

**Biography:** Writer Dace Vīgante (1970) was born in Jūrmala, Latvia. She graduated from the University of Latvia Faculty of Law. Vīgante has also attended the Latvian Writers' Union's "Literary Academy" program. In 2017, her debut collection of stories, *Ice Orange* (2016), was shortlisted for the Annual Latvian Literature Award, as well as the Kilogram of Culture Award, and received the Children, Youth and Parents Jury Award. In 2018, Vīgante published her second collection of stories, *We Shall See*.

**Synopsis:** The nine stories in the collection *We Shall See* continue and add to the spectrum of themes already touched upon in Vīgante's debut collection, *Ice Orange* – the most prominent being the complicated relationships between people throughout time. Vīgante's prose possesses a specific "quiet" style, as it includes no loud epithets or overtly dramatic dialogues – and it is precisely this veiled approach that allows Vīgante to convey the "inner dramas" of her characters so well. The stories are often explicitly visual, concentrating, as it seems, on abundant detail; however, Vīgante manages to include the symbolic subtext in each visual image as well.

## Excerpt

### Between Two Coasts

"Sire, the time for your good deeds has not yet come," the Prince answered. 'I fear her illness might return. Have ten female slaves carry her to her bath without her feet touching the ground. Then, give her the most beautiful, noble of jewels, gems to bring her great joy. When this is done, have them take her to the place outside the city where you found her. The demon must leave her in the same place it first entered her."

(From an Arab fairy tale, "Fairy tale of The Magic Horse")

I'm the last one there. I race breathlessly to the ladder that is then swiftly raised and propped against the side of the boat. The metal gates clink, the padlock clanks on the chains. I collapse onto a bench next to a woman I got to know on my way here. She is knitting and, right now, I have neither the will nor the wish to share my thoughts. I would prefer to sit elsewhere but all the other benches have been taken. I certainly don't want to stand and stare at my blue, swollen veins, either. I squint back at the coast of Tangiers – frondy palm trees bid me farewell, indifferent. Minarets like uneven toothpicks stand out against the sky above small, crooked houses. Deep within them are simmering layers of aromas, the smells and stench of the Medina. I grimace, pushing my crammed-full bag under the bench and close my eyes.

Like a sleepy donkey trained to follow the same path, the boat carries today's load – a sizeable crowd of overheated tourists with matted, sticky hair, swollen calves and sweat stained clothing – back to Alghesira. For the most part, the passengers were the same as the ones on the way over. German missionaries, all wearing creased linen shorts and safari hats. A group of people from our hotel squatted like colourful hummingbirds on a long, thin bench – worrying about getting burned, some of them licking paper napkins and sticking them on their noses to stop them peeling. Most had shopping bags emblazoned with the words *Gold of Africa*. Yuck. A handsome Moroccan in an aubergine-coloured shirt stood in the control cabin with a newspaper. He might be the illegitimate descendent of a sultan, I thought to myself. Me and my fervid imagination. In Greece, for instance, when I came across a better than average looking man, whether he was selling sweets or serving at table, I couldn't resist looking for something of Alexander the Great in the curve of his lips, his

straight nose or the shape of his cheeks. Or I would search for similarities with world conquerors of a later date in every thick set Corsican I came across. And why shouldn't I? There was no photographic evidence one way or another.

I'm wearing a black dress that reaches down to my ankles, a lightweight white scarf over my head, covering my forehead and slipping down almost down to my eyes. My skin is sunburnt and sweaty, rather like sticky fly-paper. I must have looked like a mournful orthodox icon surrounded by my own honey-like mist. I lick my parched lips, recalling how I had wanted to dive into the salty freshness, but I had no time. I pour some water from a bottle onto my hands then splash and pat my face. I pull a small, white fan from my over-packed bag, leaving dirty fingerprints on it. I groan inwardly, thinking that I should have taken the dark pink or black one from the pile on my bed back at the hotel.

The Babel-like murmur on the boat slowly fades, leaving only the gentle lapping of the waves and regular clicking of my neighbour's knitting needles. She pretends to be deeply engrossed, concentrating on what she is doing. I sigh with relief. I have a book with me but am too tired to read it. I lean back and give myself up to the rocking waves. I don't manage to fall asleep, though, thanks to the hummingbirds perched on the bench in front who, bored, start rummaging through their shopping bags. As they start yanking out their souvenir rubbish, purchased from the shops along the coast, I exchange a conspiratorial glance with the handsome, illegitimate offspring of a sultan. A woman in a hideous golden tunic with *I love Paris* written across it makes the most noise of them all. She had the room to next to mine in the hotel, where I could hear her through the wall screeching like a peacock at off-colour comedies on television. I turn my head, hoping to make out the other

coast we are heading for. In the distance, I see a hint of scarlet dryland, surrounded by an expanse of bright green water.

The picture I had had in my mind was very different. I had been a little disappointed to discover that this boat was the favourite not only of my but also of all the other cheap hotels along the coast; the most popular tourist attraction and in great demand. The boats set off several times a day, observing a fixed schedule. Not exactly free but reasonably priced – rather like the trams in Riga. I was coming to realize that the special attention I had paid to my preparations was all for nothing. I had been quite convinced that this time it would be different. I had carefully calculated how to avoid standing around monuments in order to savour the Moroccan coast touched by ancient Moorish culture, in the most leisurely way possible.

'You know, I'm planning on doing it at my own pace – gentle strolls, no stress or hurrying,' I had earlier told my knitting neighbour. When we had struck up our acquaintance, she had wondered whether I was heading anywhere special. 'Yes,' I had exclaimed in excitement. 'I want to peek into shady Riade courtyards and delight in the aromatic smells of the medina spice stalls. Maybe try crushed kibrizli almonds in lemon honey or taste a drop of a thousand herbs in the Imajra potion. Then, I might slip into the cool halls of art galleries or a museum before enjoying a quick *nous nous* coffee in a tiny Berber teashop and watching the locals go about their business in their fluttering Djellabas.'

I had taken great pains with my preparations, longing for the moment when I would be able to touch, albeit fleetingly, the flimsy, embellished garments in shades of ivory, pomegranate, beetroot, okra and indigo or catch a glimpse of dark eyes like windows of the

soul, peeping out from the square of a paranja! My new acquaintance and I chatted about cinematic masterpieces of the last century – the graceful Bergmann, Bogart's good looks and Malkovich, hopeless and hashish smoking in the middle of the desert. Apparently, she too had loved Arabian fairy tales as a child. Placing a hand over her mouth, she confessed to having accepted as normal practice the murder of many of Shahryhar's women. In fact, it hadn't seemed that terrible at all - in the end she had wanted all those silly beauties to be done away with in order to make way for wise Sheherazade and her breath-taking tale.

Whereas in my case, the exquisite illustrations had somehow seared themselves into my memory, the depictions of half-dressed or even naked women awakening my earliest fantasies of physical love and an appreciation of the beauty of the female body. Often, they were only clothed in a long gemstone necklace, a pearl ring, long tresses of hair and glimmering, pale rose skin. We both giggled.

We were of the same opinion that the unfounded jealousy of princesses' husbands and lovers had always been rather unnerving, not to mention their unquestioning belief in gossip and an unwillingness to check facts, especially when their luckless womenfolk had had their name's blackened through envy, been tormented, weakened and spat upon. "Absurdly, they all manage to make it to the end of the story when they successfully prove their innocence," my acquaintance continued, lifting her needles. "Then they are begged for their forgiveness and smothered from head to toe in jewels."

"That's the way to do it!" I said eagerly. "In the end they were rewarded handsomely for the wrongs they had suffered." I imagined them all lounging about in their chambers hung with golden drapery, playing with agate dice. Their clothes threaded with invisible

gems, the sun glinting off an almond-sized pearl on their foreheads. Their feet were washed in brass bowls and they ate delicacies from a polished silver platter. At night, they slept in brocaded four-poster beds veiled with embroidered silk from China as the smoke from aromatic herb incense swirled from jewel-encrusted lanterns. I was about to add golden statues in shady palace gardens and travelling tents lined with lion skin but was interrupted by my acquaintance, putting her knitting down in her lap. Our conversation had inspired her to change her plans – she now wanted to feel at one with the city itself, interwoven as it was with ancient myths. She announced that she would be honoured to have such a fascinating travel companion whose knowledge of Moorish heritage would undoubtedly lead her on an unforgettable adventure. Flattered, I agreed without a moment's hesitation.

As the boat approached the coast and we started climbing down the ladder, I suddenly felt unsure of things and, nudging my companion, told her I was popping to buy some water and that she was to go on ahead, I would catch her up. Alongside the boat's moorings I had spotted a stall under an awning selling a vast selection of head coverings which was lucky for me as, despite the sun being hot enough to dry your eyes out, I had stupidly forgotten to bring a hat. I had to find something suitable. I certainly didn't want to ruin my acquaintance's stroll by lumbering her with a companion suffering from sunstroke.

As I turned back onto the quayside, there was no sign of our boat. The sweltering African air was literally burning my nostrils so I hastily set off in search of the right entry gate into the old town. Although not on my schedule, the jewellery shop recommended by the hotel guide turned out to be on my route. I took this as a sign that it must be where I should form my first impressions of local handicrafts, seeing myself in the reflections of

authentic treasures and encountering the shadows of their ancient owners. I reflected that the museum could only house the most pitiable remains of local burial sites.

Looking around, I noted that the entire hotel group was here, foraging about - trying on, measuring, jingling and weighing. I caught sight of the man with the rabbi-like nose from my boat, haggling loudly with a stallholder with piercing eyes, the very picture of a descendant of Ahmed I. He nudged me knowingly, saying that I should knock them down until I got what I wanted for next to nothing. I just can't, I'm too shy to even start so I cut him short, saying that I wasn't looking to buy anything, actually. 'Conceited ass,' I thought to myself, and head purposefully for the exit. Then I saw it – a ring with a huge pearl just like one in a book illustration – on a woman's finger. The stallholder, a Cesaria Evora lookalike with very white teeth and a psychedelic print head covering, was leaning towards her, whispering in her ear: "One hundred, ninety, eighty, very special, exclusive." The woman shook her head and handed back the ring. At that precise moment, I was flooded with a wave of fog like steam hissing from a hot water pipe, like chanting vibrations coming in unison from Mojahedins' minarets, like a trembling faintness. I snatched the ring from her hands. The walls of the stall, clustered with pendants, medallions, stacks of bracelets, bundles of earrings, half-moon diadems, all merged together and swirled in a colourful mosaic. "Exclusive, special, *très charmant* for the lady, authentic, come and see."

The next moment I saw myself as a little girl, sneaking out of my foldout bed into my parent's double. The bed linen, washed out and in places finely darned, rustled with cleanliness and smelled of imported soap. The duck feather pillows, deep and soft, cradled my head. The dreams I saw in our room were bright, clear, sometimes unforgettable. I still

remember one of them. I was in a deep cave – the hiding place of thieves' treasures – and I was allowed to take as much as I could carry. All the same, I knew not to let myself get carried away, repeating 'open sesame' to myself, just in case I needed it on my way out. I took the first crown I lay my hands on, just like the Tsarevna-Swan's kokoshnik crown on the book by Pushkin and, snatching up a cup lying on a heap of gold coins, scooped it full of crystals as big as pumpkin seeds. For a moment I was guilt stricken, was it all right to steal from thieves? Then a stern voice bellowed that I was to leave the crown but could take the cup. Reverently, I replaced the crown on top of a huge mound of pearls and even gave a bow. Somehow, I knew that I was dreaming yet at the same time I also realized it was a very strange dream. I squeezed the cup's handle so hard that my nails dug into the palm of my hand. Then I woke up. My fingertips were stiff and numb, my fist raised aloft. I knew the cup was ceramic, I could feel the smooth glazed surface of its handle. For about a minute, I didn't open my eyes. My heart was pounding as loudly as the voice in my dream as I lay wondering what my parents would say when they saw what I still couldn't believe myself. I might not have to get up early for school anymore in the mornings, or my parents for work. Why would I have to go to school, anyhow? To start with, I would cram the cupboards with chewing gum, shelled sunflower seeds and chocolate-covered hazelnuts. I would stock the fridge with salami, smoked chicken and lots of cream. We would buy four-poster beds for all of us with pom-pom fringed pillows. Mother and I would get stylish new dresses made-to-measure to replace our old, worn ones and I would buy a horse with a shiny bridle for my father.



When I finally came to my senses, the stallholder was looking concerned. "*Charmant, très charmant, don't worry, c'e finit, c'e finit, all okay.*" She wiped the sweat from her upper lip, her encouraging '*très charmant*' now less insistent, lacking its previous enthusiasm. I put trembling fingers to my damp forehead. I gasped, in need of fresh air. It took me a moment to release my grasp on the ring I still held in a cramp-like grip, my fingers numb and aching. I needed to wriggle them to get the circulation going again. "*Thank you, merci, goodbye, au revoir, dosvidanje, you forgot, madam, you forgot, oh, my God!*" A handkerchief in her hand, Cesaria held out a small package that, in my haste, I had forgotten to pick up. Leaving the shop, my sandals sank into the melting asphalt - I almost collapsed in the thick lava-like heat. Everyone else seemed to have disappeared. I glanced at a clock above a shady tearoom. Surely that wasn't the time already! I needed to start running if I was to make it back to the boat on time.

'Great exhibition in that art gallery, wasn't it?' I was shaking. 'Thanks for the recommendation. Did you go somewhere else first then pop to see it later?'

My eyes rolled as I gulped some water from my bottle, mopped the sweat from my brow and clutched my bag. I was aware of an increased level of curiosity amongst some of the other hotel residents; they were staring at me, nodding their heads like birds and whispering. The man with the Rabbi-like nose got up and came over. 'Ask her how on earth she did it!' croaked the woman in the gold tunic. A host of faces - dust smeared, weary from the sun and sweaty, topped with fezes, straw hats and turbans, including the handsome one of the sultan's illegitimate descendant - all turned to look at me. I averted my eyes, hoping that he was just crossing the deck.

A fleshy, hairy finger pointed insistently at my bag. Smiling unctuously, he praised me warmly, saying that it took a real merchant to haggle down to half the price. The saleswoman's face went from copper to peach-tinted copper then back to copper again. The others hadn't been so lucky. The crowd of hotel humming-birds seemed to move *en masse*, getting up and approaching like a thick, sneering, malodorous wall of flesh. I turned my head quickly away. The hills of Alghesiri were already clearly visible. The following morning I was still rolling the word around my mouth with pleasure. The most peculiar man of all was the one gripping a synthetic-fibre rug in a Persian print rolled up under his arm. Unrolling it before me, he claimed to have got the best deal of all, boasting how he had made it to the rug shop to buy this beauty for his dog. His wife would be delighted. Rolling the rug back up, he offered round some Turkish dates before demanding rudely that I show him my ring. 'Who would have guessed it of our silent bookworm? Nose always in a book, not making friends with anyone and then, what do you know!' He clapped his damp hands together. Rather at a loss, I opened my bag, not quite sure what I was looking for, rummaging around amongst scarves, hats, different boxes and casings, souvenir elephants, creased, synthetic Djellabas, embroidered flip flops, a book, a bottle of *L'air du Marocc*.

'Look, here it is!' the woman in the tunic squeaked. Probing fingers delved into my bag and pulled out a small bag with *Gold of Africa* written on it, seconds later extracting a box from within. The man with the rug, his tongue sticking out, fiddled to get the lid open with broken fingernails. The ring was plucked out of its casing. The pink velvet heart whirled down onto the deck. Someone tapped the pearl against his front tooth and the man with the nose bit the gold while others looked on, dog-like teeth bared, awaiting their turn. The

sun was scorching the back of my neck so I pulled my scarf down lower over my eyes, but I still saw the handsome sultan's bastard closing his newspaper and looking away, smirking.

My purchase was generally acknowledged as a great bargain, put back into its bag and handed back to me. The warm wall of flesh withdrew. I was left gasping for breath. I squashed the package and quickly shoved it back in my bag.

The pale grey coast of Tangiers merged with the water, the colour of scorched moss, until finally disappearing like a mirage in a desert. The latest reminder to top up my balance and the usual threats flashed up on my phone. No other news.

I needed to work out who I should turn to first. Maybe I could wrangle an invitation from the women in next door's room to join her watching TV comedies and ask her for a loan of twenty euros or so. If I was in luck, she may even want something from the brand new shoeboxes or clothes bags in my room. Or maybe even the ring?

The guide came around checking we were all happy with her recommendations. 'We wouldn't have had time to do anything more, would we? Just the basic package.' Without waiting for an answer, she nodded and hurried away to get off the boat. The crew were already setting up the ladder.

The women next to me was knitting steadily, the needles swishing, clicking quietly.  
Open Sesame! Open Sesame! Open Sesame!