

Biography: Jānis Einfelds (1967) is a Latvian post-modernist writer. His first publication was the story "The Battle of the Short Winter," published in 1988. He is the author of several stories, novels, novellas, and other works of prose. The colloquial term *einfeld* has come to mean a certain principle of characterization in Latvian literature because of Einfeld's particular style. His works have been also published in the United States and Germany. Einfelds has been a member of the Latvian Writers' Union since 1996. In 1992, he received the Klāvs Elsbergs Literary Prize for his work in prose. His book *Non-people* (2005) received the 2005 Annual Latvian Literature Award.

Synopsis: *The Rascal* is a harsh, apocalyptic thriller about the fate of civilization. The author describes a world ruled by fake culture and mediocrity, by selfishness and cruelty. In this world, foolishness and power are one and the same, and inescapably lead to loneliness, pain, and death. Is there any hope of surviving in a world like this? The author never complains or lectures—he simply states the facts and delivers a verdict.

Excerpt

Prologue

To gladly visit old acquaintances; to buy wine and a cake in a shop; to buy flowers in the street and then carrying lots of stuff, go there – to new places, new flats. I am not one to quickly forget about my benefactors, once they are no longer needed. I have a bright mind and a good memory, and I do not forget the good or the bad. Eh, I could go to my spiritual mentors; talking in clichés – return to Mecca, right this minute, when I still feel like a student even though my hair already has some greys.

They would not care about my past and I do not remind them of it. In fact, my essence has been stopped; it is me, trapped inside the mirrors, preserved on film, and only on a photo I still exist. Those who have not acquiesced with my stopped, forever frustrated face are my real friends.

I remember how I was extracted from the frozenness of a hard disk by the lens-master Lenais, using powerful optical devices. That is how I appeared at his flat, workshop. I had started moving and that was my only free route. I remember sitting with Lenais's wife and slowly sipping tea, picturing beautiful birds. The birds were black and white though.

However my life went on. Nothing was over. Only my wandering in the gutters was over.

It was in Lenais's flat with the black and white birds that I decided I was going to school. I will have to start my studies from the very beginning as I have fallen behind. Lenais, the optician will have to sponsor me. Therefore on a Friday he invited his closest friends and in their discussions my destiny was being decided. Among them there were family friends, doctor Salnis, and Mesins – a decrepit professor of jurisprudence, retired now; he gave me a stern look. I went into another room and awaited the verdict with a racing heart. The elders argued heatedly, I know, about me, but I could not distinguish the words.

Then they called for me. Mesins had stood up and was not looking at me; he was just staring out the window. Also those sitting at the table were not coming to shake my hand, just told me sharply I would have to go to school and that I should try to rather be the first in my studies and not mischief – I would not get another chance. Tears came into my eyes and I barely mumbled a thank-you; I remember at that moment the shade sliding into the room getting longer, alongside it was light, and now I had stepped out of that shadow.

The first forms at school were very hard – I was sitting like a lump with all the small kids.

Once even the desk gave in and broke. So I was given a special chair and had to drag it everywhere with me. I was "the pupil with the chair". I studied quickly; within a year I had reached college and my benefactors did not have to be ashamed.

College students were haughty. I did not fit in with them either. My previous life had been too rathe. However I passed the centralized tests with honours and continued my studies at a business school. I worked the nights. It was hard, but it was hardly the road of pain I had walked in the parallel worlds. I still saw everything in black and white. Because of the optical effects and illusions I had lost the ability to see the colours of life. Probably that is why I was a spare at the business school. I did not participate in their revelries. But I felt good.

Later it was work - work, work, work and very little contact. Suddenly everyone was so distant. It was a black and white office, black and white money and black and white entertainment. Nevertheless the elders at home were happy as I was able to repay my debt and to support them financially. Once following a big deal, a major success I wanted to throw the elders a party, but they had already passed away.

A Jinxed Neighbourhood

We lived under the entrance gate to the restaurant "Ararats". A spring was purling by, that is how they called drain water here that was running away filled with protein and other organics. If the wind came from the south, it brought the stench of old meat to our shelter. I got used to it quite quickly but my new protégé was suffering. At first he used to faint. On

those occasions I used the spring and with the water that stunk strongly of sperm, splashed his face, the aristocratic features of which had gradually started to fade.

The burned baby however did give us concern. There was no breast-feeder. We would have been able to find some whore but I turned out to be insolvent, thus soft squidgy tits were out of question. We kept feeding the kid with ice cream leftovers gone off so he got permanent diarrhoea. We stuffed a hose, a long hose up his bum and all the organic liquid ran through it until it reached the end that was dipped in the spring. So we lived hoping for better future. The little one was growing visibly. He didn't cry almost at all, just kept laughing which sounded like hiccups.

One night when both of my subordinates were asleep and the drunks were making noise at the nearby restaurant, I heard some smooching just like the sound of loud kissing. I recognized however that no one was secretly kissing here, the sound of kissing rather originated from movement of some unknown creature. I got tense. Just in case I was ready for a cat's leap. Even though I am not as strong as the ones older than me, I can cause damage with my teeth as I know how to bite correctly.

I learned how to bite through observing rat drones being finished off – because of this, a state of affairs came about from time to time between the rodents that I have written about frequently in my student years: this state of affairs is called the primitive Communism. Rat drones are different from other rats by having larger extremities. The drones do nothing but fertilize the primary rat mother, who is an insatiable beast, large like a German shepherd, and through every delivery she delivers countless dauphins and infantas, which survive

through natural selection. Frequently the numbers of drones got too high – then they were torn to shreds by the regular rat plebs and for a while stability was thus restored.

Also human studies don't differ much – majority of the society lives by the rules of rats. For long I kept watching intently how to bite correctly. And I learned. But this I am not going to teach to anyone, no wonder if the one I had taught it to would use it on me and someday I will be lying in a ditch with a bitten throat.

The creature was approaching but it wasn't within my territory yet. I saw a massive body lean down in the dark and I heard long quiet sobs. I became curious however should I crawl closer? It would be a poorly thought-through and a suicidal move. However I didn't let my guard down. It was getting light and the tension eased – there was no one in the place of the nightly visitor, just an old handbag with a missing handle. Its shiny clasp turned out to be broken. I had a look inside. I found a creased piece of paper with blurred drawings in chemical pencil – got my hands dirty. There were squares with some kind of signs. I could not read so I gave it to the kid. He was struggling for a long while until he mastered 'Sarmites street, Local Council square, Restaurant "Ararats".'

'That's the plan of this block! But why? Indeed, this affair isn't quite clean. Tonight I'll have to survey' surprised I said.

The baby in the ice cream box had already acquired an acceptable skin colour. No more ice-cream was left though – there was a glue-like stringy substance around instead. We had been massaging the baby daily to make sure he was going to make it.

I kept thinking about the plan I had found. Could it help to get some money? Then we could live it up a little, some money never hurts. So far we had none; we survive on old food

thrown out by the restaurant servants or from dead animals. We have constant stomach-ache - other than that we get by somehow; it is all right. Even nightmares do not disturb our sleep, just the suspicious situation at night.

The following night came gently. The dusk kept lingering in the air until it got completely dark and bitter. My guys were sleeping. I hid myself behind a pile of clinker to monitor a part of the inner yard and the ray of light stretching from the boiler room.

Somewhere in the street a matted lantern was glowing: if I focus my vision, maybe I will be able to see the unfamiliar entrant and assess.

The field of vision kept shrinking, my eyes felt gritty, eyelids seemed to weigh a ton, and thus I could not hold them up. A sweet wave passed through my body and I passed out. That was my biggest mistake – I feel asleep so deeply that nothing could wake me, not the barking of the dogs, not the distant departing trains. I was woken by a hard blow to my nape and I fell back into unconsciousness. I recovered hanging in the air, my neck and shoulders were squeezed, my torso was squashed by somebody as if in claws and I was hanging like a flying man, struggling helplessly with my arms and legs. Then I noticed the lights below and heard some noise. I realized that the street is far below and as soon as the unknown releases his grip I will fall, land on the cobblestones and die. I heard a hoarse laughter and a voice near me on the roof. It seemed it was addressing me:

'How does it feel puppy? You scared? Stop jerking so much or you'll kill yourself. After all, it's the seventh floor, the roof, the helm of all Creation.'

I could not see the speaker but I realized that I was not going to fall as the speaker needed something from me so I stopped struggling.

I was released. Now I was lying on my back on the sun-heated tin. I took a deep sigh trying to breathe calmly to prove to the unknown I was not scared of him.

'What is it puppy? Scared?!'

'No! I am not scared of death!' I hissed.

'Wow! Turns out we've got a philosopher here. Still small but has a head on his shoulders.'

'What do you want?'

'Not much. Just a little favour. Surely you have a feeling what sort?!'

'I know nothing. Let me be or throw me down, I don't care!'

'Oh, so you'd so much want to fly down there and become a bloody steak!? Yes, you'd like that! But I don't, I'm quite switched on as well and wouldn't want to lose my head as it's worth thousands.'

'I am tired of your twittering!'

'Shut it boy if you don't want to become a thicket whose brains are splattered around the asphalt. Respect the older and wiser! Unless you get eaten by rats you have a chance to experience a prosperous old age.'

'Who are you? A cop?'

'No, I haven't fallen that low yet. However I do have powers in this neighbourhood, I am the judge in these few streets; I have a Sheriff's star tattooed on my arse and I am unhappy, very unhappy that some son of a bitch has started operating in my block without asking my permission!'

'Is it me?'

'No. It's someone else whose guts I would love to splatter ripping his stomach open with my

hands. See, I've got nails like a tiger so I am capable of doing that.'

'I am not doubting that, but what's it got to do with me?'

'Hah! Go on, pretend not to know anything! Only thanks to me you are still alive!'

'I don't believe that...'

'Hah! You were hit on your nape and you passed out straight away; had I not caught you, your distinguished persona or simply, you little shit would have been hit some more. And then your highness or simply, piece of dead meat would be nibbled at by rats in the street.'

'Quiet! What's going on down there?'

Downstairs the concentrated light of a beacon was wondering from one side of the street to the other flashing and surrounding moths and smaller bugs with its bright light. The light was twitching nervously, desperately trying to find something, it seemed it could not. It lit up a wreck of a house with its two floors inhabited by junkies, then the neighbouring house, more like rubble, pothole-ridden street, small rat nests where the baby rats were squeaking and their mothers were running around worried, with their eyes shining. The light patch also lit up the barricades: useless furniture piled up in one place, where there were no fighters, three years have passed since the fighting. Something rumbled. A well built silhouette stood next to the light in the dark. The light disappeared and again it was dark all around. One could distinguish some voices:

'Did you find it?'

'No.'

'Let's go then!'

'No, they must be here, I swear I'll find them!'

'All right, you have two minutes.'

We went numb on the roof until the one next to me whispered into my ear:

'Don't move! It's cops. Looking for us. If they get us, we'll have to face the tribunal.'

'And what will the tribunal do?'

'Shush! Trial at the tribunal isn't long and also the judgment is short. Have you seen the gallows at the east wing?'

'Yes.'

'See, that's what's ahead if the coppers get us.'

After a click the light flared up again. It swiftly shot up and dazzled us creating an area of light around us.

'We've been spotted! Let's try to leave. Just listen to me and don't do anything foolish!'

I followed him. In the light I noticed that he was a common vagabond, I would not be able to distinguish him from the thousand of those wandering around our suburb. I had to work hard to catch up with him jumping around the rooftops and the sloped roofs – we had to run tilted and fast. We were surrounded by a dazzling space: from below there was the peeking coppers' beacon, but their amphibian was not as fast as their jeeps and that was saving us. Soon the first rounds were fired. They were aimed at random but we had to watch out for an odd one to get us and not to get hurt by ricochet.

The vagabond suddenly disappeared and I was falling in the dark. I could not see the beacon, bullets were no longer whistling past. I fell on top of something soft, it groaned and cursed:

'Bloody puppy! You run well, you just fall heavy even though you are just a boy. Get up quickly! Up! Don't moan about the bruises and try to crawl with me!'

I crawled gasping loudly; something was sharply scratching my knees. Light flared up at the top of the pit but we remained in the dark as the wave of light could not be cast into here. I tried crawling faster. The rubble and junk were hindering me but I did not fall behind; I just tried to catch my breath for a second and then continued. Gradually I was feeling proud as I felt that I will have escaped from all the impending danger, but then I got onto something tilted and slippery, so I slid down in the dark until I smashed into metal bars. They reverberated loudly and my feet went so numb from the blow that I couldn't quite move them for a while.

'Here, here, move this way, to the left, just watch out – there is a trap for rats; don't sit on it or you'll be seeing some stars!'

I carried on crawling, something glittered. Silverware, I thought to myself. It had a jagged edge. I carefully lumbered around it.

'Well done! Some day you'll make president if you do everything so carefully; caution is essential.'

I hugged my saviour, we stood up insecurely to our full height and I realized that we are under the loft in an abandoned, dilapidated flat where the rubble made walking very hard and my feet were going even number.

Then a squeak, I was startled and a ray of light appeared through a gap of a door someone had opened.

All the cogwheels halted in my head and it stopped my brain processing the ongoing situation; I waited not quite understanding what was happening. However it wasn't danger. It was more like a friendly gesture by an invisible stranger, and there was no alternative route for one to choose.

The gap of light became wider and I was shoved away from my mate in the dark into a room where light bulbs were flickering above my head. The door closed with a squeak. It seemed that I had escaped the claws of the police but now I had been captured by some others, whether they were predators – I didn't know – only time would show.

'Well, boy! We're home. Settle on the floor, take a nap or you'll look like a tearful chicken' one of the strangers said and pointed at a box full of stinking rags.

The box was my size – I thought I could have a nice sleep in it, but I had to be careful. I would have to sleep with one eye open and with one ear awake as well. I obeyed, lay down and pretended to be asleep. The strangers immediately started talking. The master of the house reminded me of some actor, I just cannot remember which one.

'Let's hold on for a while, the Cyclops will calm down, so will the cops, and then slowly and calmly we can check out the neighbourhood; but note – I said calmly. Hope you got it?'

'Yes, sir marmalade sergeant!'

'At ease! We'll leave the little one at peace for a while. Look, he's fast asleep.'

'Well it was some exercise for them small legs.'

'Yeah. Just keep your eyes open. We won't hold on like this for much longer. And if we relax, we'll instantly get stuck. I wonder how many people does the Cyclops have now?'

'Around three, maybe more; he is wearing a mask, maybe he has recruited some more

during this time.'

'Right. We've got half an hour. Let's sit, have a smoke, take the kid and drift to a safe spot.

Hear? Cops are rampaging around. They won't come in though, too many rat traps in here.'

'First we need to come up with a plan, a sketch to keep in mind. Second, we have to accept a possibility we might need to use the retreat route.'

'I doubt that. We can only move forward and we've got nothing to lose.'

'Quiet, there's some sort of steps coming from above us! What does that mean!'

'No idea. I am sensing it is a spy from the opposite block. Completely unknown like a thing to be denoted with an x.'

'The first unknown appeared three weeks ago, started extorting money from homeless children. The kids have got stuff to take, he could've survived on that even though not for long and not that well. But the kids started complaining and so we caught on to him. We didn't manage to catch him though. After there was more and more of these unknowns, a syndicate of some sort developed; it was organizing selling children into slavery, usually to wealthy buyers who feed the little ones to their dogs. For them it is considered good etiquette. It seems this sleeping kiddo may have seen them, might be able to recognize them. I saw them myself at night but it's the same thing as if one was looking into a dark well.'

'Yes, it's all getting complicated. It'd be nice if the cops weren't meddling, we could somehow find a thread to smoke them bastards out. But it won't work straight away. This nest of anarchy is getting thicker and more mottled so it's hard to do anything to them.'

'The steps went quiet.'

'Obviously waiting.'

'Clearly not one of ours.'

Suddenly there was a scream; something was breaking with a crack. Then it went quiet.

'He'll have run into the upstairs trap, it has pressure like a meat grinder. Did you hear the bones break! Spine broken into two, soul in hell with the Satan. Such a nosey bastard deserves it. Hey, wake up the kid! And let's get lost. It's no longer safe here.'

I received a hard flick on my head; I was being woken up through being taken by my scruff and put so that I was in a position to run straight away. I kicked back and rushed ahead stumbling over all kinds of invisible hurdles. The other two followed me at the same pace. They knew the way so they could navigate through the porous stomach of the night mother, where the world of darkness rules all around.

I would not say it all went smoothly as I sensed that many more than two were running behind me. Possibly it was not the cops but I could not show any anxiety, just move my numb feet as quickly as possible. Finally I got ahead of them. I left them behind until I heard loud bangs. Someone howled and then that was it – silence. I stopped, looked back. Did not see a thing but something was there.

I had a feeling that my saviour and "marmalade sergeant" with broken bones could be added to the nation of the dead. Someone had killed them and nothing would be left of them by the morning as there was a thick swarm of rodents here. I heard slurping. It was nearing me, I wanted to escape, but got caught up, was thrown a net over and dragged God knows where. I heard saliva and rustling of lips – have I really been planned for someone's dinner at this late hour?

The last cannibals in our neighbourhood were shot out by police three years ago. Have they reappeared? In this world there already were very few cannibals, I was more frightened by faces and pain not the notion "cannibalism", that was written on the walls with a capital letter by some deranged retired colonel, muddling five big exclamation marks at the end. It meant nothing to me, just a similarity with the animal world, from which people of the barracks had not departed too far; they were only richer than the animals as they owned alcohol and drugs and some - a five inch revolver the bullets of which to squash the heads of their unloved ones with.

Cannibals were still operating at the time when the slave market had not commenced. They sought out lonely pedestrians. And their victims had had it. Later it turned out they were not hunting on their own; a whole gang was operating, in some areas more and more people kept disappearing. The cannibals were elusive and their union was so strong that it started threatening areas of wealthier residents. Once however, a cannibal had left a poorly gnawed hip carelessly behind. Following the footsteps cops caught the wild creatures in their den and shot them without a trial or a jury like dogs. Then peace was established; people were only eaten by rats and even then only if they were so crippled they could not defend themselves or if the person had become carrion.

My reflection was interrupted by a stick the sharpened end of which was poking me through the net; it was stabbing my side, it hurt, I bit my teeth but could not scream – there was such a ball of saliva and blood in my throat that I could not swallow it or spit it out. I heard voices:

'He's wriggling, the little snake!'

Jānis Einfelds "Palaidnis" [The Rascal]

Excerpt

Translated by Lauris Vanags

'You wonder, the net isn't quite a private villa.'

'Listen, let's quit for today. It's morning soon.'

'How many do we have in our account today?'

'This is the third. The oldest one of the merchandise. We won't be getting much for the previous two. One's really thin, the other still asking for the tit.'

'Can you carry him?'

'With the whole net? No. Plus he'll hardly be calm, he'll be kicking. Let's rather drag.'

One sighed. And then I started sliding, my back got hit against whatever was in the way.