

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 structure of Jānis Einfelds's collection of short fiction, *The Man Who Sold Pornographic Pictures*, is based on three men telling stories about their erotic adventures. All together, there are 16 accounts of strange, traumatic, and sad sexual encounters. The author has said the stories are based on the "lewd" Latvian *dainas* (folk songs). Einfelds's characteristically heightened narrative style is clearly present here, and shows something in common with the language of myth and folklore, though the stories unmistakably take place in modern times.

Excerpt

Naitis, the Cigarette Man

Naitis woke up late. He had a terrible headache. He smoked a cigarette. Then he made his way to the kitchen. There were newspaper clippings on the partition. Naitis knew them from heart. In the kitchen, the stove was making a racket. Naitis took a sip. The tea was weak. Hosanna was echoing in his mind.

"There's a strange, old gramophone stuck in my head. I'm afflicted by odd melodies and thoughts! I'm an old cigarette, my arms and legs, and trunk are cigarettes. My head is a cigarette filter, but my heart is a yellowed cigarette butt. It's old and smoked out. Just like my life!"

These weren't even his own thoughts, his lost character slid by. His thoughts were ruled by his overseers.

Naitis slowly sipped his tea and looked out the window. But the only thing outside was old advertisement posters. Naitis downed the last of the swill and went back inside. He smoked another cigarette.

"My heart isn't a burned out husk just yet!" Naitis thought to himself.

His heart was pounding as he looked at the photographs of his daughter. She had been just seven years old when the wheels of the freight train dashed her to pieces while she was looking for bits of amber in between the rails. In the photo she is wearing a kerchief and her face is illuminated by brilliant, unseen lantern. The photo had torn on one side and the tear had split her in two.

"Ceaseless seeker! I hope you get all that heaven offers!" Naitis said to the little shabbily-dressed girl in the photo speckled with fly droppings.

The bell rang. Naitis dragged himself awkwardly over to the door. Stiffly with stiff steps. An agile man with a moustache straight as a ruler squeezed into the space made by the open door. He introduced himself:

"Aleksandrs Lorencevs! I'm an agent! We're looking to hire!"

Naitis didn't say a word and the visitor kept talking:

"So," he opened up a folder, "let's begin. How do you feel about working in coal theft?"

"I can't." Naitis answered.

"At the radio factory as a loudspeaker?"

"No."

"A labourer at the bureau of nightmarish visions?"

"I just don't have the energy." Naitis said barely able to force out the words.

"OK. OK. Fine, let's be serious. I know a place that pays well with almost no hard work at all!"

"I'm listening."

"Not a word about it to anybody!" The agent wrote something down on a small piece of paper. "Here! Go to the market. Look for a man off on the side behind the cobbler's shack! Give him this slip of paper and he'll know what to do! Good luck!" and with that the agent left.

Naitis stood in the doorway holding the slip of paper. The old clock struck twelve and Naitis put on his boots and jacket.

His path took him past the paint factory and quarry. The people there were drunk and aggressive. They were also the ones that Naitis avoided the most. Further on, his path wound along the railway embankment. It reeked of fuel oil, it was rattling, and Naitis jumped down off the embankment. A minute later a freight locomotive followed by countless cars roared past and his head filled with working-man's music.

After walking for an hour, Naitis got to the centre. There were grey barracks, stray dogs, and people with untrustworthy faces. The wind battered around bits of paper down the traffic lanes.

The market was full of people and flies. Naitis took care of everything easily. He grabbed the packages and stepped off to the side of the market.

"So you get what you have to do. Sell as many as you can, stay out of sight of the epaulets, and three percent is yours... yours... yours!" the director's words rang in his ears.

And so Naitis started to work. He'd become a pornographic picture seller and among the children he was a much anticipated visitor. It was this forbidden fruit that let them discover – before they had grown up – what it meant to be impatient. When they looked at the black and white images, some of the boys would choke with laughter, while the girls would look down and whisper to their dolls as they clutched them tighter to their chests. Sometimes they would squint and thank him, and then press an apple or a piece of candy – melted by the warmth of their hands – into Naitis's palm. Naitis said that cigarettes were a better gift and that they could steal them from their parents; he also promised a better selection of pictures.

At first he didn't have much luck, but in time he became skilled at his work. Trains, markets, and dormitories were his showrooms. The pictures sold easily. He had the whole world in his hands. The children loved their favourite heroes most of all – old friends like Donald, the wolf, and hamsters with a giant tail in the front shaped like an axe. They would laugh even more if this foreign object was larger than its owner. The piglets and mice grinned like mad, and sometimes they would have two heads that would move from top

downward. This could just be viewed unambiguously, because at that time the only thing that really mattered was playing.

There were also pictures that older children looked at, which were blurry photographs that sometimes would overwhelm the admirer's inner world, sometimes causing it to boil over into a feverish frenzy. The faces of the people in the photos disappeared, they filled with black dots, swelled, and left an impression that would vanish. There were many moves that showed off the nether half where muscles get steep and stiff. These were a reminder – everything will pass, fall apart and rot in a waste bin, health failed, the notion of motherhood broke down, those breasts won't give sustenance anymore, a partner will rob them of their milk, a triggered nerve, an entire sea of abstract, shifting drives and motivations would just become a small steaming pile. Only the pictures would survive, the playing cards that revealed a naked kingdom would survive. Though over time they will get boring left to the harsh mercies of the viewer's pitiless gaze, as they cease to reveal new faces and facets. Naitis came up with ways to increase demand – not because of life experience, but with a flight of fancy that groans from pain as it pulls a heavy body aloft. There could be an Earth covered in vast expanses and an immense stone pillar could be placed there, which would poke at the clouds. But then Naitis slumped again, because there was no way to capture something like that in such a small picture. The Earth would become nothing but a speck and the pillar wouldn't be longer than a cigarette, and no woman is interested in a little thing like that. And so Naitis batted away his mental meanderings.

Later on his thoughts drifted to a woman. A person could dive into her like an ocean and launch a bathyscaphe into her depths. It would slide in, humming like a wax candle, and

show things through its portholes that mortals, and even the woman-ocean, had never seen. He could make money off of these shells and quickly forget about them later. As time went on, Naitis's views changed: at first he couldn't take his eyes off the pictures, later they were pushed out by kiosks selling colourful magazines, and eventually looking at the pictures became boring. It was just work, work, and work again.

Naitis didn't go to church, because he felt like his hands were unclean.

After work Naitis went down to the boat dock on the canal where he usually watched the sun set. He was scared of encountering any ambitious citizens and found a leaky boat, fell to his knees in front of it, and began muttering holy hymns. He saw the blood of Christ in the sunset. The Son had paid with that blood. Also for him. The leaky boat was Naitis's beloved, little chapel. He befriended the owner of a flat head who was always milling about on the boat dock. The little man's name was Henriks. Henriks was a night watchman and carpenter. If a boat was missing a screw, Henriks was the one to fix it.

Henriks also said that when the canal's water turned red it looked like blood – the hottest kind and the sort filled with the most absolution. But other times it seemed to Naitis like the red water was the menstrual fluid of some giant vampiress (who had been tormenting the town).

And night turned to day. And again there were the nudes, coins, and delighted children. Naitis grew apathetic and longed for each evening.

Troubles spare no one. They also didn't pass Naitis by. When he was reaching out for a daisy to pin to his rumpled coat, a car came to a halt at his feet. The order-keepers – distinguished from others by their epaulettes – put Naitis behind bars. At the precinct where

cockades rushed by and beneath them – heads – small lights buzzed in their sockets, an epaulette, a mild velvet epaulette, screamed in Naitis's face and afterward wrote down the facts Naitis shared with him in a report. He was released before midnight when chained-up neighbourhood dogs bark at each other. Naitis brushed off the footprints covering his legs with their dust. His trousers were filthy.

"I guess I'm filthy too, but I'll mend my ways!" Naitis whispered into the fragile night and didn't forget what had happened to him for a long time afterward.

The next morning something was lipping around the corner, it had crawled into that machine over there, it was the disgruntled money changer who was lipping. He strained the cream off Naitis's thin hair, banished the bags from underneath Naitis's eyes, and vowed vengeance in the days to come.

One day Naitis was organising his pictures and froze. Among the nudes and debased depictions there was a photograph of his dead daughter. Naitis thought the pathways of his brain would explode.

He walked down the street while grandmothers warbled in trembling voices:

"There he goes, that den of vice! That naked picture scoundrel!"

At the boat dock he prayed to God, but their hatred overwhelmed the Creator Himself.

"What's wrong with you?" Henriks asked. "Come on, have a sit! Have a smoke! Let's have a chat!"

Naitis borrowed Henriks' hammer, told him he had a nail to drive into the wall.

During the night Naitis was racked with a fever, he could see the future and it wasn't good.

The next morning, he grabbed the hammer, some cigarettes, and headed to the market.

"I'll get those scoundrels!" Naitis swung the hammer around menacingly. "I'll smash their bones, shred their spines, spring a leak in their skulls!"

His hatred began to bubble through the entire market. The booths looked tiny to him. It seemed like they were kneeling at his feet and any moment now he would trample them. But that's only the way it seemed to him, because in his rage Naitis broke off the end of his shoe and had to limp the rest of the way.

"No, I'll find that cross-eyed, blasted money changer, I'll spit in his face and drive the hammer into his little son's head, so it splatters like a meatball, so those scoundrels die before their time. No, I thought of something better, I'll climb up onto the roof and drop this hammer on them from above, then my enemies will burst like liqueur chocolates! Hail the hammer, the just executioner!" Naitis shook his sun-scorched head.

Scrambling over the cornices, Naitis became even crazier. Reaching the roof of the meat pavilion, the little man's madness flared up reaching its apex. Suddenly, he forgot about one wrongdoer and found a different offender.

"Cigarettes! Obviously, it's cigarettes!" Naitis relaxed.

"You rotten, thin, little tubes! You're the reason I got this disgusting job, it was just so I could buy you, honour you, suck your supple smoke, muck up the air, pamper you like a capricious young woman. And? All you did was chew up my lungs, shrank my chest down

like a rod. Ah, so you're crawling back again here already? Well, let's see which one of us is stronger!" Naitis babbled on, his fingers outstretched, his yellow nails were probably the damned slender centres of the filters.

"Don't slither like a snake!" Naitis screamed. He started to pound them like a deranged blacksmith clanging away in his shop.

"I'll suffer this pain, just so I can destroy you!"

Brown fluid oozed from his shattered fingers and dripped down. After they had dried, his fingers shrivelled and bent at an angle.

"Bend, bend! Nobody will ever be able to smoke you! You'll rot in your own juices, and stay out of my sight, I'm warning you, I'll really lose it, and then you better watch it!"

Naitis looked down, the goods being sold at the market were being smothered, a whole horde of nudes was rising up. They were doing whatever they pleased. Lying on the ground, engaging in physical acts, acting out entire vignettes to prove the divinity of flesh – all of it so that the flour sacks would be sanctified, so they would grow heavy enough to stay sunken in the depths. The nudes were doing tricks that the images hadn't even dreamed of and Naitis didn't have a powerful enough imagination to comprehend any of it.

"Cover yourselves!" Naitis bellowed as he stripped and cast away his clothes, which fluttered down like sweaty parachutes through the stale air and came to rest in the dusty street.

"Get dressed! Tonight I'm inviting you to a ball where we'll speak, because only with nudes will we glimpse the future. Theirs is the glory of the world!" the little man howled, stood up naked, and began to conduct a ceremonial march with the hammer.

Something heavy came to rest on the roof, the sound of footsteps behind him. Naitis looked back and shrank. This was unexpected, unforeseen – he could see white foul-stinking tubes, extending to their full height, pushing their honour up to a certain height, shaking their fists, which were also tubes, their angry faces were tubes, too. Naitis had never seen cigarettes as angry as these. The cigarette squadron parted revealing their glorious champion who had triumphal tobacco leaves winding around his head. He shrieked:

"Don't you remember Colonel Cigarrón?"

"I remember you, how could I forget you, Your Grace!"

"You betrayed the cigarettes?! Was it worth it? Did it make you feel better? But you'll pay dearly for that, you miserable snot-encrusted lung!" Cigarrón drove a spear into Naitis's neck. Pain.

Naitis fell to his knees, but the slender, amorphous figures rushed off trampling Naitis into the dust. Wet. Naitis felt his neck, but it wasn't blood, it was tears that had trickled down his neck. It became harder to breathe and feel connected to life, because the heart and lungs of this pitiful waste refused to serve him anymore. The back of Naitis's sun-warmed head shined like an enamel bowl. And as this little man on the roof began to be reborn and chill to his temptations, a car with a red cross came to a stop below.