

Biography: Nora Ikstena (1969) is a prose writer and essayist. Ikstena is one of the most visible, and influential prose writers in Latvia, known for her elaborate style and detailed approach to language. After obtaining a degree in Philology from the University of Latvia in 1992, she went on to study English literature at Columbia University. In her prose, Nora Ikstena often reflects on life, love, death and faith. Ikstena is also a prolific author of biographical fiction, non-fiction, scripts, essays, and collections of short prose. Ikstena is an active participant in Latvia's cultural and political life, and a co-founder of the International Writers and Translators' House in Ventspils. In 2006, she received the Baltic Assembly Prize in literature.

Synopsis: The novel *Mother's Milk* deals with the post-war period and follows the fates of three generations of women, its narrative centering mostly on the 1970s and 1980s. Raised by a single mother, the central mother figure – a single mother herself – is a brilliant gynecologist who finds herself at odds with the dehumanizing effects of Communist ideology. While living in Leningrad, she successfully performed a secret, artificial insemination procedure on a young Russian woman who later loses her child as a result of the brutality of her war-veteran husband. With no prospects for advancing her scientific career, the talented doctor is sent off to practice in a rural area – her daughter sharing the experience of being uprooted. The doctor suffers from clinical depression and the entire burden of everyday life is placed on her young daughter's shoulders.

Excerpt

Returning to Riga after spending the fall school break with my mother, my mind was still uneasy about her. I was somewhat comforted by the thought that Jese was with her. Not wanting to worry my mother's mama and her stepfather, with whom I stayed during the school year, I told them that all was more or less fine, that mother was now working less and resting more, something she deserved to do long ago. I said we had had a wonderful

vacation, that we had baked an apple cake, celebrated our birthdays, roasted potatoes on coals in the wood stove, and that I had breathed good country air and the days had flown by.

The second term of my first year of secondary school had now started. I couldn't just take it easy after finishing the initial term so well. The vunderkind had begun to pay attention to me, which I considered a great honour. We had a heavy course load, leaving no time for anything else. Military instruction had been added to the curriculum. We all had to lie on our stomachs on the school's smelly gym mats and spread our legs wide (which amused the boys no end, because no one allowed us girls to change from skirts to pants for these classes), then aim a rifle at a target and pull the trigger when the voyenruk – the military instructor, yelled out his 'shoot' command in Russian. Anyone who couldn't do something according to his orders met the voyenruk's favourite phrase: po druzhbe dvoyechku – for friendship's sake, do it twice. Voyenruk's cruelty paralyzed us all. With him you could very quickly earn a 2 – the lowest grade on your report card, which would spoil a high grade average. In this same class, after the shooting exercise we had to don gas masks, which could be removed only by order of the voyernuk. A class mate of mine fainted, because it turned out that her klapen – the mask's valve was closed, which she hadn't noticed, and she nearly smothered while waiting for the voyenruk's order.

With all my heart I hated this short, fat voyenruk. Bit by bit in my imagination he became the main culprit responsible for this mess of Soviet parallel lives. This repulsive, slimy toad who had crawled into our water lily pond, devoured all the peace loving dragon-flies, and now was squatting and croaking on a lily-pad, swelling ever fatter. And we all had to swallow that toad!

And then a ray of light pierced this hopelessness. On the school bulletin board appeared a call for applications to join a cultural history group. The meetings would take place outside class time. This sounded inviting and so I applied.

Three secondary school students came to the group's first afternoon meeting. I, the vunderkind and one other girl. (Later we were twelve in total in the group.) We were introduced to Teacher Blūms, who looked as if he came from another world. He had a hitherto-unseen high forehead, bushy, longish hair and a thick beard. All in all, he didn't even look like a teacher. He spoke in a quiet voice and what he talked about was also other worldly.

We were to begin with poetry. In a nutshell, here we would learn what our school curriculum had passed us by (I didn't quite understand what he meant by 'passed us by' and decided to ask only after the meeting).

Here then is an example - a poem titled 'Krasta runa' – 'The Seashore Speaks', written by a young poet, only ten years older than we were.

Teacher Blūms began to recite:

To stand so long chilled to the bone, letting my nose weep, With quite a Latvian joy I allow my soul, my head to freeze. The sea rises and crashes, rises and breaks apart again (Others rise and crash, rise and break apart again.)

Forever and ever, time after time, now or never Hang on, stay mum, sit tight, stifle the soul's hunger.

He had read the poem in Latvian but it was a different language. I, the vunderkind and the

other girl sat transfixed, as if doused with water. Just a moment ago, we in our gas masks had gasped for air waiting for the voyenruk's order, but here someone was standing on the sea shore, where waves rose and broke.

My parallel world blossomed with the speed of lightning. Teacher Blūms had entered it. In the Gorky Street library I found the first book of the author of the poem 'Krasta runas'. The slimmest of slim volumes, already quite worn for wear. I shoved it into my boot and carried it out of the library. And read it from the first poem through to the last and once more from the last to the first.

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She came during the winter break. For Christmas Jese had brought into her room a spruce branch with large cones. She had dusted and washed the floors.

In the kitchen in a pot Jese's cooked peas were drying up. Jese had wanted to celebrate a lovely Christmas but I had shown no interest. She was probably offended and had left the clean, tidied-up house and the prepared holiday treats. She had not shown her face all these days, not even for New Year's Eve.

My daughter was busy in the kitchen. Preparing something. For the first time in days the enticing smell of the food invited me to get up and get dressed.

"I doubt whether Jese will come again," I said from my room. "You too will soon stop coming."

"Mama," from the kitchen replied my daughter, "now you can't give up just like that. I'm stewing ribs with sauerkraut. Before the New Year your stepfather stood for a long time in

line at the butcher's, and we bought the sauerkraut in the market. They send their best wishes to you, and also a little gift."

Stewed ribs and sauerkraut. A gift. The small things in life. I felt a pang of pain at the thought.

With great effort I put on my warm pants and a jacket. I already had hurt Jese, my good, faithful friend; I didn't also want to hurt my daughter.

She was quietly humming in the kitchen. Just as Jese did, she was breathing life into it. The pot was simmering away, warmth emanated from the wood stove, the coal and the ribs in the sauerkraut wafted their fragrance.

"Mama, the coals will be good. Let's put in potatoes with all their skins. Do you have potatoes?"

"Potatoes? Maybe, if Jese brought them, then maybe there are some."

"Yes," my daughter exclaimed happily, "look there's some in the pail in the pantry. I'll wash them."

I sat down at the kitchen table, lit up a cigarette and gazed at my daughter's movements. They were womanly and domestic, joyful and considered. How she lifted the pot's lid and tasted the contents, how she added salt, how she scrubbed the potatoes and lined them up on a neatly folded towel to dry. How she organized the dishes, forks and knives on the table, how she put butter in the small dish and the candle and spruce branch in a tiny vase.

We sat at a festive table on our little life's island. She talked enthusiastically about her

school, about the vunderkind and her teacher Blūms, who was the smartest person in the world.

"Mama," she said, "do you remember how for the carnival in our school you made me up to be two people – as a split personality. Now I really am a split personality. One who is taught at school, and the other is taught by Teacher Blūms."

Then suddenly she seemingly became embarrassed and asked: "Mama, will you be offended if I tell you something?"

"I won't be offended."

"Teacher Blūms took us to an abandoned church, where we saw a bell that had a torn-out tongue. Afterward he asked what our thoughts were about the bell.

"And what did you answer?"

"Mama, I said that that bell reminds me of you. Everyone was silent and I didn't have anything more to say. It was quite a dreadful silence, but I couldn't in a few words explain why that bell reminded me of you, and that's why I also was silent."

"And why does the bell remind you of me?"

"Because it seems to me now and then that someone has stolen your joy in life. Has torn it out of you like that bell's clapper. And you can't manage to ring – exactly like Teacher Blūms said about the bell. Are you offended?"

I gazed at her. My flesh and blood. The Giver of Life had gifted her to me. And her longing for life was stronger than the hell and the evil worm that was gnawing on mine.

"You're not offended?"

"No, of course not, you're my joy."

After the meal we got dressed warmly and went outside. It had snowed for three days. The bright sun covered the white earth with its veil. We headed for the river along our accustomed path.

"Along the way let's stop by Jese's," my daughter said. "Jese is a good person and one shouldn't hurt her."

My daughter threw a snow ball at a window of Jese's modest house. After a moment she, wrapped up warmly and happy to see us, came out.

"Jese, what a lovely day!" My daughter called out brightly, "Let's go to the river Jese."

We went as a threesome. My daughter in the middle, her arms around the two of us.

The golden ball of the sun rolled over the white river. We stood dumbstruck, touched by a radiant silence.

Until my daughter happily exclaimed: "Let's slide on the ice! Mama, Jese, let's slide"!

She grabbed our hands and we raced for the river. We slid back and forth until we collapsed in the soft snow. For a moment all three of us lay there, holding hands. Gazing at the sun.

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After the winter holidays at my mother's, I continued to attend Teacher Blūms' group, distancing myself more and more from the school's curriculum. This slowly began to bring

down my high marks. My form teacher was concerned, but I promised to pull myself together and to improve. My mother's mama and her stepfather also were worried. Did I perhaps have too heavy a load – with the school and in addition the cultural history group? No, I insisted, everything was fine, and quietly fretted only about one thing, that my form teacher and my family might start to look with suspicion at Teacher Blūms. I forced myself to master the school curriculum, learned by heart all that foolish history and social studies, wrote required compositions, became a role model of obedience in the military studies, somehow scraped through in chemistry, physics and algebra, for which I had developed an allergy, and my grades began again to improve. All this was on behalf of a single objective – Teacher Blūms had promised to take us to Leningrad and to the Hermitage during the spring break. If I was to get a good report card, no one would object to the trip. Mother's mama sighed because she remembered how badly Leningrad had finished for my mother.

"Do stop," I said to her. "Don't ruin the trip I'm so waiting for."

This gave me a good excuse for not visiting my mother during the spring break and so I wrote her a letter saying that a wonderful trip was forthcoming for me – to Leningrad. She sent me a postcard with a view of the Neva River and its bridges, surely from her time in Leningrad. On it were only two sentences: "Have a wonderful trip. My greetings to Neva and Teacher Blūms."

I couldn't believe it, but it did come true. On the spring break's second day we were sitting in a second class wagon on the Riga–Leningrad train. Teacher Blūms had kept his word. And I had studied until I was sick to my stomach in order to improve my report card.

In the morning, having hardly slept on the train, we immediately headed for the Hermitage.

We stood at the end of an impossibly long line, armed with patience, because it was cold.

Beside us was another fast-moving stream, involving foreigners. They had been driven here in comfortable buses and were let inside without having to wait in line. Totally frozen, now and then some of us left the line-up to hop and run about a bit. It was substantially past lunchtime when we got into the Hermitage. After the first two exhibition halls my head started to spin, I found a bench and sat down.

Here was a world that swept you off your feet. That screwed off your head like a burnt-out electricity bulb. I didn't attempt to understand what Teacher Blūms was describing to us. Just focused to allow his words and the paintings to flow through me like grains sifted through a sieve, catching here and there, and sprouting in the fertile soil of my imagination.

Time stood still, we wandered through the halls as if possessed. Until we were close to exhausted. And then I saw it – a brilliant green moon in a black painting. I sat down on the floor in front of the painting and couldn't leave. It drew me into its darkness and light, which were fighting each other in the framed small, square space. I wasn't here, I was there – between the green moon and the dark in which all got lost – I, my mother, my mother's mama and her stepfather, the cage with the hamster, the tiny man I had made of clay in class. Everything spiralled as if in a whirlpool, then vanished in the dark with the speed of light.

I came to my senses on Teacher Blūms saying: "You fainted by the Kuindzhi." Around me stood the frightened members of my group. The museum guards had brought a glass of water.

At night we went to see how the bridges are raised over the Neva River. It was such a

majestic sight when the bridge jaws gaped open and rose to the star-filled heavens. Below flowed the river that I was to say hello to from my mother. And also give her greetings to Teacher Blūms, who woke me up from the dark.

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She, totally broken, came to see me the fourth week after the spring break. Grown thin. She sat in her room or in the kitchen gazing apathetically out of the window. Something had happened.

We weren't accustomed to questioning one another. In the evening muffled sobs issued from my daughter's room. I entered.

"Mama," she said through tears, "after the Leningrad trip they let Teacher Blūms go. Someone had told the school director that I had fainted by a painting and he was let go. But that's not all."

"You fainted by a painting?" I asked.

"Yes, I was tired and I had my menstrual period. Besides, that painting was incredibly beautiful, just the darkness and a green moon, I looked at it for a long time, and suddenly it seemed to me that the darkness drew all of us in – me, you, your mama and stepfather, and the tiny clay man. It grew dark in front of my eyes and I fainted."

She cried so dreadfully, feeling an enormous guilt that wasn't hers.

"That's not a reason to let a teacher go."

"It was only an excuse, mama, only an excuse. It turns out that they had been watching our

teacher already from the first day that our group met. It turns out mama that among us was someone who reported all, absolutely all, to the school's director and she relayed all of it further to the KGB.

I sat by my daughter's bed, listened, how she talked about the KGB, and sensed a suffocating wave of hate wash over me. It seemed to me that outside the window stood the ghost of Winston stepped out of that unknown author's book which seemed to describe my life – he looked tortured to the point of being unrecognizable, questioned and forced to confess, and forced to accept 'their' truth. And this spectre that had burdened me, now burdened my daughter.

"Mama, but that's not all yet. That's not all, mama," she said brokenly, through tears. "A week after the trip, the school director called me out from class and led me to a room adjacent to her office. It was like that time when we had graffiti scrawled on the sidewalk at our place. There, in that room, sat a dreadful man. Dreadful, mama, with a massive head, light hair and very evil eyes. Such evil eyes."

I stroked my daughter's head. And sensed that I was starting to shudder. The shudders descended on me as if from a distance – from the young forest stand of spruce trees, which my father had tried to protect, from the cold suitcase in which my mother had hidden me, from the old professor, who reported our talk about God, from the Engels Street room, in which I denied everything, from Serafima's husband's battered ugly face, from my Soviet cage, where I didn't have the courage to eat my child – all this came and overtook me, and I fought with all my strength against this, so my hands would not tremble and I could caress my crying child.

"Such evil eyes," she repeated.

"Did Teacher Blūms take you to church?" straight to the point he asked. I was so frightened by his evil that I was trembling and silent."

"He stood up, mama, walked behind my back, placed a hand on my shoulder and in a chillingly calm voice said – you won't graduate from this school, and you'll never be accepted at a university if you don't answer."

"And, mama," I said, "he took us, I said, he took us, mama," my daughter sobbed. "I should have lied, said that he didn't take us, but I told him the truth, that he took us."

"Did he read poetry and other texts to you that aren't in the school programme?" The evil man continued to torture me.

"He did read them," I said, crying. "I should have lied and said he didn't, but I told him the truth, that he did read them. Mama, I should have denied everything and lied."

And then he returned to his desk, pulled out a blank sheet of paper and a ball point pen and placed them both in front of me. And in just as cold and calm a voice said, "And now you'll write all this down."

"What shall I write?" I asked him.

"You'll write that Teacher Blūms took you to a church and read poetry and other texts that aren't in the school programme to you. And you'll sign – your name, surname and class."

"I won't write."

"The evil man once more got up from his desk, mama, he once more stood behind my back,

but now he put both hands on my shoulders and squeezed them so hard it hurt."

"You do know, of course, how life has turned out for your mother, that's what he said, mama. Already tomorrow you'll be expelled from school, and your good marks won't help you."

"He turned me around to face him, his face inflamed and he was yelling."

"Comrade Blūms sort poisons our young, poisons and leads them away from the Soviet path. If I had my say, he would be in prison, but unfortunately these are no longer the times for this. But he won't set foot in this school again, never again. Blūms' gang! Write!"

God forbid, how my child then wept. I tried to comfort her.

"And then, mama, the door opened and the school director came in. Her expression was dreadful and her face was as hard as stone. She sat down at the desk, crossed her chubby fingers and, the corners of her mouth trembling, talked exactly the same as that evil man."

"Now you have the opportunity to ruin your life for all time to come. The others have already written."

"All the eleven others?" I asked through tears.

"All eleven and without such melodrama," she replied.

"Mama, therefore the vunderkind had already written! And then the school director added – if you didn't have such good marks, I wouldn't go so easy on you. Write and sign it."

"Mama, I did write it."

My daughter was crying so dreadfully, that my heart was breaking.

"I wrote – Teacher Blūms took us to a church and read poetry and other texts that aren't in the school curriculum. I wrote and signed my name, surname and class."

I brewed some camomile tea with honey for my daughter. She drank it and fell asleep, totally cried out. When I heard her calm breath, I shut the door to her room.

The darkness in my room enveloped me. I opened the window; outside spring was in the air.

I lit a cigarette. The shudders slowly receded.

The sky was unusually bright. I went out into the garden. So star-filled the sky! Directly above my head flowed the Milky Way. The goddess' milk drops, which fell there before she fed her child, before he was to be swallowed by his father. Unreachable and infinite. Warm and flowing. I gazed at it all night until dawn. Until the Milky Way vanished and a rooster began to crow in a neighbour's yard.

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Without Teacher Blūms, school seemed to me dead. I avoided looking at the vunderkind, although he behaved as if nothing special had happened. I avoided meeting the rest of the group, although, when I ran into them accidentally in the school corridors, they also behaved as if nothing had happened. Everyone had spring on their minds. Just a little more than a month and the summer holidays would begin. I had caused so much worry for my mother's mama and her stepfather. After the questioning at the school they were so worried about me that it became burdensome for me. They had decided to rent a couple of rooms and to spend the summer by the sea. I decided to go to my mother's.

I managed my assignments as if on automatic pilot. I learned all I was assigned. My form teacher also was paying special attention to me. In history and social study classes much greater demands were placed on me than on my classmates. I crammed and beavered away ad nauseum. And I counted the days left until the end of the school year. I had a calendar in which I crossed off every day that passed.

It was already the end of April, when the entire planet was shaken by an explosion. The Chernobyl Nuclear Power Station exploded and the school director tripled our military instruction classes. On the voyenruk's orders we put on and took off gas masks until we were sick and tired of it.

My form teacher told us about the doctors and volunteers from Latvia who now had to go and help in Chernobyl. As an example she mentioned her son – a doctor. Her mother's duty was to convince her son that his place was in Chernobyl.

And she had succeeded in doing so and her son had gone to the nuclear disaster location to help the victims.

I really didn't understand this teacher's commitment, because, encouraged by her, her son had put himself in harm's way. But I also didn't have to understand anything, I had only to heed what constituted duty to our great Motherland, and have the courage characteristic of a responsible Soviet citizen.

I gazed out of the window and the teacher's words passed by me. Passed by – those were teacher Blūms' used words, the ones I didn't understand during our first group meeting. On the other side of the street, the large chestnut trees had burst into leaf, soon the trees would blossom. I would leave the city, run through fields, swim, sit for hours on the river

bank, encourage my mother to go for walks and we wouldn't go to bed until late in the warm evenings, we'd pick the first chanterelles in the woods, and I'd drag mama out from her lair littered with books, ashtrays, apple cores and coffee mugs. I'd read all that teacher Blūms had recommended. I'd read all that was now on my Mama's bookshelves. I would read to spite the man with the evil eyes, to spite the school's director and all my other eleven class mates, who wrote about teacher Blūms, to spite myself, who also wrote, because I was intimidated. I hated my fear. The summer seemed like a liberation. From what felt like a young offenders prison, which I had to endure still for just two more years. Only two years.

"I am proud of my son." The teacher's words called me back to class

Two weeks later, when the chestnut trees were almost in blossom, tragic news ran through our school. Our form teacher's son, the doctor, had been killed in Chernobyl. She walked around dressed in black with a black ribbon tied around her head and everyone expressed their sympathy to her. She had to wait for a zinc coffin to bring her son back from his duty abroad, which she had encouraged him to fulfil.

In her sorrow she became even more harsh and strict. Even though it was almost the end of the school year, she harangued us with new history content, piling on more and more homework and tests.

While we wrote the tests, she disappeared into her office from which we heard muffled sobs.

We hung our heads over our notebooks so that we wouldn't have to look at each other.

Towards the end of the hour, having dried her eyes, she came back into our classroom.

She rapped out: "I am proud of my son, he fulfilled his duty."

In my imagination I saw how around her a cage had materialized, how she had shrunk and transformed into a hamster devouring its child. It was so real and horrifying an image, that it caused me to feel sick to my stomach. The silence in the classroom was numbing. Until the saviour bell rang.

The summer didn't bring the expected liberation. Everything turned out totally differently.

The day before I was to leave, Jese appeared at the door to our flat. In a state of total collapse and cried out. On seeing our concern she immediately blurted out: "Your mother is alive, transferred to the large, new hospital right here in the suburbs."

"Jese, what happened? What happened, Jese?"

She sat in the kitchen drinking tea made by my mother's mama and told us.

After my last visit, my mother had become totally withdrawn. She hadn't gone to work with the ambulance even those two times per week. I really don't know, Jese said, but I think she was let go from her work. When it got dark, she had sat outside, gazing at the sky. Jese had tried to talk to her without success. All she got was broken phrases, answering only for the sake of answering. Jese had tried to cheer her up: "Summer's coming, we'll be here the three of us, all will be fine."

She had turned to Jese, looked at her in a funny way and said: "Yes Jese, yes, all will be fine, we all are just human." And once more had gazed upward, now simply into the dark.

On the evening of that particular day Jese had come after work to make dinner. The door to my mother's room had been closed. Jese had knocked, but was not let in. She had sensed something terribly amiss. She had knocked more persistently, but had still not been let in. The door was locked simply with a small latch, and Jese had managed to get it open.

Oh my God, Jese said, she was lying there with her eyes open, her pupils dilated, groping with her hands the air around her. Beside her scattered about were two packets of pills – she had ingested the contents of both.

My mother's mama bent her head. "The road to hell," she repeated, "the road to hell."

Jese fell silent, then continued. She was allowed to go along with mother. In the ambulance mother had nearly died, hooked up to tubes and oxygen, and her stomach had been pumped out. She was still in intensive care, but her condition had stabilized. Jese was not allowed to see her, but they would let in a daughter or her mother.

Jese talked maybe for about twenty minutes, but it seemed to me that she was talking for twenty years and that these years went by right here in our kitchen, where outside the window in the yard already dandelions were in bloom and soon lilacs would blossom and under them old folks would sit at a table, happy about having once more awaited the first warmth after the winter, while right there in the sandbox toddlers would play and birds take sand baths. But I don't have time for that spring. I have to grow up fast, faster than the words flowing from Jese's mouth. And I have to be brave to hear all this.

"Jese, stay the night with us, take a bath, rest," I said.

"Yes," said my mother's mama in a weak, hollow voice, "Jese stay with us."

"I'll try to get to see her already tonight. First I have to phone the hospital."

"Sweet pea, you won't go alone, will you?" My mother's mama asked, raising her eyes worriedly.

"I will go, and I have to go alone."

Right at the end of Lenin Street, the trolleybus turned off toward a pine forest. It was half empty. I sat at a window, in my lap everything my mother's mama had given me to take along. A toothbrush, toothpaste, slippers, a dressing gown, a hairbrush, soap, pantyhose, warm socks, underpants – everything that mother would need when she woke up. In the beginning for small moments of life – in the hospital ward, afterward for the larger moments when she'll have recovered and can go home. Beyond the window in the woods bushes were greening – so bright that they pierced one's eyes. Near the hospital some aunties were selling spring flowers. With these I probably wouldn't be let into intensive care, if I was let in at all.

It was the busiest visiting hour. People were hurrying to their loved ones over the stone slabs of the hospital's entryway. With food prepared at home, flowers and life's necessities.

The doctor on duty in intensive care listened to me attentively. Compared my passport with my mother's passport.

"You're still very young," he said, "are you sure that you want to see her now?"

"Yes," I answered.

I followed the doctor through long, seemingly never-ending hospital corridors. It seemed to

me that we were descending ever more deeply into the underworld and around every corner was another larger corner. Until in blue lights appeared the sign 'Intensive Care'.

"She's not conscious. Poisoning your system with pills is life-threatening," the doctor said as he opened the ward's door.

Naked to her waist, my mother lay in bed. Stuck to her chest were adhesive patches, which were connected to tubes leading to medical apparatus. On a nearby monitor the line of her heartbeat zigzagged.

I smoothed Mama's hair, which as always was matted. I stroked her ear, neck and chest. She was warm. Warm and quiet, she slept transmitting her life signal to the big metal box.

After a while, the doctor entered.

"I think we'll pull her through," he said. "You too must try to call her back."

Three days later mother regained consciousness. She was transferred to the regular ward from intensive care. My mother's mama and I sat on either side of her bed, while her stepfather waited outside on a bench so that mother would not get too emotional during this first encounter. She ate a couple of spoonfuls of our brought bouillon, closed her eyes and said just these few words – "It's a pity".

My mother's mama had a long talk with the doctor. Their decision was firm – they were ready to transfer mother to the psychiatric hospital, where she would have to stay for at least a month under medical supervision and she would have to be medicated.

"We have no other choice," he explained, "she tried to take her life. Consciously tried to,

being a mother and a doctor."

The summer passed me by. Both by the sea with my mother's mama and her stepfather as well as in Mama's house together with Jese we thought and talked only about her. I went to see my mother at the psychiatric hospital three times a week. I had to sign in. The hospital orderly would attach a doorknob to the door and let Mama out for a walk with me in the yard of that madhouse.

We circled around, sat down on broken-down benches, and mother greedily and constantly smoked, as if I had brought for her life's elixir in cigarette packs.

"Say hello to Jese," she said. "And mother and stepfather." She repeated the same thing again and again, because I could not get up enough courage to ask her the question that was tearing me in half.

"How is the sea?" She asked. "Do you also go over to our house? Jese surely must be taking good care of it?"

She asked and I answered with a yes or no, for sure, good, as always.

"You don't want to talk to me," she concluded, suddenly offended.

"You don't want to live," I threw back.

"I don't want to," Mama responded.

"So what will happen now," I asked.

"They'll sign me out after a month, after determining what category of disability support I fall into, and then I'll return home. I want to be home. Here, inside, it's dreadful."

"And we, Mama, will we have to live in constant fear for you. I'm afraid of that fear on your behalf. I'm afraid of that fear, Mama.

"Forgive me, I'll try, I'll try, forgive me," mother repeated, smoking in fits and starts.

"Look Mama, around us everything is in blossom. We could sit in our garden, chat with Jese, whip up a strawberry mousse, walk in the fields, swim in the river, Mama."

"Hug me, hug me tightly and kiss me," Mama said, and suddenly in the sun's shadows her face was revealed to me. It had aged in a single moment – the smooth skin had drooped, under her eyes were dark circles, from which stretched deep lines of sorrow, as if etched into her hard face by the constant flow of salty tears.

I hugged my mother tightly and kissed her.

"You've returned, I called you back so fervently, you've returned, all will be fine, all will be fine, Mama."

*

They signed me out only during the last half of August. The woman doctor in charge treated me as if I was shit. A mother, doctor – but a Tvaika Street Psychiatric Hospital patient. They drugged me with stuff that would have laid a horse low, and I, not caring, allowed them to do so.

My daughter and Jese came to help me pack and to take me home. They tried to talk about all sorts of inconsequential trivia until we were standing outside the asylum's gate.

"Never, listen, never again will you have to be here," in a hard voice said Jese.

My daughter didn't let go of my hand and led me like a scapegoat, who in a moment could escape from her.

"I stole your summer," I said to her.

"There are still a couple of weeks left, we'll be able to go mushrooming," she replied matter-of-factly.

Clean and orderly, my home and the garden welcomed me. What pains the two of them had taken! My room smelled of apples and on the table there was a vase with asters. The table had been set in the kitchen. Life was waiting for my return.

They busied themselves around me, warmed up food, unpacked the bags. I looked on as if from aside. I wanted to stop what was happening like one stops a car on the road in order to climb in and drive further together, but all that was happening was passing me by. Jese, I wanted to say: "Stop fussing, we're on the Milky Way, playing – plunging our legs in until our feet disappear". But I was silent and looking on, as they organized me for further living.

"I've managed to get work for you," Jese said happily. "The tying of wire brushes. To clean off rust. You can make good money from this. No need for any papers for it, the work will be formally in my name."

"Tying wire brushes," my daughter questioned. "Jese, but maybe Mama can still go and talk about a job with the ambulance people?"

"Nothing will come of it there," Jese said. "Talk has reached them in advance, they know everything there."

"Tying brushes, Jese, but that's magnificent, thank you, I'll tie wires with all my heart and soul." I said that whole heartedly, but my daughter and Jese heard irony in my voice.

"Can you get something better? How much disability support payments will you get and when will you get them?" Wounded feelings could be heard in Jese's words.

"I'll help you in the beginning. I know how. It's nothing complicated," she continued.

"Fine Jesse, fine, let's tie brushes."

I felt weak and went to lie down in my room. My daughter covered me with a blanket.

"Sleep for a while, Mama, rest," she said and stroked my head.

Half-asleep, half- awake I heard my daughter talking with Jese.

"She's given up, totally given up. She's smarter than all of us, more courageous than all of us, she's a super doctor, Jesse, she knows about giving life and now, Jese, she knows surely also how to die. How can we help Jese? How can we help her? Why such an injustice? Why was she sent here, if she was supposed to work at the Leningrad Institute? And now, Jese, you're going to teach her to tie wire brushes! My life is crap, Jese. In which I have to betray teacher Blūms, in which my Mama doesn't want to live any longer. What kind of crap is this?"

"Don't say your life is crap," I heard Jese say, trying to comfort my daughter. "Never call it that. This is the hand that we've been dealt. We're worn out from carrying heavy burdens. Everything has to be taken with humility, also wire brushes, and then you'll regain your strength of soul."

Nora Ikstena "Mātes piens" [Mother's Milk / Soviet Milk]

Excerpt

Translated by Margita Gailitis

"Jese," said my daughter, "you speak beautifully, as if from a book."

I dozed off. Sleep set me free. Then they woke me. At dinner time.