perhaps I'm not. I'm waiting to hear the sound of the door lock, Nika sneak into the corridor on tiptoe. Mother shouldn't let her come home so late. Nika is only fifteen but she has already run away from home three times. She's growing up without a father. Just like you, Teresa. Just like Veronika.

I had a father, but what of it. He died a long time ago, and I still haven't forgiven him.

Teresa is still here, glancing at me as if making sure I'm still alive. I'm a burden for everyone, Teresa. Old people are nothing but a burden. She thinks I'm sick. That I'm tired. That I'm losing my mind. Many people in our family have lost their minds. But we are quiet sort of madmen. We go mad behind the closed doors of our burning houses.

This is Motiejus, my son. One of the twins. Two peas in a pod. We never buried Valentinas. Motiejus never recovered after the war. Perhaps he can still see the blood on his palms, perhaps he can still hear the screams at night, going on for decades. His Russian wife has left him a long time ago, back when Teresa was still a child. She went back to the depths of Russia without ever learning Lithuanian and she's walking around the steppe with a fur hat on her head held high.

Or perhaps she is already dead.

Every year on Army Day, Motiejus puts on his medals and attends the demonstration. He told me himself. I don't know if anyone else comes with him or if he demonstrates by himself, marching down the road surrounded by the ghosts of his dead friends – they will always stay alive to him, anyway. We're all going to stay alive if there's at least one person who remembers us, if there's at least one book written about us. No one is going to write about me. What for? It would be a long and boring book. No one really knows me, even Teresa and Nika. They don't know what secret I carry around. They don't know that I am the cause of all the misfortune.

After his wife left, Motiejus simply collapsed. He seemed to have aged at least ten years after the winter. How old was he then? I'm too old myself. I've lost count. This means I shouldn't be here anymore. But it's not what I wanted to remember. From that point on, Motiejus collapsed and never got up. He kept walking around like that, disfigured, pressed down to the ground by an invisible weight. He showed up one of those days in Teresa's house with his son. The son was so hungry that he wolfed down everything Teresa had carved and left on the table. She went to work, she couldn't not go. It wasn't her fault they knocked on the door without notice at eight in the morning.

Motiejus complained he was tired and lay down on my bed, and I stayed in the kitchen with his son, Sasha. They could have given him a Lithuanian name, but none of us are so very Lithuanian, anyway. No Lithuanian is actually Lithuanian, just like no Lithuanian Pole is actually Polish, and Russians... Russia is so wide that you can expect anything from it. Sasha's eyes were red, burning. Endlessly stuffing the remains of the ham and sausage with pickles into his mouth, he started talking about how he came with his father to borrow money because they were going to build a spaceship. He said that humanity was in danger. That aliens were trying to contact us. That Kashpirovsky knew everything but the government was trying to keep it secret. They know everything, he whispered, motioning in an unspecified direction – the apartment building next to ours,

perhaps, or somewhere behind the road, or the sky. It takes a lot of money to build a spaceship, but all being well, the construction might start as soon as next spring.

‘Where are you going to fly?’ I asked.

But Sasha merely shook his head and explained that he was sworn to secrecy. For now, he was not allowed to tell. Not even his father knew everything. I told him his father was too old to fly. Space flight is a young person’s business. But Sasha didn’t agree. He said that time was different out there in space. Time doesn’t go there, it stops. It starts going backwards, on top of that, and we become young again.

Suddenly I felt the urge to go on the spaceship with Sasha. Perhaps we’re going to grow younger during the flight. Motiejus, Sasha, Teresa and me. Nika doesn’t need it, she’s still so young. Younger than I was back in the summer that went on forever. If we flew long enough, perhaps I could finally go back to that summer. Perhaps I could tell Aurelianas what I never did. Perhaps I could stop him. I wouldn’t let him go, I would fall at his feet, wrap my hands around his knees. I would leave my husband’s home and set out to wander around with my lover. We would hide away in the shade of the trees by day and I would count the winks of the falling stars for him by night. I would make the rivers and the blood flow in reverse. If only I could turn back time, perhaps my Veronika ...

I didn’t even notice that Sasha had already left and was now fussing around in another room. He came back with a guilty smile on his face and casually asked if I happened to know where the key from the drinks cabinet was? I didn’t even know Teresa had put a lock on it. How should I know where the key was? Disappointed, Sasha went to wake up his father. They didn’t stay long afterwards. They devoured the remains of the ham and left. Sasha asked once more if my contribution towards the construction of the spaceship could by any chance be more than twenty roubles, which was already rolled into a tube and hidden away in the pocket of his faded shirt.

When Nika returned home from school, I asked her if it was possible to build a spaceship that could not only fly but also turn back time. She laughed. Only a complete madman could come up with something like that, she said. I wasn’t even surprised – there have been madmen in our family. Perhaps all of us are born mad, only in our own way. Nika for her paintbrushes, Teresa for the man with a coin-shaped bald patch on his head, and me... I’m still alive.

Excerpt translated by Romas Kinka

2

'I want to commit suicide.'

'I know.'

'Excuse me?'

'We wouldn't be talking otherwise.'

'Oh, yes, that's true.' The woman seemed disappointed. 'You're going to try to talk me out of it?'

'No.'

'Excuse me?'

'You have to speak to a psychologist, and I have to do some work. My talking you out of it or not – there's nothing in it for me.'

'You're not even going to pretend.'

'No, I'm not.'

'So, what's the point of even talking...?' She began to get angry.

'Because our conversation's going to be recorded. According to the information I have, the state doesn't have the resources to listen to it, unless it's going to carry out a random check but that's not very likely. However, our words are undoubtedly being analysed by AI, so if we don't say anything, it won't be able to make anything out.'

'Hmmm.'

'So, you see, it's best for both of us just to chat for an hour.'

'So, it really makes no difference to you if I change my mind or not, is that right?'

'None. There has been talk recently about paying a premium even to private psychologists if a client chooses to go on living but so far that talk hasn't done me any good.'

'That's a stupid system.'

'It's certainly not the most logical. So, perhaps you'd like to tell me why you've decided to commit suicide?'

The woman sighed deeply, trying to suppress her anger, but she soon began talking. Kajus leaned back in his chair and made himself more comfortable. As to why he had decided to start the conversation in the way he had with this woman – he wouldn't have been able to explain, but in his work he had observed more than once that some clients, especially those who are inclined to want to have their egos stroked and be pitied, are forced to pause and think by a conversation starting like that. His employers were unlikely to appreciate such an approach, but his success ratings were among the highest.

Most clients, once the conversation got going, would look on him as an enemy. But some – as a last resort.

However, all of them saw him as a moralist against suicide, and that made Kajus happy.

‘Are you condemning me?’ the woman asked suddenly.

‘Absolutely not. I think if a person in today’s world never thinks about suicide, there has to be something not quite right with their psychological makeup.’

She became a little confused again and Kajus smiled inwardly, trying not to show any expression that might betray what he felt. The woman was complaining about sexual dysfunction – this was so common that he activated the auto-response function. He normally didn’t use a prompter because it was simply boring to read texts prepared by a computer. He’d noticed for some time that whenever he read the prepared answers without giving them any thought all day long, he’d feel drained to the last drop. He’d choose them only on days when he just couldn’t concentrate. How was he different to a computer at moments like that? In ways that no one could fully define? There was an attempt several years ago to replace psychologists with AI but all the clients complained of a lack of the human touch. No matter how hard companies tried to replicate human beings – which usually resulted in even more logical errors – nothing worked. Kajus didn’t complain – he had a job.

In his experience it was men who much more frequently complained of sexual dysfunction, but some women did too. Researchers considered the biggest problem to be the excessive amount of sexual information: it would overtake everything at every step of their lives and his clients would soon discover that nothing aroused them anymore. Initially, they still hoped the problem would be resolved by their partner, until they realised no one else could help them, and they’d begin to ask if they were going to live their whole lives like that. Some of them decided they didn’t want that.

To dissuade the woman had been considerably easier than he’d thought and a green number on the screen soon got bigger. Kajus stretched and let the second client in.

‘I’m an ecokaze,’ said a young man without any preamble.

The computer immediately offered up a list of statements.

‘I know what you’re going to say to me. That one death won’t change anything. That it’d be better to look for a solution to problems. I know all that,’ the client said without even being asked anything.

‘That’s great, you’re prepared. But you haven’t even introduced yourself,’ said Kajus, even though he saw the name MINTAUTAS in the corner of the screen.

‘My name is completely unimportant – why overload your brain with one more meaningless name? I’m one of eleven billion.’

Kajus turned off the prompter – it didn’t look like it would be of any use this time. Ecokazes are convinced that one of the best ways of reducing the ecological footprint of humans is a smaller number of them on Earth. His clients were usually about the same age as him – twenty-five to forty. Of course, it was the younger ones who most strongly believed in ideas like that but the law on suicide only allowed those over the age of twenty-five to take that decision.

It was probably the ecokazes who led to the introduction of the law on voluntary suicide. When almost two decades ago young people began to leave this world en masse – most of them for ecological reasons, the government didn’t know how to tackle the

problem. Strengthening the police, campaigns, counselling by psychologists – nothing changed the situation. Following the example of other countries, it was finally decided it'd be better to legalise the option for people to decide for themselves but at the same time to control it: to introduce obligatory counselling and for the death to be carried out through certification. But none of that really meant that everyone approved of the existence of such a law.

'But don't you think you'd hurt the people close to you by doing that?'

'My parents know about my decision.'

'And do they agree with it?'

'No, of course not. But I didn't agree to be born in this world, they didn't ask me if I wanted to be. They acted selfishly. Now it's my turn to act regardless of their wishes.'

Over the years of his work Kajus had often talked to ecokazes. Usually, a question about the people close to them allowed him to gauge if there might be any chance of dissuading the client. In this case the client's tone of voice told him that that was unlikely.

'But you know we've reached the peak of human population ...' Kajus came up with a counter argument. 'Scientists predict that the numbers will now remain about the same and begin to fall at the beginning of the next century...'

'The opinions of scientists – they're all different. But that's not what's important. Do you think that eleven billion people is normal?'

'I didn't say that.'

'But I'm saying it,' the client flared up. 'It's not! It's not normal. The Earth no longer has the resources, every day we kill off a couple of hundred species of animals because we only think of ourselves, ourselves, ourselves ...!'

He stopped speaking as suddenly as he'd begun. His breathing could be heard even on the screen. Kajus didn't hurry to give an answer – he waited for the silence to become a little uncomfortable.

'You know how to speak in a very impassioned way. It seems to me you'd do much more good for the Earth not by abandoning it but by changing other people's opinions. Correct me if I'm wrong but I think that ecokazes are only making things easier for all those who don't want to change anything ... Instead of continually protesting and not letting up, you're walking away. And, as you've said yourself, those who think only of themselves, only of themselves and, to say it again, only of themselves, can go on ...'

'We've been protesting for many years. And that hasn't changed anything,' the young man interjected. For the first time Kajus heard sadness in his voice – he hoped to use that.

'And death will change something?'

'What's needed is a jolt. People are standing in the streets with placards or boycotting shops, but others just walk by, and the best-case scenario is that they'll give it some thought for that moment but an hour later they'll be back to living their normal lives. But when people die, when someone's child, brother or sister dies, they can't any longer just be observers. They feel the pain. And that pain stays with them their whole lives.'

Kajus leaned back in his chair. After so many years he should have become used to those who had chosen to die but, in spite of that, a helpless sadness would most often wash over him once he realised that he wouldn't be able to talk his client out of it.

‘A lot of the people I talk to really don’t want to die. They wait until I offer them a reason to think again ...’ Kajus sighed. ‘Is there even the slightest possibility, the slightest chance, of you hesitating, of changing your mind?’

The young man shook his head.

‘But you’ll always have time to die. Don’t you want to still think about it and come back to me later?’

‘It’s impossible for me to live without leaving a footprint. No matter how hard I try. Every day I go on just makes the burden on Earth harder. I’ve been thinking about this my whole life.’

Kajus nodded in understanding. It had been a long time since he’d come across such a categorical client.

Five minutes later, a red number appeared on the screen. Kajus felt the pain. The pain, of course, would soon pass, he might still remember it later today in the evening or a week later, but for someone else the pain would last a long time.

A man. Perhaps sixty-years old. Older people were much less frequent. Kajus leaned forward.

‘Do I have to tell you the reason?’ he asked, feeling uncomfortable. He kept glancing from side to side as if the walls in the room were observing him.

He could’ve lied and said you have to, but he didn’t want to do that.

‘You don’t have to.’ Kajus was getting more and more curious. ‘But if you are getting ready to commit suicide, perhaps you should tell someone why.’

‘I don’t know if you’ll understand ...’ In front of the screen, the man held his hands together and put his head between them. ‘All my life I worked at a large law firm. I know, you don’t have to say anything – for you, for young people, that’s impossible to understand but I liked working there. I used to look for information to do with cases, I’d check facts. And then ... a couple of months ago ...’

The client sighed deeply, trying not to choke up. Clients would often tell their stories in that pose when talking about separations or betrayal.

‘Yes?..’ said Kajus encouraging him to continue.

‘I found out I’d been working at my job for a decade ... pointlessly. AI had been doing my job for a long time already. Earlier, as far as I understand, they were comparing the data we were producing ... I mean me and ... the computer. But it’s been a decade already since anyone has even ... has even looked at the work I’ve been doing. Do you understand?’

He covered his face with his hands and burst into tears.

‘Ten years ... ten! They were deceiving me ...’ The man tried to speak coherently but it wasn’t easy for Kajus to understand what he was saying. ‘It’s the state subsidies ... it’s worth their while ... worth their while to employ me ... for me just to be there ... I was trying so hard ...’

Kajus only nodded without saying anything. The state supported companies in certain sectors employing people, which looked better than to have unemployed people losing their skills completely, but it had become no longer possible to deal with the number of them. A lot of people condemned this practice, saying they were getting the same pay for doing work useful to society as others were getting for doing nothing.

‘I understand it’s painful for you to have found out you were working without any

point. But...' Kajus stopped. No prompter could have offered up his next sentence: 'Have you never thought that most of the work we do is meaningless? What sort of cases did you usually work on?'

'Inheritance, divorce.'

'There are people separating and making up every day, someone inherits something, someone doesn't... How much meaning is there in any of that to be honest? What's the difference if someone inherits a flat by the sea or not, if that flat is soon not going to be there any longer, since all of us are flying straight into nothingness... You understand what I'm trying to say?'

The man didn't answer but was listening attentively. Kajus became bolder.

'There is as much meaning to things as we give it. You think your life is without meaning and that's why you want to end it. And right now, I'm measuring the meaning of my life using yours: I think it's meaningful to save your life and it's by that that I'll decide at the end of this day if I've done something meaningful. But that's – a meaning I've created for myself. Perhaps tomorrow... you'll steal from someone.' At first Kajus had wanted to say "you'll kill someone" but stopped in time. 'But to me the meaning looks different.'

'But I thought I was helping people. That seems meaningful to me.'

'I understand, but how much – looking at things as a whole – could you really help them? Perhaps your meaning in life was to improve your skills, to learn... Perhaps you'll still be able to apply that elsewhere?'

'Do I understand you correctly that, according to you... it's not very important if a writer shows his work to the world or shoves into a drawer?' asked the man suddenly.

Kajus smiled.

'I can see you're listening. I'm not saying it's the same thing because I don't think there is one truth that is correct. Everything depends on what meaning we give to something.'

Both of them were silent for a while. A minute later the man suddenly remembered that he'd have to make a decision about which he no longer, it seemed, felt sure. At times like these Kajus's clients usually decided to grasp at straws and come back at him with another argument. He didn't have to wait long.

'I just think that the most painful thing for me – wasn't the meaningfulness. Perhaps I could've even come to terms with that if I'd known. I simply felt... deceived. A fool. For not seeing. For not understanding. After all, I could've looked for information myself. I could've noticed how my material was being dealt with... But I didn't notice!'

'There are lots of things we don't notice every day. Being betrayed by the people we love the most, the suicidal tendencies of our children... But this isn't even being betrayed by someone close to you. It's not worth committing suicide over that.'

Kajus didn't even try too hard – he knew the ground he was covering very well. Clients of an older age would quite often cite work as a reason for their thoughts but most often would complain they'd been replaced by robots and simply no longer had any work. Talk like that unnerved Kajus, who was younger than them: robotics had been talked about for all of the last century, everyone had to prepare for it. Now those earlier thoughts seemed immature to him – and the situation much more complex.

A few minutes later the size of the green number on the screen got larger. If he himself were to believe what he said to others, it would be even better, he thought.

'Well done!' he suddenly heard Naomi's voice saying and even surprised himself by smiling.

Even though it had been programmed, the praise seemed very human and necessary.

[...]