

Biography: Andris Kuprišs (1982) is a Latvian writer and translator. He studied journalism at the University of Latvia and obtained an MA in Photography from Goldsmiths University of London. In 2019 he published his first book, a collection of stories titled *Berlin*. Kuprišs’ essays and prose have been published in *Rīgas Laiks*, *Veto Magazine*, *Domuzīme*, *Punctum*, and *Satori* magazines, among others.

Synopsis: *Berlin* is a collection of 21 prose pieces and one short novella. Although the stories are not intentionally linked, they follow a vague narrative that seems to promise a resolution in the novella at the end of the book, the titular *Berlin*. Or, each story is yet another attempt to penetrate, from a different place and time, the city where the protagonist finds himself, stranded seemingly without a purpose. Berlin is a place where you really want to be, but find it almost impossibly difficult to get to, and when you finally do find yourself there, you learn that to escape this place is even harder than it was to arrive, no matter how much you wish to leave it. Something has happened—we’re not sure what, and neither do any of the protagonists.

Excerpt

Wet ice

“Did you take the child to work with you? Couldn’t get a sitter?” Tanya, mum’s colleague, smiled as she spoke. She was around sixty, a nice lady, but sometimes she got on my nerves.

“And that beard doesn’t suit you,” she continued, still smiling. I was smiling too and felt mildly annoyed. Mum was standing in the doorway of the neighbouring office and was

also smiling. We were all smiling, but each for our own reasons. Tanya, because she thought her joke was funny, me – hiding my annoyance, but mum was smiling, as if she was saying: *don't be angry at her, son!*

Even though I had already been sitting at one of the desks for twenty minutes, mum had not come out of the other office even once. I knew I had arrived a bit ahead of time, it was not midnight yet, but my shift had ended early. Mum and Tanya still had to clean two more offices, and so I decided to help. Mum had been working here for four years, which I knew, because I was the one who had found her this job. One evening an acquaintance had come to see me (I was at work late that night) and asked if mum was looking for work. I answered that she was and had been looking for a long time. My acquaintance gave me his phone number, we each had a glass of calvados, and he told me how work was moving along on his big project. This project truly was big, which I understood, because I knew that I could never handle a project like that even though I had worked on larger projects. This project, though, was so big that only a person like him could complete it. Maybe I even felt a little jealous of him, but instead I preferred to think that I just really knew what we both were like.

That night I called the number my acquaintance had given me. A man's voice picked up on the other end.

"How old is she?" the voice asked.

"Sixty-four."

"Has it been long already?"

"Soon it'll be ten years."

"OK, let's give it a try. Tell her to come by Wednesday at eight. Then we'll see."

"Thank you," I said.

"For good reason," the man's voice said.

Tanya left when I started mopping the floor. It was just the two of us. Mum still had not come out of the other office; its door was shut. The room was completely silent. The only sound was the light drone coming from the ventilation duct and splashing when I wrung out the cloudy, soapy water from the mop into the bucket. If I had not known that mum was nearby, I might have thought I was here alone. I was surprised by the silence, because it was so unusual for this type of situation. And anyhow, mum would typically talk quite a bit and often tell me about her day at work and her colleagues.

"But soon it will be four years since you started working here, remember? Time flies, right?" I said and regretted it straight away. What time? Why the hell did I even say anything like that? That was something mum would say. She often talked about how quickly time would pass and that sounded acceptable from her just like from any pensioner, but from me? Why did I say that? Was this oppressive silence making me talk like that? I stopped mopping and listened. Just the same drone from the ventilation. I decided to try again:

"I'm doing fine. I've got a lot of work, but that's good. It's good when there's a lot of work." I wanted to keep talking, but did not know what to say. That is, I did know, I had a lot to talk about after all – as was usually the case – but when I had the chance to tell her something, I often felt too tired or impatient, or everything I wanted to talk about suddenly seemed devoid of purpose, it felt empty and dull. Just an hour ago, though, I had at least two things I had wanted to share with her. I pulled myself together and continued.

"Just one more year and you'll be able to apply for benefits. Well, it's not that it's so important, but still, a bit more money. And everything is going well for me; there's work. I even managed to save a bit, can you believe it? Dad would be proud."

I finished mopping the floor and carried the bucket of dirty water over to the toilet. When I came back, mum was standing by the window looking down. It was dark outside, so all she could see was her own reflection in the yellowish light of the hundred-watt bulb. When I came in, she pulled the hood of her coat over her head without saying a word.

"Should we go?" I asked.

It was night already, but there were still a lot of people out on the street. The cold had retreated a few days ago, there was only a bit of snow left, and all of that had already managed to turn into a wet slurry. We walked down the main street in silence. Everything that I could say tonight I had already said, but mum apparently did not intend to speak at all today. I put my hands into my pockets to find my gloves. I found one in the first pocket; I put it on. Then I shoved my other hand into the other pocket and found two more gloves. Also leather, also grey. One glove was the same as the first one, the other was almost the same, but with a different pattern. I looked at all three gloves and could not understand why there were three of them. Who did the third one belong to? People lose gloves in pairs, they don't hide just one in somebody's pocket. I tried to remember from whom I might have casually borrowed one glove. I walked and thought about gloves and the people I had met that day. An older gentleman had come to see me in the morning. He had wanted to know how the work was coming along on his project. As he was leaving he turned before reaching the door and, trying to seem casual, asked:

"How old are you, young man?"

"Thirty-one," I answered. "Why?"

I understood from his facial expression what he was thinking.

"Good day," he said and walked out.

I could not remember if he was wearing gloves.

I stopped at the traffic light and waited for it to turn green, but it was red and stayed red for too long, and while I was waiting, suddenly I got cold, I also began to feel a surge of dislike, annoyance, and fatigue. I wanted to get home as soon as I could and go to sleep. I turned to see where mum was but did not find her. I forgot about the gloves as I tried to see where she had gone off to, but only saw unfamiliar faces. I turned and looked ahead, thinking that maybe I had not noticed her crossing the street, but she was not waiting on the other side. I even began to doubt whether mum had even been with me, whether the two of us had left work together or if she had stayed behind. It came down to me even questioning whether I had gone to see her at work at all. Though this feeling only lasted for a moment, it felt very unpleasant. I remembered how a girl had once accused me of trying to force myself on her. She said that one night last spring, I was drunk and had made a pass at her. Her accusation reached me by word of mouth. I was at a loss. Me? Force myself on her? When? In May? On the tenth? What was I doing on the night of May the tenth? I remembered being at home watching hockey. Yes, that night there was a good game, we won. There was no chance I could have forced myself on anybody! Clearly, it was all a misunderstanding. No? She says it was definitely me? Why would she say that? But maybe it's true? There's so much I don't remember, after all. Maybe I'd forgotten it? Well, no, it

just can't be. I was at home. Hockey, four–one, we won. We advanced to the next level.

I felt the same way now standing at this intersection. I thought about it for three more seconds, to be absolutely sure that just a few minutes ago mum had been with me, but now she was gone, and I could not understand where she had disappeared to. I walked back about twenty metres and stopped at a twenty-four-hour shop. Someone walked out, slipped, and almost fell.

I walked into the warm, bright store. A long aisle opened up before me between the shelves. The shopkeeper was polishing the beige-coloured tiles with soapy muddy water. I watched her diligently doing her work. I hoped she would give me a sign showing me where to find mum, but she kept her head down and went on rubbing the floor with a rag. I squeezed between her and the shelf and kept walking.

I found mum sitting on a banana box in the farthest corner of the shop. I was surprised that even though there were other people in the shop, no one had paid any attention to the woman in a coat sitting on a banana box. I stood in front of her. I thought I heard mum sniffing, but then I realised it was just the sound of the shopkeeper's rag getting closer to us. I leaned down. Mum lifted her head and looked up at me. I was amazed by my own actions or, more precisely, by their absence. Instead of being bewildered and asking questions in a loud voice, such as: "What the hell, mum? Where did you disappear to? Why are you sitting here in the middle of the store on a banana box?" – I just leaned down and with uncharacteristic calm asked mum what happened. Actually, I did not even ask, I just thought how much I wanted to know, but as many other times before, I did not say a word.

I remembered dad. When he was in the hospital, back when he no longer could

understand anything that was happening around him, I was sitting with him in his room, and – just like now – was silent. At that moment it seemed like everything I could have told him, I had already said – about hockey and how I was planning a trip with my friends for a few days. Dad was sleeping with his face turned toward the wall, but I just stayed silent. I had never felt the need to speak if there was no particular reason for it. Even when I was at university, after classes when I would sit with my classmates at the bar, I was often annoyed by the question: *Hey, Kupriš, why are you so quiet all the time?* I couldn't stand it! But now I was sitting with my father as he lay in bed and I had the feeling that not only did I need to say something, but that I wanted to open my mouth and have something important drop out of it – on its own, without me having to force it. I wanted to assign meaning to this moment, because it felt like meaning was the first thing to go. It disappeared like a person waving to you from the shore. You see him from the deck of the ship, you see how he's waving, but a moment later he's not waving anymore, and a moment after that, he's not there at all.

So, I decided not to stretch it out needlessly, I leaned over him, and with a great deal of effort forced myself to say it.

I must have hit a spot I was not even aiming for, because dad lurched, quickly turned toward me, and started to scream with desperation: "Yes, yes, yes, just like that!" It was as if I had woken him up with my banal and tortured phrase.

The shopkeeper and her rag had reached the spot where we were sitting.

"To tell you truth, I'm hungry," I said. "What about you?"

"Don't be angry with me, mum!" I added. "Come on, let's go! There's a little place

just around the corner. I think it'll still be open. We can chat and have a bite to eat there."

We got up and started moving toward the exit. When we reached the door, I heard the shopkeeper's voice behind me:

"Careful, the step is slippery!"

We left the store, I took mum by the arm, and we carefully slid over the wet asphalt in the direction of the restaurant.