

Biography: Ieva Melgalve (1981) is a science fiction and fantasy writer with literary influences. She has also written books for children and young adults. Her first book was a collection that included her first short story and a play entitled *The Break- Even Point* (1999). In 2013, she self-published her play *The Un-humans*. In the same year, her fantasy novel *The Dead Don't Forgive* was published and subsequently shortlisted for the 2013 Annual Latvian Literature Award.

Synopsis: This novel combines dystopian fantasy with the typical storytelling techniques of literary fiction, creating a book that is both accessible and attractive to genre readers as well as to a wider audience that values intellectual challenges. In an enormous theater on many stages there are theater performances all happening at the same time. The actors don't have their own identity outside of their stage lives, and no objective other than trying to get the chance for a better role and trying not to wind up in the playwrights' bad books. Who are these playwrights, who is the audience, and do any of them really exist? No one knows (although a few of them – the inquisitive young Lapsa, for example – try to find out).

Excerpt

Know all things to be like this:

A mirage, a cloud castle,

A dream, an apparition,

Without essence, but with qualities that can be seen.

Know all things to be like this:

Ieva Melgalve "Mēness teātris" [Moon Theater]
Excerpt
Translated by Suzanne McQuade

*As the moon in a bright sky
In some clear lake reflected,
Though to that lake the moon has never moved.*

*Know all things to be like this:
As an echo that derives
From music, sounds, and weeping,
Yet in that echo is no melody.*

*Know all things to be like this:
As a magician makes illusions
Of horses, oxen, carts and other things,
Nothing is as it appears.*

Samadhi Raja Sutra

0

It was time. The mime opened his eyes. Moonlight fell on the black, sound-absorbing floor.

The mime walked with light steps over the smooth walkways, descended down backstage passages, sliding silent as ghost between the black curtains. In the dark only his face and hands were visible, porcelain white and cool.

On this end of the theatre everyone still slept, people dressed in gray clothes in narrow, uncomfortable beds that weren't designed for prolonged use. While passing the mime listened closely to their breath, touching the restless sleepers' foreheads and palms, straightening a fallen blanket. Then he headed further, listening closely to how water already rustled in the showers - there they washed, the ones who had finished their evening series or who were woken by nightmares - following a faint warmth where the lift delivered breakfast.

In the wings - in the passage where ten or maybe even a hundred people went every day - the mime leaned over and touched a small droplet that faintly reflected a diffused light.

The end of his finger became shiny red. The mime analysed the fluid's makeup, it was blood. Fresh blood, one droplet, what's more, a nearly perfect round form - so then a trickle, not a spurt. Of course, this was the women's division - bleeding was normal - but the mime send a message to Central.

Not important, the answer came after a moment. Another pause. A silly report.

If the mime were a person, he would have bent over or winced, maybe even stripped off his clothes, awaiting punishment for bothering Central.

But the mime wasn't a person.

In an almost absent-minded gesture he raised his hand to his face, then put his fingertip into his mouth to clean it off.

A child - a young girl, an adolescent - witnessed this gesture and was startled, but she immediately averted her eyes and hurried past the mime, as if nothing had happened.

And the mime too continued on his way, not even attempting to register the girl's face or the biochemical makeup of the drop of blood.

But nothing had happened.

1

With a velvety soft sound the curtain lifted, and the glassy darkness of the viewing hall swept over the stage. Peter slept in a wide, cool double bed, stretching out a hand to touch the place where Leonora would be, if they would have woken at the same time.

The actor had been up for several hours: a grey figure among other grey figures, one of dozens, maybe even hundreds of actors who headed for the showers, ate breakfast, read the set-ups for their roles and waited for the moment when they would tread the boards of the stage, no matter how unlikeable their role might be.

Peter's role was neither small, nor unlikeable. The actor slid into it as if in a dream, and the role became like a second skin to him, in ten years he'd gotten used to and worked through it so that he didn't know if he would be able to play any other role. If the script

continued as anticipated then that wouldn't be necessary anyway. With half opened eyes, he looked towards the kitchen, from which a yellow light seeped out. A frying pan clanged, the stage was lit; it was morning.

Peter sat on the edge of the bed and rubbed his face with his hands as if he'd just woken up. Music could be heard from the direction of the kitchen, accompanied by Leonora's crooning.

Such a wonderful morning, he thought, and Leonora's voice had to go and ruin it. After all these scenes when he, Peter, had tried again to get closer to his wife, after the night when they, of course, had made love. Yes, of course, they'd had sex, but it was just one of the objectives of their fight. Leonora's sneering, Peter's resentment, how awkward and sad.

Now, of course, Peter wasn't thinking about that. He got up and slowly headed across the bedroom towards the kitchen, putting a self-confident smile on his face - that frozen stone mask that had become the signature of his role, making him loathsome and irreplaceable.

"Leonora," he said testily. "It's Sunday and you woke me up. Again."

Leonora stood in the kitchen. Over her nearly transparent nightgown she'd thrown a just as nearly transparent dressing gown; it tightly covered her strong breasts and round belly. Peter wanted to go up to his wife, to embrace these warm shoulders, to pull her body closer, to stroke her curly hair, which was heavy and stiff with hairspray, put his lips on her ear and whisper something tender into it - just like the time when they still considered themselves to be in love.

More precisely - just like the time when Peter considered himself to be in love, but Leonora was a shifty gal who had taken the opportunity to ensnare in her web the richest bachelor in the Land of Plenty. Only later when playing out their roles did they discover that they understood each other deeper than any of their short-lived lovers; and in these words an unspoken understanding made both their characters deeper and more complex than the script had allowed for. The actor didn't know if these changes came to them for good or for evil. Maybe that's why they were together for so long, maybe that's why they were so unhappy.

"Leonora," Peter said hoarsely.

She threw the pan on the table; the wooden spatula slipped from it and fell to the floor with a dry clatter.

"I only wanted to please you," Leonora said. Usually she said it with a smile, and Peter would retort with something harsh and insensitive. This time her face was tense, and her left eyelid twitched, barely perceptible. She pushed a plate with an awkward motion - an excessively white earthenware dish, on which was stacked a huge pile of pancakes - cold, greasy pieces of plastic, topped with a red clot. Clearly, Peter thought, they had to start fighting before the first bite.

"Well what have you done now," he said. "You know how much I hate pancakes."

He leaned over to pick up the wooden spatula, and Leonora stepped back. Peter straightened, the spatula in his hand, and frowned. Had he hit her? Yes, sure. But now, when she was pregnant? No, not now. She smelled of blood and fear.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked.

Leonora blinked, as if she wanted to say something, then turned away, wringing her hands, and looked out the window. No one was there, only the large oak tree and its accompanying swing whitened the darkness.

"Hey, Leonora," Peter said. "You - you have something dirty on you there."

She looked back and lifted her eyebrow, for a moment losing the strain of the episode. That was Peter's fault, really, his remark was nonsense.

"Are you bleeding?" he asked.

"No, I..." Leonora pulled at her nightgown.

No, she couldn't be bleeding, pregnant women don't bleed, shows how much Peter knows. And there wasn't anything written about that in the scene. She would have let him know; that's a serious situation, and he wasn't ready for that. What would he do in such a situation? He didn't know and couldn't know.

Leonora rubbed her fingertips. "I'm bleeding," she said, slowly, as if surprised - just as surprised as Peter. "I could lose the baby."

"My baby?" Peter asked. His mouth was completely dry, but there was nothing to drink on the table. They probably didn't expect him to be worried.

They definitely didn't expect that Leonora could lose the baby.

The whole script, all those witty hateful phrases, that he had prepared, were now no longer appropriate; not just because in his heart Peter wasn't the villain, but because Leonora was on the verge of tears. Possibly it wasn't even Leonora who was crying there - possibly, it was her *actress*, a woman Peter didn't even know. And she stood there alone on

the edge of the stage and in spite of their marriage and everything that they had been through together, Peter didn't know what to say to her.

But the mime had to know, or maybe the scriptwriters - someone who could save Peter and Leonora from this moment. He said again loudly: "You could lose the baby?"

Leonora sobbed and fell into Peter's arms, burying her face in his shoulder. Her light hair tickled Peter's lips, he inconspicuously placed the wooden spatula on the table and touched Leonora on her back, which had just begun to shake.

"Leonora," Peter whispered, his lips very close to his lover's ears, her body so familiarly warm and unfamiliarly timorous. Peter held her hands - scared and instantaneously happy.

Leonora pressed her forehead closer into Peter's shoulder, and he lifted his head, looking around: out the window, then up, where over the wall he could see the empty space above the set decorations.

"Everything will be okay," Peter said loudly. "Help will be here soon."

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She had known that this moment would come; she had already figured it out on the day when, alongside her usual hero arc, she had also received a different folder about the pregnancy. About what she could and couldn't do within that context, about how she would have to play it not just on stage, in the role of Leonora, but outside of it, too.

Here secret name wasn't listed any place, nowhere, but she involuntarily read it into each line. *Malda*. A woman who dared to be more than just a role, who dared to dream about life outside of the series and the relationships between actors, not just their roles.

But everything turned out completely different. She had a role outside the series - yes. But every time she had proposed that such a role break up with Peter's actor too, Gurd had rejected it. Too risky, he'd said. An ordinary actor wouldn't be ready for it. And you yourself aren't ready for it; you're not ready to see who he is outside of his role.

And now this. This pregnancy, that was both unexpected and terrifying.

She pressed her forehead into Peter's shoulder and felt his heart beating right there next to her. The touch of his hand. *Leonora*, he whispered, and Malda suddenly understood where she had made her mistake. Why had she been looking for the exit from the theatre among other people, when she'd had Peter next to her this whole time? Not his role - Malda, it seems, had never seen such a self-righteous, egotistical and controlling type as Peter in his relationship with Leonora. But that which Peter's actor invested in the role - this uncertainty that hid behind his ice-cold countenance, these doubts and carefully controlled gentleness. No scriptwriter had written that, not for this series. The actor had brought it to the role himself.

Why had she listened to what others said? She herself knew this person and knew that he wouldn't betray Malda, that he would understand. Like now, when they're embracing, even though in the script it was supposed to be a bitter and destructive argument.

She heard how the curtain slowly descended, how Peter's actor moved to withdraw into his out-of-character distance.

"Wait," she whispered, and the actor instinctively froze. Malda raised her head and saw how he cast his glance toward the curtain, then around, where the mimes could be. No one was there, they had no reason to fear.

"Take care of me," she whispered.

The actor let go of her and stepped back - just a half step, the professional half-step, that signals the end of a scene. A half-step that said: *there's no relationship between us, all we have in common is a role in the same series. And: there is no "us."*

Malda clenched her teeth and felt herself begin to tremble - maybe from the loss of blood, maybe from anger. "It's all happening for real," she said.

The actor simply nodded his head, faithful to his habit of not saying a word out of the scene.

"It's all happening *to me*," she whispered.

The actor looked at her with a strange expression on his face, as if he had never heard people saying "I" or "my" or "to me" outside of their roles. And maybe he hadn't heard anything like that either. The only people who talked like that were crazy, dangerous, irresponsible.

"I could really lose the baby. Really, not just in my role," she said. The actor stepped back and turned away, as if he could protect himself from these words. Perhaps Malda would have done the same - when backstage some extra or temp asked for help, looked her in the eye and reached out a hand, someone who had neither a name nor a role.

But this time it was completely different, because this time it was happening to Malda.

"Can't you not act even for a minute?" She attempted a step forward and froze.

A mime appeared behind the actor's back.

He held her eye, the actor turned too and, frightened to attempt a step to the side, he raised his hands in protection, in denial of his connection to anything that had happened here.

But the mime didn't react to any of that, the mime didn't drag them away. He didn't do any of what Malda had been told. None of it was right. The mime simply handed the actor and Malda a piece of paper, on which was very briefly and hastily written a new scene. Head to the hospital and hand Leonora over to a doctor, interlude: a car ride; Peter calms down Leonora; in this moment they are united - and they realise that in spite of their disagreements, they love each other.

The actor read this scene and unexpectedly, almost boyishly smiled.

Malda shuddered.

A mime threw a soft autumn jacket over her shoulders.

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In the next scene they were sitting in a car while the stage turned in a circle beneath them. That way they knew they were on a road. Peter tried to suppress the urge to chew his nails; it was a bad habit the actor had that he tried not to introduce to his role. The wind lightly mussed Leonora's hair: she had put on the jacket, but hadn't put on a hat, and Peter too was half-dressed - a long coat thrown over his underwear, his bare legs unpleasantly

touched the plastic mats on the back seat. The mime sat in front of him, having put on a hat, a chauffeur's jacket and wig in a hurry. Apparently a real chauffeur hadn't been available.

Peter chewed again at the hangnail and then immediately lowered his hand. If they hadn't got a chauffeur, then apparently this scene wasn't expected; if this scene wasn't expected, then apparently Leonora's bleeding wasn't any sort of joke and her conversation between scenes - not a cunning plan to provoke the actor into unprofessional behavior, but genuine agitation.

He wrapped his arm around Leonora's shoulders and watched how the the mimes constructed the next scene from simple, unpretentious backdrops and green polyethylene curtains, how they pushed around heavy and possibly totally real medical devices, how they carried in a bed and an operating table, how they quickly dressed the actors. They didn't have to speak now, during the drive they didn't have to speak, and they didn't really have to act. The very idea that the world was turning was a meaningful enough event as it was.

Leonora mumbled something, and Peter bent down closer to her. "What did you say?" he asked, before remembering that this wasn't the place for conversation.

"I need to talk to you," Leonora said.

"Darling," Peter said, embracing her. "I'm sorry for how I behaved... it was almost impossible to talk with me."

Leonora threw him a shocked look - *does he mean his role or the interlude between scenes?*

Peter shrugged his shoulders. "But do we really need to talk about that?"

He was principally against conversations between scenes, even in situations like this, when something unexpected happened. In his experience, conversation between scenes didn't ever help; especially in the "Land of Plenty," where the script still clung to the good faith and intentional un-intentionality; there was emptiness not just behind the set decorations, but also behind the spoken words. Who was Leonora? Was her father a militiaman or a farmer, did she have a seventh grade education or maybe experience at an art and music school, or maybe all of the above? Peter didn't know; her past was described in different ways in several episodes, and no matter what she would say, he always responded with a polite "really?"

But this time was different. She was scared, and angry now as well.

"It all happened because of you," Leonora said.

"Because of me?" Peter's breath stopped and he had to stop himself from running off further into his usual anger and offence in the script, which now would be completely inappropriate. He gathered himself and said, completely calm: "What do you mean by that, darling?"

"All of this," she said, gesturing vaguely around with her hand. "It's only because I wanted to love you."

"Well, I don't know," Peter said cautiously.

"If you weren't the way you are - I would have long ago stopped playing the role of your wife."

Peter frowned faintly. He didn't like meta-text, all of these moments when people on stage cunningly referred to the fact that they are the only people on stage. This didn't just

threaten them, but also the whole series - you navel-gaze for just a bit too long and the story gets all tangled up and twisted in itself, until none of the problems you're dealing with seem important enough any longer, and with that the storyline comes to an end, usually along with everyone involved in it. Peter had seen it with his own eyes, and he didn't have even the tiniest desire to repeat that experience.

But he laughed drily and patted Leonora on the head. "You are wonderful in the role of my wife," he said. "No one else would suit it so well."

"But I don't want to play that role," she said. "I just want to be with you. Not acting."

Peter went quiet for a moment, looking for the right words. "You don't have to act with me, Leonora. We'll be together. Even if... even if you lose my child."

"Peter, it's not your child."

"Don't talk nonsense," Peter, of course, had suspected it; it would be bizarre in a series for a woman to have a child with the same man. But he had to believe that it's his child - and he shouldn't have to find out this way that it wasn't.

"It's... Michael's child," Leonora said. Her eyes, blue and excited, looking for something in Peter's face, but what on earth could he say? Of course, the fact that it was Michael's was believable - Peter remembered his dark hair, his self-confident smile, his black, shiny jacket and clenched teeth; Michael was exactly the kind of character who could impregnate a married woman and still maintain his interesting hero status.

"You can't know that," he said. After that, after this scene, she would still have the chance to take back her words, but the seed of doubt had already been planted and they

would have the chance over the course of several series to play out their jealousy, doubt, and pain in full scenes, which might compensate for the fact that this scene was so choppy.

"Of course, I know," Leonora replied. "I haven't had sex with anyone else, not recently."

"Now you're talking nonsense, Leonora. We've had sex."

"No, we haven't."

"What are you talking about," Peter replied. " We just had sex, and a week ago as well, and we definitely had romantic stretch two months ago - right when you conceived the child."

"We didn't have sex," Leonora raised her voice. "We just started one scene naked in the bed, that's all. We didn't have sex."

Peter didn't even know how to answer that. He glanced to the side - but the curtain was open, it was all happening for real, on stage, and Leonora jumped out of her role so quickly and madly that the most talented scriptwriter couldn't solve the problems she had caused.

"And you know know why we didn't have sex?" Leonora continued. "Because they know that we love each other. I don't know how they found out, but they know, and they don't like it. That's why made me start the affair with Michael. That's why they made me..." she caught her breath and blinked; teardrops caught in her long eyelashes, but Leonora didn't even bother to turn her head so they would twinkle in the spotlight, "...sleep with Michael. And conceive his child."

"What 'they,' what are you talking about," Peter said quickly. This whole scene had become something incomprehensible and absurd, and he didn't know if there was even a chance to save it. But he had to try - no matter how awkward it would be.

"They. The scriptwriters."

The word resounded in the empty space, and Peter went pale.

No one mentioned the scriptwriters on stage. If they did, then they spoke of "higher powers" or God - anything other than the scriptwriters! It was even worse that going out of character - it was even worse than jumping out of the scene - it was unimaginable.

Leonora was crazy. Her eyes were big and bright, and their pupils had narrowed to the tiniest dots, as if she was staring right into the light.

"And you know what I did?" she demanded.

"What?" Peter asked with ashen lips, now he wanted Leonora to talk, for the word "scriptwriters" to be drowned in a flood of other words, so that no one would notice.

"I looked at the mimes."

"What?"

"I looked at the mimes. I was told not to look at the mimes, that if I did I could lose the child, and that's exactly why I looked at the mimes."

Peter felt like he was dreaming; the stage turned slowly, the car stood in place, and it seemed to him as if Leonora's words are like clots of blood washed out of her mouth, dragging along with them everything that he had dreamt of - and everything that he had relied on.

"Leonora, don't speak," Peter said. His voice was completely stiff, lips not listening; he squeezed Leonora's shoulder, but she didn't even flinch. "Don't speak."

Something stubborn flashed in her eyes, something unpleasant and insane, and she said "And it was all because of you. Because I don't want someone else's child, I want yours."

Peter placed his hand on her forehead, desperate, and said "You have a fever, Leonora, what are you talking about, you're talking nonsense, senseless nonsense you're talking, these are just feverish nightmares that you've imagined, soon we'll be at the hospital and everything will be okay, everything will be okay, everything will be okay."

Her forehead was warm, sticky and wet under Peter's palm.

"But you should be happy," she said. "I won't be having another man's baby anymore."

"Leonora," Peter answered, desperately trying to say just one thing - that he hadn't wanted any of this to happen. "I don't care who the father of your baby is, that's not *important*, understand? I want you to have the baby. And I want to raise it as my own child."

Leonora looked Peter in the eyes, faithful and trusting.

She's crazy, Peter thought. She's crazy, she wants to die, and now she wants to carry me right along with her.

"You're having a nightmare," he said firmly. "You're having a nightmare, and you'll forget all of this. I will too."

Or at least Peter hoped he'll be given the opportunity to forget.

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Peter recognized the hospital they had been delivered to immediately. It was the series "Love Pulse" which was dominated, as the name suggested, by love-worn doctors, nurses, interns, and patients. At one time he himself had been the new neurologist who had arrived at the hospital, quickly seduced and abandoned, in the next series he tried unsuccessfully to take revenge and then no longer appeared on stage; he couldn't even remember his name, if any had been given.

Peter carried Leonora into the cramped waiting room, put her on a stretcher and quickly, before Leonora could manage to say something else, warned the nurse that his wife has a fever, she's having nightmares and doesn't even understand what she's saying, but that morning everything had still been fine... Fortunately, Peter was interrupted by a routine "take her blood pressure, hook her up to the EKG, prepare the first operating room." Leonora sat up on the stretcher and tried to say something, but the nurse put an oxygen mask on her. Peter took one last look in her eyes wide with fear, and then she was carried away.

Peter gave a furtive glance off to the side - no, the curtain hadn't been lowered; maybe they had forgotten, maybe - just the opposite - they hadn't lowered it deliberately. Yet there was something fascinating in the way Peter now responded to everything he had learned - too fast, too incoherent, but still. So much storyline in one unfortunate scene!

Peter treaded the boards of the stage, trying not to step on the ones that creaked and trembled, and thought only of Leonora. In Peter's eyes, none of this was worth it - this child, this unexpected candour - it wasn't worth her blood. She was all Peter had known,

and all that he had loved. He even used to think about Leonora behind the scenes too, even when he had cast off his name and his role. Every time when there was turning point in the storyline and she had a new passion, a new intrigue, or a new extramarital affair, Peter supported her - with joy, suspicion, anger.

He, of course, was nothing more than a second or third rate role. The spotlight was on Leonora. And Peter - the rich, blindly loving husband - was left in the dark, remaining silent, he was a puppet on which the drama played out.

But he was good.

And she - who was she? She was a mediocre actress with a beautiful body, with long waving crimped hair, and a velvety chest voice. Peter walked in circles around the small room. Of course, everything will be fine with Leonora, he thought furiously, everything is fine for her, she can afford it. Or at least she thought that she could afford it. How could she have thought of something like that? Talking about scriptwriters, talking about the mimes. You could be dropped from the series for that, and if Leonora was dropped from the series, what will happen to Peter?

He watched how people or perhaps mimes moved behind the green curtains. The plastic hid most of the movement, covered everything in shadows. Peter hoped they were mimes, not the series doctor. The cases when "Love Pulse" doctors were allowed to operate were very rare, really only when a person was almost dead.

If the patient wasn't almost dead, but had somehow sinned in the eyes of the scriptwriter, then after a couple of unsuccessful resuscitation attempts death would set in - an awkward, laborious death, from which everyone tried to eke out the maximum drama.

And then they would come out to the fretting despondent relatives of the patient and in a professional, sad voice say "we did everything we could" and "unfortunately we weren't able to save him," and then they were also able to relax while the relatives and friends played out their tragedy.

Now it will be Peter's tragedy that he'll have to play out - no, he didn't want to think about that, he refused to think about it. Nothing had hurt Leonora like that - a little blood, that's all, you don't die from that. Yes, she could lose the child, and that would be tragic, but on the other hand - really how tragic would it be from Peter's point of view if his wife lost another man's child? Not too tragic; Peter already began to mentally rehearse phrases in response.

But nothing could happen to Leonora, nothing would happen; so they'd somehow have to extricate themselves from the situation, play it out as best they could. Maybe the scriptwriters really took the hint and Leonora would have a nervous breakdown or go totally crazy. There would be enough drama in that for years - constructing a story about an unhappy husband, whose crazy wife doesn't allow him to live fully, but he can't divorce her, because they have a child.

Out from the wings came some doctor walking rapidly across the stage. Peter stopped him. He remembered this doctor; he was a cardiologist, a failure and a fool who always had a broken heart and unhappy, utterly defeated eyes, hidden behind thick glasses. The glasses, of course, were just a prop. The doctor looked bewildered at Peter; he remembered this actor from another role, but did the new neurologist really have to

return? For a brief, malicious moment, Peter considered not saying anything and letting the cardiologist dig a grave for himself, mixing roles, but he took pity.

"How is she?" Peter demanded. The doctor nervously straightened his glasses.

"How is Leonora?" Peter clarified.

"Mmm, yes," the cardiologist said, cleared his throat and tugged at the stethoscope hung around his neck. Peter suspected that he didn't even know how it would be used.

"Please, help," Peter said.

"Nothing is certain yet," the doctor mumbled and hurried off.

Peter opened his hands wide - out of rage or maybe out of helplessness. Of course, that fool didn't know anything, what could he have known. Maybe some of the other doctors on the show knew a bit about medicine - but this cardiologist was pointless from the start, one of those who had a hard time saying the name of his own profession. So let him suffer his ignorance. Peter did not feel for him.

He no longer even felt for Leonora.

Only for himself.

He pictured Leonora lying on the hastily arranged operating table - half naked, drugged, drowsy, finally silent. And therein lay the role of Peter, on the border between continuation and ending.

Ten years he had invested in this series. It was where he had learned to play an adult role, where he had grown from a teenager into a man, where he had been freed from his desire to excel and win at any cost, where he had learned to carefully develop each gesture, each scene. Where he had understood that the most important thing is to feel, not to show,

that the most important thing is to live, not to play. And now that was all on the verge of collapse, and not because he had made a mistake. She had made the mistake - she'd lost her mind, lost her shame.

And conceived a child with Michael.

And where was this Michael, where was that black-haired hero? Probably somewhere happy in his pool. Peter had never been given a pool. A real one, one you could swim in. Peter hadn't even ever waded in a pool. Leonora had. At the time he hadn't even pretended to hate his wife.

And why is he still here, in this place, where no one remembers him, where no one looks at him - and rightly so, what could you see in a person walking aimlessly in circles? Peter turned on his heel and wanted to leave, but he didn't dare. He had to stick it out until the end. You had to stick out every scene until the end, no matter how ridiculous you had to play it. Every episode had to survive until the last drop, no matter how humiliating it may be. He clenched his teeth and blinked his eyes, they were blurry from who knows what - tears, dust, the smells of the hospital that had spread over the whole stage little by little?

Another moment, and he'll leave.

And then - a touch on his shoulder, the same doctor who came out from the side of the operating room. This time he looked more assured, a folder with text in his hands.

"Well?" Peter irritably demanded.

The doctor cleared his throat, looked at the paper. "Yes. Hm. Peter, yes?"

"Yes, but that's not important. What is happening to my wife?"

"Unfortunately we were too late."

"What - too late? She was fine, just a little bleeding, she was in perfect health just this morning!"

"Well yes, hm." The doctor looked at his page. "Pre-eclampsia, toxicosis, an unexpected lethal outcome. It might be, unfortunately, an exclusive situation."

An exclusive situation, oh God, what a failure you are, thought Peter, but it wasn't the right moment to say this. He grabbed the cardiologist by the shoulders so that the tiny little man shrunk even smaller. "But what about the child?"

"The child?"

"My child. She was expecting my child. My child..." Peter felt his voice cracking involuntarily.

"Yes, hm, the child." The doctor looked at his paper again, blinked his eyes, improvised. "We're very sorry."

"No," Peter said.

"We're really very sorry."