

Biography: Writer and journalist Arno Jundze (1965) was born in the Latvian town of Jaunpiebalga. He graduated from the Faculty of Education and has a PhD in philology. He has worked in Latvian television for over 10 years, directing various programs dedicated to culture and literature. Arno Jundze is an editor of the cultural news section for one of the biggest newspapers in Latvia, and helps in shaping the country's most important art and literary forums and outlets. He was a member of the council at the State Culture Capital Foundation and chairman of the board of its literature department from 2010-2012. Jundze has received numerous prizes for both his literary work and his work in television. He has also published several children's books.

Synopsis: This is a story about a naive young man who dreams of a romantic future and an open door to endless possibilities. Instead, he ends up in Afghanistan in the hellscape of war, where he is forced to do almost anything to salvage any semblance of a future. In this future, however, it will be easier to kill than to love. A Lutheran minister and Gulag survivor serves only God, because the villagers often avoid even saying hello to him. A talented researcher at the turn of the millennium dreams about a career in science, but in order to support his family, he ends up selling tractors. A once famous journalist, now an addict, is excited about getting the scoop of his career without realizing that he is being played by the secret service. There are echoes from witch trials, death and love in Paris, a walk into the realm of silence, and fragments of overheard phone conversations, secretly copied letters and text messages that the reader must put together like pieces of a puzzle. *Dust in the Hourglass* was shortlisted for the 2014 Annual Latvian Literature Award.

Excerpt

NOVEMBER. WITHERED FAMILY TREES AND RIPPED BIBLES.

THE 70th of the 20th CENTURY

An unpleasant Saturday evening. The Pastor is finally back home, warm. The stove is burning, the fire is crackling and the long day spent at the cemetery is already gradually withdrawing into the past. This time, it had been the turn to bury Anna Dzelzkalns. He hadn't known the woman particularly well. She hadn't been a keen church goer, since Dzelzkalni lay almost fifteen kilometres from the House of God. Could an elderly person cover such an enormous distance? There is no bus service and Anna had been widowed in the Second World War, so there was no husband to take her there. Over recent years her legs had been hurting and even the short walk to the nearby shop caused her trouble, for which reason she sometimes went without fresh bread or sugar.

Nevertheless, he remembers Anna's cordial voice and cheerful character. She radiated some kind of invisible light in spite of the hard life she never complained about. Anna Dzelzkalns was the last in the once strong and prominent family of their countryside, one which had generated the village heads as well as policemen and a well known *Saeima* deputy of the first independent state of Latvia – a lawyer named Miervaldis Dzelzkalns. Anna had time to tell him this much during those rare occasions when she asked him to visit her in Delzkalni.

-Pastor, I know, it's a sin not to come to Church, but what can I do with these old legs that refuse to do as they're told? Maybe you could come to visit me? Or should I become a complete pagan - she had pleaded with him in an unusually quiet and submissive tone, so uncharacteristic of her usual self.

Of course, a Pastor goes where the name of God and his help are needed. Even when his own legs hurt. He sees that Dzelzkalni is a substantial old farmhouse, built from split granite blocks and unharmed even after the long communist reign and the dubious maintenance methods of *kolkhoz* times. The first times they meet the house is still well kept since Anna doesn't live there alone but with her cousins, Alvine and Elisabeth. But time has a way of taking its toll. The taciturn Elisabeth is the first to be called to the burial mound, followed by Alvine in the shape of a fading figure in which even the faintest glimmer of her former renowned beauty is difficult to detect. Now it's Anna's turn, and the great house will now stand empty. Alvine and Elisabeth, both daughters of a rich merchant, were outsiders in Dzelzkalni. After the war they took refuge there, arriving from Riga (as they themselves reported, laughing) to escape the Russian grasshoppers and deportation. Siberia just went straight over their three heads. All because Anna, apparently, was born under a lucky star. Despite the fact that, in the words of the Communists, she belonged to a family of true bourgeois and masters, Anna's husband, a railway guard at the beginning of the war, was taken to Soviet Russia and ended up at the frontline where he fell, "at the lines of the Soviet army, the death of a hero", as the notice later read somewhere near Kursk. This tragic piece of paper, yellow with age, that Anna had received in early 1946 and which, at first, she had planned to burn in the fire, had saved her life as well as those of her cousins on numerous occasions. Although to her, another scrap of paper actually meant a lot more. The one that she kept in a locket close to her chest and never showed anyone. But she did show it to him, taking pains to ensure that she would have it with her when the last hour came. Today, the locket was put in the coffin with Anna. There is a small note – the last she received from her

husband. Her neighbour's young son had found it on the side of the road and had brought it to her.

Dear, sweet Annie, those Communists have gone completely mad with fear. They pulled a gun on me, screaming they would shoot me and made me climb in the cargo box of the truck, so we are off to Pleskava. But don't worry in the least, I will find a way to slip out of their grasp. I love you, Your Edward.

He didn't, however...

Anna's memories of the times of independent Latvian are light and full of quiet pride – here there was a substantial house with a big shed housing twenty dairy cows, each with a golden ring in its ear, vast rye fields, a well-stocked kitchen garden, and yet she doesn't talk willingly about the days after the war. It seems to the Pastor that Anna is stopping herself from speaking her true mind, - the fact that this bloody time brought nothing but devastation, filth, disorder and total collapse to Latvia.

In this sense, they understand each other with no more than a single word. Anna, of course, knows that he has come back from Siberia. He, in turn, understands what Anna would like to say. But time has taken its toll. They have both been beaten by life and have learnt enough to know that there is no point saying things which may reach unwanted ears. As to the present situation, they agree without speaking – they both abhor the Communist regime.

From the white-haired woman he learns just the facts: how the powerful family of Dzelzskalni which in the not so distant past, in the times of Ulmanis, had bloomed and flourished, has now started to dry out as if its roots had been cut. The men of the family

were scattered all over. Some of them lost in Siberia, others at the front during World War Two. It seems her youngest brother, Juritis, got away unscathed and after the war ended up in Australia, but she has no news from him. Here, in the nearby vicinity, many silently correspond with relatives forced to emigrate after the Second World War. Some now live in Canada, some in the USA, others in the nearby Federal Republic of Germany or over the sea in Sweden. From these places the local post office gets bluish envelopes, decorated with red squares down the sides and beautiful stamps. Nothing like the pale ones with "*pochta SSSR*" on them that are too embarrassing even to send to friends here, on the other side of Latvia. All the same, nobody has heard anything of Anna's brother. The Pastor has even tried making enquiries about Juris Dzelzskalns via church channels and through the Red Cross, but all in vain. Disappeared, as if the earth had swallowed him. Anna herself thinks that he may have fallen sick and died somewhere far away where he was quickly buried. There are plenty of similar sad tales of the fate of family members in many twentieth century Latvian families.

The women of the Dzelzskalni family who survived the Second World War and the turmoil of the regime bore no children under Soviet rule. Who knows why they were of such a barren nature. Maybe the Dzelzskalni seed didn't really want to germinate in captivity and generate slaves for the Party silently hated by the Dzelzskalni women. Although that wasn't Anna's case, as she had been widowed and later hadn't let other men close, - so that much was clear. But neither of her married sisters, neither of her cousins nor any other relatives had any children. It wouldn't appear to be the result of poor genetic inheritance either,

since during the times of independent Latvia, the Dzelzkalni family has been blessed with children.

After the funeral ceremony and the traditional memorial meal, the Pastor is called upon by a woman he has never noticed before, and a bundle is pressed into his hands.

- Dear Pastor, Anna asked me to give you this! Take it, or I will have no peace on this earth!

Now, after coming home, he puts the bundle on his huge, brown-panelled, chipped desk.

The cord is tied so tightly that it is impossible to undo. He takes the scissors and cuts the stubborn knot. In the bundle, wrapped with great care, is the Dzelzkalni family Bible. It is not the first time that, during a funeral, the Pastor has been given the Bible or the Song Book of the deceased as a last wish since nowadays it is no longer the custom to hand down the sacred texts within the family. This is easy to understand as the Soviet government has created around the words "God" and "faith" the same atmosphere as once surrounded the "plague". Why cause anyone additional trouble?

The room is filled with the unmistakable, unique fragrance of the Bible. Maybe some would call it a smell, but not him. It is an ornate edition from the early eighteenth century, bound in a leather cover, decorated with a silver cross, printed in St Petersburg. Most likely it was rebound in some Latvian shop. The pages of the book have turned quite brown with age. The book, that was once kept in the main family room, has absorbed all that went on in the wealthy Dzelzkalni manor house over more than a hundred years. It bares the timorous touch of hands, rough from hard work, belonging to several generations, the fragrance of the food cooked in Dzelzkalni, the acrid smell of smoke and tang of soot absorbed at the end of the nineteenth century when, on a cold February night, the big tiled stove of the

Dzelzskalni family room exploded. One can detect something of the scent of the girls and the bouquet of soap, the eau-de- cologne used by men after shaving, the pungent smoke of the pipe owned by Otomars Dzelzskalns, boot polish and cartwheel grease, those smells which today are forgotten even by elderly folk well into their eighties. Between the pages of the Bible someone has preserved a small jasmine flower on a slender stem with two leaves, some blue violets, a snowdrop and a bright maple leaf. The pressed flowers have turned fragile – about to crumble at the slightest touch. Who knows now how many decades ago Made of Dzelzskalni placed, between the pages of the Gospel of Matthew, three rose petals taken from the flower her timid fiancée Wilhelm, who adored his beautiful Made his whole life, had given her.

There are several photos between the pages of the Bible. The portraits show serious men with strong shoulders and big hands, as well as cheeky young ladies doing their best to look like grand dames in front of the camera. And a fragile girl with a parasol over her head and a beautiful, clear look in her eyes, seemingly coming from another world. Nowadays, girls with glances like these become famous film actresses. There is also a family picture taken in the Dzelzskalni garden. On its reverse there is an inscription: *In the year of Our Lord 1913 Mertc.* The final page of the Bible holds a real miracle. Usually, when he is handed copies of the Bible, the final pages have been torn out. The reason being that, in earlier times, publishers used to leave a few blank pages where the owner of the Bible could record his family chronicle. Admittedly, during his lifetime he has witnessed a whole host of miracles, an example of which might be the heartbreaking inscription: *I lost five hundred roubles and the horse and carriage to Mikelis Zemitis at cards. God be with me!*

These pages are usually ripped out because the living are often scared of keeping the Bible inherited from their grandmothers, but they want to hold onto the family chronicle. The Dzelzskalni family is apparently not to continue, however. What is more, the funeral was attended by no more than the last remaining neighbours and a few acquaintances from the times of independent Latvia from the surrounding area. Despite this, the Dzelzskalni family Bible contained the most important family events, all carefully noted down in four different hands. The last inscription dating from 28th June, 1941, testifies: *Today the escaping communist servants Gatis Zutis and Juris Dakstins shot Jazeps Dzelzskalns (born 1907). God above, when will this nightmare end?* The Pastor has no way of knowing that, in twenty years' time when Latvia is reinstated with independence, the grandson of Juris Dakstins will privatize the Dzelzskalni land, but will have no luck with his farming. The crops will not grow, the potato leaves will have blight. And no one will be able to explain why. Least of all the young Dakstins.

Reading such things always weighs heavy on one's heart. For more than thirty years he has been consoling others, telling people that everything rests in God's hands. Unlike the Pastor, Our Saviour knows what he is doing and there will be an end to all these tribulations. But one cannot always accept everything that happens with stoicism. The one thing the Pastor cannot take are the lies generated by the Communists. Every day he sees how the Eldorado promised by the kolkhozes is destroying Latvia, a country which, in the past, was able not only to feed itself but also export agricultural products all over Europe. He has no respect for Ulmanis whom he considers a bad, cowardly statesman who has lied to his people. Having said that, while he hadn't allowed himself to be cheated by the Communists, and

leaving aside the endless ceremonial floral archways he demanded for his public appearances, Ulmanis had at least had a good grip over agricultural affairs. Now, almost everything that made Latvia strong as a nation lies in ruins. Large country houses and estates like Dzelzskalni now stand empty, swallowed up by the all-powerful land reclamation projects, and country people assigned to new housing in blocks of flats now built in villages, just like the ones in big towns.

In the past, every peasant's child had an unidentifiable sense of when crops should be planted or hay cut, but nowadays the same proletarian class works not only in the country but also on factory assembly lines in the city. They have no gut feelings and neither do they even attempt to reflect on how things are connected. They work their hours, receive their wages and don't give a damn about how well their job is carried out, whether it's done according to one's conscience and the natural order of things.

Talking to people he realises that, even if the education system is considered to be much better now than it was during the times of independent Latvia, a great inner emptiness reigns in the hearts of young people. Nowadays, hardly anyone wants to sing in a choir, act in a play or listen to the opera. The radio playing something akin to a cat's yowling, a bottle of schnapps and the TV is more than enough. The drinking is accompanied by endless smoking and foul language. They are still Latvians, educated even, having completed their studies in a professional institute they are thought to have obtained a profession, but as soon as they open their mouths, a torrent of *nahujs* ("fuck yous" in Russian) roll out like toads in a fairy tale. They can't even put the simplest of sentences together without them any more. They bark like dogs! Walk around unshaven, dirty, unwashed. And yet they boast

that in the bathrooms of their apartments they have hot water running all day long. So why do their clothes stink so? And who stopped them from connecting the water supply and all the facilities to the homes in which their family have lived for countless generations?

Even back then in Siberia, in the camps of Vorkuta where he ended up after his fixed trial, people didn't lower their standards to such an extent. Even if some people let themselves go, this clearly signalled the beginning of the end as these people simply didn't survive. But here, living in freedom, they have truly been turned into a herd of sheep. What the Party heads bleat, the rest of them repeat. Almost every week in the papers he reads just how bad life had been in the Latvian countryside. Worse still, the stories are told by those who had experienced these times first hand and have since become somebody. How can they tell such lies when their contemporaries and classmates are still alive? They are more than able to make the comparison themselves, surely?

They say that following a religious cult is the opium of the people. And yet how is it different from this bloody communism, once praised by the demonic Stalin and his henchman Hruschov and now worshipped by this ageing wreckage that glorifies it in its screeching voice from the party tribune, set out practically like a church pulpit? The creators of the Moral Code of the Builder of Communism even copied from the Old Testament, unable to think of anything better. The whole country bows before an embalmed body set out on public view in the mausoleum, and yet the papers assure us that Lenin is more alive than ever. If this isn't just like a pagan cult, what is? A true expression of idolatry! Many years ago, whilst a student at the University of Latvia, he had spent some study time abroad at the University of Basel where he attended lectures by Schweitzer himself. His fellow students

from those times are now professors of theology in various universities around the world. He was more than able to recount exciting tales of ancient pagan cults and how party rituals as practiced by modern communists appear in this light. But nobody requires this information. Far better to keep it to himself.

The Pastor himself is marked out in a very special way. Some people, upon catching sight of him, prefer to cross the road whilst others, usually the totally ignorant, try to get into a debate on the existence of God or say something that they consider hilarious. Time permitting, he is happy to chat with these time wasters and, with a quiet but incisive logic and straight forward questions, succeeds in reducing even the most hardened promoters of atheism to tears. For a long time now, none of the communists in the immediate vicinity have attempted to argue with him about God. They give him a wide berth, quietly growling and scowling like battered mongrels. Because they somehow know that if they yap, they will come out of any encounter with the Pastor with an odd feeling in their hearts that God does exist after all. In spite of the writings of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Vladimir Lenin. Maybe this is his rightful place, his mission here on earth that of serving in this empire conquered by idol gods who pray before an embalmed body in a mausoleum. The Pastor tries to save the houses of God and parishes the Lord has entrusted to him, nourishing the hope that he will convert the pagans to his faith, just as the celebrated Professor Schweitzer whom he had met in his youth had dreamt of doing in distant Africa.

With the passage of time his memories of the atmosphere in the lecture halls of Riga or Basel have dimmed, but Schweitzer's response to the inquisitive Latvian, asking when he

might expect to have the same conviction in his own abilities and mission as detected in the professor so renowned across Europe, is carved deep in his memory:

-You might study your whole life long and never find that conviction. Be shredded with doubt. But, you can always count on Him. Let His hand lead you, and then the conviction, given by His presence, will flow into your heart. Let Him come to you! This is your chance.

He experienced the true power of these words when his life or death was in the very balance. This was in Vorkuta, August 15th, 1952, a day of great significance for many Christian denominations, yet the Lutheran Church's approach to the Assumption of Mary is one of philosophical calm and reserve. In the lager barrack where he found himself after the trial (which he would joke bitterly about later, saying that the Soviet government honoured him greatly by organizing a fixed hearing and trial, whereas others were simply thrown into cattle trains and taken away to Siberia), something bad was brewing. Just like everywhere else, political prisoners were all thrown in together without rhyme or reason; those falling foul of the Soviet system being punished for some insignificant offence, "urks" in lager jargon, alongside sworn criminals and criminal authorities.

In these places of incarceration, there was usually an unwritten agreement between the *criminal authorities* and the guards by which the *authorities* guaranteed some kind of order within the lager and in return received a degree of freedom, both of action and word. Unaware of this, the Pastor had the misfortune of rousing the hatred of the boss of the lager's political council, a sworn atheist. The man, who went by the name of Parhomov, would mock his compatriots and decided to teach the Lutheran Pastor a lesson, based on Article 58 comma 10, "Regarding the possession of anti-Soviet literature". All because, quite

unexpectedly, the dispute about the non-existence of God had turned into a huge source of humiliation for him. The Pastor, despite his poor, heavily accented Russian, had no difficulty reducing the impassioned atheistic arguments of the *politruk* to dust. Parhomov was outraged and didn't hesitate to use his fists. But that was not enough. The intellectually humbled Parhomov then wanted to destroy the spiteful snake who, in a matter of minutes, had shaken his conviction in communist tenets with a few simple examples illustrating that God did indeed exist. Parhomov had no need of God! Parhomov wanted to publicly smash this worm of God. His rage was so unquenchable that he would stop at nothing and, to this end, the prison guards received an order to collaborate with the *authorities*. A huge quantity of glass bottles were set aside and, one evening, the stubborn Pastor during the inspection line-up, was confronted with the unthinkable. Before the line of prisoners, the *authorities* had scattered a path of shattered glass extending for around fifteen metres. The guards grabbed the Pastor and tore his trousers away. Parhomov was jubilant.

-So, *batjushka*, here's your chance to prove the almighty power of your God. You can back down if you want, but then I will give your naked ass to the *authorities* so you can keep them happy, and you can bet that no one in all the whole camp will lift a finger to save you. Or take your chances here. Get down on your knees and, for all I know praying to your God or as you please, crawl over this broken glass! If you get to the other side unhurt, nobody will doubt your faith any more. Go ahead!

So, he stands with the lower part of his body naked, totally humiliated, in front of the line of prisoners. The political prisoners stare at their fellow inmate in speechless terror, aware that some day they might be the focus of the sadistic boss's entertainment. Meanwhile, the

authorities snigger, making venomous remarks as to who will have the pleasure of violating the *batjushka's* innocent backside. The guards are divided in their reaction: some watch in silence, others are quietly enjoying it. They are merely on duty in this place, no one gets to choose where they serve under the Soviets.

Batjushka takes several breaths and makes up his mind: whatever happens – happens. His faith in God hadn't saved him from the charges based on the notorious Article 58 and Siberia, and yet he still resolves to put himself in the hands of the Almighty because he has no other choice. He can't just give himself up to slaughter. He gets down on his knees. Razor-edged splinters of broken bottle necks lie ahead of him, just as sharply terrifying as the shards from the bottle sides and bases. They have been carefully placed – with the jagged section uppermost. There is no way he can get over them unscathed.

The line of prisoners sees a pale, humiliated man who, clenching his teeth and squatting on his knees, begins to crawl forward across the path of broken glass. One political prisoner in line, a former university professor, reflects that maybe the first Roman Christians suffered similarly before dying the death of martyrs. Complete silence has fallen.

The glass shards crack and screech, and yet he proceeds across the path of broken glass on his bare knees. To the surprise of the prisoners placed in line and their guards, after his first moves forward he neither screams, bleeds nor faints, as they all anticipated, but slowly and decisively continues forward. When the prisoner's left knee presses down onto a particularly menacing shard, the entire line holds its breath. The glass cracks and the prisoner, without making a sound, continues on his knees across the sharp spikes of glass.

Over the next five minutes, the lager witnesses what is generally referred to as a miracle. He crosses the path of broken glass and slowly gets up. Those standing closest to him see that the barbs have left deep, red-blue marks on his knees but nothing bleeds and nothing is cut. Indeed, his knees are undamaged. The man brushes away the sharp thorns of glass sticking to his bare flesh and puts on his trousers.

Nu blag! Uberite tut vsjo k cortovoj makeri! (What the fuck! Clear all this shit away!) – Parhomov pushes through the line, spits and in deadly silence makes for the guards' barracks to get drunk. During the night his ulcer ruptures and he is rushed to hospital. He undergoes surgery and after recovering, is signed off as unfit for service. Parhomov never returns to the lager.

Rumours about what happened quickly circulate round the barracks. Now, nobody considers for an instant inconveniencing the Pastor with atheist musings on the existence of God. They are afraid! Even the *authorities* look up on him with great respect and awe, something that occurs so rarely in the lagers of those times. Try and get even with a man who pulled off something like that and reduced the almighty Parhomov to pulp! God must have been on his side!

The deciphered audio registration

(The quality of the registration is disturbed by the sound of dripping water.)

A: I didn't know that Igorjok was such a beast...(Noise) He seems so timid and frail (noise) but in bed....a real mule...

L: What did I tell you? And what a thing. Doesn't seem so big but (noise) real steel!

A: Mmm! I'm still getting a kick out of it! Only...(Noise.)

L: However(noise) lately Luda looks somehow ...!

A: Didn't you know? She has...(Noise)

[..]

THE WATCHMAN'S MOBILE HOME DISAPPEARS INTO THE NIGHT

SPRING 2005

It's well past midnight. The sky is heavily overcast and the blue van – the watchman's mobile home in the middle of an up-market building site – has merged into the total darkness. If it wasn't for a pale light flickering in its window, shielded just by a blind, the optical illusion that there was in fact no such van would be complete.

He is standing stock still in the dark, smoking. The darkness has taken over everything, turning the ordinary landscape into something nonexistent. Glancing at the scene from afar, it might look as though the glowing spot of his cigarette as he inhales the smoke, along with the window, are the only sources of light in the entire universe covered by darkness. Under the heavy clouds, it's not even possible to make out the nearby metropolis, usually given away at night by the yellowish reflection in the sky coming from countless street lights, shopfronts, signs, windows and the lights of vehicles in motion. It's almost as if some fairytale giant had covered the surroundings with an enormous, thick blanket. The first spring cyclone brought from the nearby sea on a breeze blows gently over

his head. The darkness and the total, warm silence feel like an unspoken promise from nature, confirming that the winter cold and unpleasant chill of melting snow are things of the past and the bubbling growth of spring will soon take over everything in its path.

The man is at a loss, although these words fail to convey the complicated, stream of conscience signals that he obstinately tries to ignore or even deny. They pour into his brain, as unstoppable as the warm flood of spring air in the black April sky. The bundle of notes he found in the house to be demolished has awoken a storm of long forgotten emotions.

For some years now, the man has led a very simple, modest life. A life where there is no place for complicated and intellectual "whys". It turns out one can live quite well without them, miserable as that life might be. In his mind he avoids using a certain word that he once used to spit in contempt. But, every so often, it creeps up into his conscience like a horrid, fearless mouse somewhere under the floor. The word isn't even Latvian. It began its march to victory around the time when the Soviet Union first started heading towards its downfall, swiftly ousting the previous and linguistically correct term, "wanderer". Up until then, people of the sort referred to hadn't existed as a class, but suddenly they appeared overnight. Ragged, stinking, drunk people of the gutter living anywhere they could, on dumping sites, in basements, attics and unlocked entrances. Flea and lice-ridden, sick. The Soviet police, *militia*, had been the first to come up with a common noun to describe this new human species and in the early days had even tried to fight these people, sunk as they were in rubbish. The term emerged from the standard protocol phrase in Russian, *bez opregelonovo mesta zitelstvo*, person of no fixed abode. Even if the Russian slang word

stood for exactly the same thing, the acronym *BOMZ* soon took the place of the Latvian word for wanderer.

He lives almost like a *BOMZ*. No, not quite so badly, the mobile home has got all the conveniences, also his job on the building site is paid well enough, two sets of uniform, a warm jacket and footwear. His only expenses are food, cigarettes, cheap vodka and the previously mentioned Marina. Besides, he has his extra income from selling whatever sells here. He hardly spends anything from his watchman's wages. Really, what has he got to complain about? It is not so bad after all. Any real *BOMZ* would be envious of him. And not only *BOMZ*. Here on the city outskirts there are countless people living in tiny homes, earning a lot less than him, doing jobs they hate and working their fingers to the bone.

All the same. There is a rather thin line between the man's life here, on the building site, and that of a homeless person. He has no apartment of his own, no family, nor personal belongings except a small locked metal box with a plastic handle. No family – at least no family that had ever shown the slightest interest in him. No, to tell the truth, he does have some belongings: a couple of years ago when he found himself kicked out on to the street, he had left a bag of clothes – good clothes- with his former colleague, the old Fela. Among them, there had even been a *Hugo Boss* suit. What would he need it for now? Besides, it was highly likely that even kind-hearted Fela, tired of waiting for its owner, had already thrown the bag away. The man has thought of it sometimes. What would happen if he died? No, he isn't even forty yet. Although, the way he has been living all these years – alcohol of unknown provenance that sometimes smells so bad it is hard to swallow, endless bad cigarettes and cheap food – only a fool would fail to realize you can easily poison yourself on

those home brewed vodkas and end up meeting your maker. And there would be no one to mourn him. He would be buried in a pauper's grave, a stick with a number on it marking his grave.

It scares him, but his existence in the twilight zone between the real world and the wanderers' brotherhood is an undeniable fact. As plain to see as the thin, cracking layer of ice that just a few days ago still covered the puddles on the frosty April mornings. In this much simplified life, in which reality is avoided and the will to be accountable for anything is totally lacking, there is no space for thoughts that go any further than – *I am running out of cigarettes, I should go and buy a stick of Marlboro tomorrow; or – a client wants used bricks.* Thinking can be hazardous. He is well aware of this and for some years now he hasn't allowed anything into his brain that even resembles the embryos of thought.

Despite this, tonight a cyclone of endless questions, hypotheses and assumptions spiral through his mind. It's quite clear that the carrier bag stuffed with papers had been hidden under the floorboards in the attic for a reason. Who might have hidden them there? They aren't just a pile of printouts, put there to be taken away or burnt. It was no material for a fire! A4 office paper is extremely difficult to burn, it is much thicker than standard paper and gives off acrid smoke.

No, all right. Anything is possible. Drawing up a version of the accidental nature of the documents' storage, you might hit upon something after all. It's logical, understandable from a human point of view, and no conspiracy theories are involved. It's possible that the documents had been placed there by accident, as they say, in case they were ever needed.

As a back-up, in case the computer should fail all of a sudden. They don't take up much space. Let them stay there! What if they should need them one day?

Or on the other hand – maybe the heap of documents has been printed out from a worn-out computer destined for the dump. Printed out within no particular order to save everything stored on the hard disk, just in case it was needed one day. Makes sense, doesn't it? The owner prints out everything he can from an old computer, deletes all files from its memory and then throws the used apparatus out with the rubbish. It's obvious he doesn't really need these documents, so he throws them somewhere in the back of beyond, out of sight, so they don't take up any space on the shelves.

Thinking it over, in the past people held on for a lifetime to all sorts of correspondence and documents. Not only the former nobility and famous writers. They stored bills, old contracts, telegrams, postcards, even meaningless letters from long-forgotten acquaintances they hadn't seen for years. Nowadays, normal people don't act like that- unless the owner of the bundle had been one of those odd, senile types and, to put it nicely, aware of the value of the epistolary genre. That might also explain why, when selling the house, the owner had left it right there where it was. He had hoped that it might have been useful, but it wasn't. So he just left it there. Seems logical.

To hell with it! What kind of logic is that? Complete nonsense, not logic! Who on earth would hide a sack of useless papers as if it were the greatest treasure somewhere under the attic floor? It would make more sense to simply fling it into a corner of the attic to gather dust and leave it at that. Or to put the papers in a folder and store them on a well-arranged bookshelf, if he was so pedantic and obnoxiously meticulous. There is something

wrong with this sack of documents! That much is plain. He feels it with one of his long forgotten senses that has suddenly re-awoken and had once been... Yes, better not to remember what was "once". Let sleeping dogs lie. It is all long gone, forgotten and dead. Consciously drowned in vodka.

However, that sack of documents is weird. Damned weird. Testament to some secret and probably illegal affairs, without a doubt. Even at a first glance it screams out: look, there has been some totally illegal spying going on, the only thing missing from those documents as proof that someone has secretly been kept tabs on would be scraps of used toilet paper.

Although the documents have no dates at all, the printouts mostly carry a date from the end of the Nineties. How on earth could a mortal have got hold of extracts from mobile phone messages back then?! It's no bloody Hollywood movie with Tom Cruise as the good spy, chasing a traitor and using all manner of unseen modems and scanners. Or a TV series about a girl called Nikita.

- Oh, stop raving, you've seen too much rubbish on television! Yet you can remember perfectly well mobile phone connections in Latvia at that time, at the end of the Nineties, how expensive it was and who could afford it. It was an exclusive toy for the *nouveau riche*! – the watchman says to himself aloud.

The first prepaid card cost about thirty *lats* a month, but back then the monthly wages for most people was hardly more than a hundred *lats* before tax. Besides, think of the phone itself! A brick with buttons! It was the Stone Age of mobile service providers and the telephone models themselves. No wonder those mobile phones were later dubbed house bricks. But that wasn't until much later. Use your common sense! A mobile

connection was an extremely costly extra. And how would it have been possible to print anything at all from those ancient devices? Getting printed messages from those things when Bluetooth technology or the now outdated infrared wireless connections or anything like them were still a long way off – it all seemed a bit like science fiction. It was another matter if someone had used technologies meant for espionage. That would explain why the computer held these things.

He lights his third cigarette in a row. He has managed to convince himself that he has no past as it hurts too much and has been removed from his conscience with great care. Yet even with his past excluded, the man still remembers the Nineties' scandals involving the tapped conversations of politicians, government officials and entrepreneurs, the shocking and cruel murders and the people who went missing and were never heard of again.

How could anyone forget that! Damn! He himself, once the chief editor of the scandal magazine "Through the Keyhole", used to print sensational material just like this in his magazine.

Spied-on entrepreneur commits suicide – transcripts from tapped phone calls reveal he was gay and faced bankruptcy.

Blown up banker! The press has phone call recordings revealing that the murdered banker supplied arms to Chechen rebels.

The owner of a SUPERMARKET chain has murdered his wife out of jealousy after tapping her telephone conversations and discovering she was intimately involved with several men.

It might seem cynical, but material like that was really in vogue in the media back then, to such an extent that over a period of one year it turned a former government newspaper into the most sought after magazine in the whole country.

But really, bloody hell! How can you forget something like the state visit of US President Bill Clinton to Latvia, throughout which the American secret services didn't even attempt to hide the fact that they had every intention of listening to all telephone conversations in Latvia, employing espionage airplanes equipped with AVAC technologies. Well, as to all those conversations – there might have been some exaggeration. What on earth might the notorious CIA dig up, listening to several million telephone conversations in Russian and, and worse still, in Latvian – a language no one knows, and that in America must be more foreign than the famous Indian tribal dialects used by USA military transmitters during the Second World War. But certain people's mobile connections were regularly tapped into by anyone with the interest and means to do so. Even his own telephone calls had been tapped. Several times! There were plenty of wealthy companies running dodgy deals, often headed by men from the former State Security Committee. Those guys, even if they had switched to the business world, didn't forget their old ways. The former comrades – the present bosses - liked to think they still had a hold on the country and business. Whether they really did or not is another matter – most of them having trotted off to the cemetery, even if they had been in the very bloom of life, as was often mentioned in their obituaries.

The man lights his fourth cigarette and continues to stare at the blackened sky, as if hoping for a sign to confirm his guesswork. The sky makes no reply. He is still lost in

thought. A short while ago he had gone through page after page and noticed with increasing tension that the telephone call transcriptions in that heap of paper were totally in keeping with the Nineties. Such compromising material usually fell into their hands printed out on the so-called needle printer that, instead of the ink cartridge, used old fashioned colored ribbons – almost like a typewriter's. While printing out they squeaked and squealed, creating that unmistakable sound of a busy office atmosphere. It's crystal clear that professionals, like those employed in the Nineties by the new money-spinning business and criminal operations after the dismissal of the State Security Committee, are involved here.

And yet on the other hand, what should he care about it all – if the paper package was left untaken in the house to be demolished, evidently its owners didn't hold it in too high regard. But why was the parcel hidden in the ceiling? Maybe the person who hid it had already met a grizzly end and the documents survived the person who had ordered the espionage. If so, maybe the bundle was not as innocent and harmless as it seemed at first glance. These questions won't leave his idle, rusty brain in peace. Oh, damn his discovery! It would have been better if it hadn't fallen from the ceiling! In the man's head it has provoked the same reaction as a light suddenly being turned on in a dark room. Long lost thoughts have suddenly returned.

Once, his brain was considered brilliant. The flatterers used to say he was a genius. He was admired by the public. An opinion leader – as they would say in the 21st century, although such a phrase hadn't been coined back then. The brilliant author of two novels, translated into several languages and published abroad. It would be hard to

believe now, but the watchman that leered as couples made love in their cars in the nearby forest, had once been the new and only promise on the Latvian literary scene back in the distant crisis years of the Nineties. He had been wise enough not to enter the swamp of politics. Not to mix with political parties or the *Saema* (parliament*). Even if he would certainly have been elected and several parties had wanted him as their pre-election driving force. The man turned down all such offers as he chose to establish his own business. Perhaps he shouldn't have, maybe now he would have been sitting in the *Saema*. But his restless and dynamic brain was not made for sitting on a deputy member of parliament's chair.

Having officially privatized a virtually unread former state newspaper, the man turned it into a scandalous and highly sought-after gossip magazine. Afterwards, all that emerged in the re-established state media market was in fact a diluted version of the magazine "Through the Keyhole" which he had created. His wife, besides being the daughter of an influential businessman, was a real beauty. A true example of a society couple. The proud father of two wonderful kids.

But it all came to an end. Not that it ended overnight. But something like that. He suddenly discovered that in his business, where success was determined by your ability to invent and be arrogant, he could no longer come up with something new, unheard of. He had been working for the third year on his third novel, expected impatiently by both his publisher and readers. Over the course of those three years he had only been able to complete fifteen pages, and re-reading them he realized they were empty and lifeless. It was like a nightmare, paralyses, sinking in a mire of mud. His genius-like brain

which he relied so much upon and about which he even boasted at times, suddenly failed to offer anything worthy of consideration. No, things still happened. At the beginning, he comforted himself with an excuse that he had done enough and that he needed a break. But this break dragged on too long. It didn't come to an end. His brain let him down at that fatal moment when everybody was expecting him to come up with some brilliant plan on how to save the magazine at a time when one bank crisis followed another and neighboring Russia's default had a huge negative impact on the buying capacity of his readers. He couldn't think of anything and made a terrible decision. Even if there must have been some way out. And he knew it.

His brain! He hadn't used it for five years now. For a while the thought embryos were soaked in alcohol. Luckily for him, back then when he had reeled down the steep steps of the hierarchy ladder, he had no money for drugs. Otherwise he would have long since been addicted to the heroin needle, or more likely still, would have keeled over from an overdose in some gutter. All the time his head had still been working all right, he took great care to protect his brain from different poisons as he couldn't even take strong liquor well. It was his big secret. Turning to wine and stronger liquor had begun when his brain showed its first sign of deserting him. It helped to ease his growing despair. Luckily, he had the reputation of being quite restrained – nobody offered him heroin or the much more expensive cocaine. Later, when everything was lost, there was no space for narcotics any more. Cheap vodka, diluted spirits and other potions, anything as long as it would stop him thinking. One might say he drank with method and according to a plan. Because when he was drunk he didn't have to think.

Who knows how it would all have ended if not for that accident. Thanks to that, he had ended up here and got this job as a watchman.

His instinct for self-preservation overrode the program of self-destruction which he himself had initiated.

Now, while sitting in the watchman's mobile home going through the sack of documents from the condemned house, packed with care into a huge bag of thin cellophane and crossed with painter's tape, he underwent incredible changes.

"Oh, God, if only my brain would start working like it used to!" he had prayed at the beginning of his downfall. That time, God hadn't listened to him.

Now, when he didn't pray for anything and, like a coward, he had reconciled himself with his losses and surrendered himself to his fate, lightness of thought and inspiration suddenly came back to him along with the bundle of documents. His brain, which for years had acted feebly, as if in a lethargic sleep or trance, all of a sudden woke up. The questions, leaping into his mind like tennis balls, created chains of logical and illogical assumptions – more assumptions, more questions. There was no denying he got a kick out of the thinking process itself. It used to be his main pleasure in life.

But for now he was torn, undecided what to do with all of it. Yes, it was undeniable: the heap of documents which had literally fallen from the ceiling had set his imagination off and his brain worked as sharply as in the old days. Now he was scared of something else – will this outburst of activity be temporary? In a few days, will his head turn back into the soft, grey, indifferent cotton that made him just like a big, useless teddy-bear?

And there was more. The man was not ready to admit to himself that some of the papers bore deeply private and intimate correspondence which in places was even as pathetically sentimental as in old romance novels. For now it was not even clear how many people had gone into making it up. However, the correspondence carried a certain charm, inspiration of the sort he had been seeking so desperately all those years since he got stuck with the fifteen dull pages of his third novel. It offered the temptation of an emerging text that is only understood by those that have ever dealt with writing.

The letters exerted a fascinating attraction. Every one of them creating a small, closed universe which, regardless of how laconic it was, expressed something unique. Such as this message written, despite being full of grammatical mistakes.

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It's only illusion that we are in control of situation There will always be somebody who will introduce last minute changes to current events. This going with the flow when you don't know what's going to happen next gets on my nerves

"It's only an illusion that we are in control of the situation There will always be somebody who will introduce his last minute changes to current events". He stops at this sentence. Because it's about him too.

On the horizon the dawn is breaking, it's time to stop poring over these documents, they will definitely need many more nights. So be it! It is going to be so exciting!