

Biography: Jana Egle, born in 1963, is a Latvian poet and prose writer. Her first collection of poems *Dzirdēt noklusēto* [To Hear the Unsaid] was published in 2002. She has been writing prose since 2011. In the 2015 Prose Readings Festival, she received the main prize for her stories *Tāds Rudens* [Such Autumn] and *Aiziet jūriņā* [At Sea]. Egle's collection of stories *Gaismā* [Into the Light] won the Annual Latvian Literature Award 2017 and her episodic novel *Svešie jeb Mīļņkij ti moi* [Strangers or Milenky ty moy] was shortlisted for the Annual Latvian Literature Award 2019.

Synopsis: This book brings together eight stories about the different stages of women's lives at moments when they are painfully affected by circumstances beyond their control. They are about longing and loss, about values, desire, loneliness, fear of death, attachment, and love – and also how these experiences transform over the course of a lifetime, how they affect a woman's journey through life, forcing her to face various external and internal struggles.

Excerpt

The white house at the top of the hill

"I'm sorry.

I don't know if you need to hear that, but even if you won't answer, it's important for me to say it. I'm sorry.

I'm having a small party Saturday. I'd be so happy to see you there. In the afternoon.

At the white house. You know, I'm still living in the white house."

Lilija has just poured the hot water for her morning coffee. She drops one whole teaspoon of ground coffee into the large, dark green cup adorned with jagged ornamentation, which looks Indian, but it's hard to say whether from the sub-continent or North America. A little bit of cinnamon with bergamot, some vanilla, and plenty of steamed milk. White, light, aromatic coffee without sugar. Clenching the cup with both hands in her usual way – as if it didn't also have large, comfortable handles – Lilija warms up her freezing fingers. They always feel like they're freezing. She studies her short-clipped nails, cracked hangnails, and the dry, pale, wrinkled skin covering the top of her hand. She makes a fist and releases it watching the veins wriggling underneath like blue worms. When her fingers feel warm enough, Lilija puts down her cup and looks out the window. For years her morning ritual has never changed. Coffee. Fingers. Window. But now there was that letter. It had ruined the rhythm. It was wriggling around like a worm, but much deeper and less predictably than the veins plainly visible underneath the shiny, creased skin of her hands.

An open envelope with no stamp or address. Delicate lowercase letters, all of about the same size, and ornate uppercase letters with calligraphic flourishes. Lilija gazes at the letter for a moment, she studies every line, every curve and loop, she has seen this handwriting before. But she could not recall who had written it... There are so many things she could no longer remember.

The phone rings, Lilija realises she was so engrossed in the letter that she hadn't even finished her coffee. Her daughter always calls twice a day at exactly the same time – at nine in the morning when Lilija has had a chance to slowly sip and finish her coffee, and at

six in the evening. Lilija moves swiftly taking tiny steps to reach the phone. It is still in the exact same spot on the shelf in the front hall it's been for the last decades.

"Good morning, mum!"

"Good morning, Mar..., Žan..., Ingrīd," Lilija is unsure as she responds.

"Žanete, mum, it's me – Žanete."

"Yes, Žanete, I know, I'm sorry."

"How did you sleep? How do you feel? I'll stop by tonight. Do you need anything?"

Behind three houses on the tiny side street there is a little shop. In a pinch you can buy what you need there or get it on credit. Luīze, the small, chubby shopkeeper, has tiny hands and thin fingers. She is up early in the morning kneading dough, whisking eggs, and baking pastries, all the while sneezing and laughing. "I'm allergic to wheat flour," she happily announces to anyone who turns up at the moment Luīze sneezes four or five times in a row like a cat. On Mondays she conjures up all kinds of wonderful flaky pastries – croissants, napoleons, elephant ears, and cheese straws. On Wednesdays, it's apple cake made with yeast dough and sinfully indulgent cheesecake, cinnamon coffee cake, mushroom and bacon pasties, but on Fridays, it's cream puffs, cupcakes with fruit and caramel cream, éclairs, and other fancy things. "You can't have everything at once or on sale everyday, otherwise customers get used to it and stop appreciating it," Luīze says. "But if they're forced to wait a week, then they know its value. They'll stop by the night before, give me a wink, and add their names to the list. I have to make sure that I make enough for everybody. They've spent that time anticipating it. And anticipation can make even a pastry more valuable, desirable." Arnolds, the owner, is often behind the counter. A slim, raven-haired fifty-year-old with a

humped nose, brown, seemingly permanently startled eyes, and constantly trembling nostrils, just like those of a spooked Arabian horse. Every smell and stench in the store keeps irritating the mucous membranes in his nose, that can't be easy, thinks Lilija. She knows that her own nose with its delicate and nuanced sense of smell has been her enemy for her entire life.

"I don't think I need anything," Lilija hesitates before answering her daughter. There's still enough coffee, she remembers that. "Žanete? What day is it today?"

"Saturday," Žanete snaps back, "Why do you ask?"

"That's what I thought, Luīze baked éclairs yesterday, and so, yes, then yesterday was Friday and today is Saturday," Lilija concludes quite logically without answering why she needed to know what day it was.

"OK, mum, then I'll be by sometime after five."

Lilija shoots a sideways glance at the letter on the table. Saturday. In the afternoon, at the white house. Today is Saturday, Žanete had said. Lilija couldn't really remember the way to the white house, that was already so long ago. Lately she only goes as far as Luīze and Arnolds's store by herself on Wednesday and Fridays. She doesn't like Monday's flaky pastries, they're too crumbly and dry. She definitely remembers though that she has to climb up to the house, that it's high up, that there is a wide street that runs right along front of it, but to get up to it, she has to scale a narrow path paved with cobblestones. Lilija is sure that once she goes outside, her steps will lead her to the white house.

She gets dressed and selects clothes that feel light and easy on her body. Her faded linen skirt with ruffles and white embroidered cotton blouse match the blooming white lilacs in front of the house. When she walks out onto the street, Lilija rests for a moment on her cane and looks in one direction and then the other several times. The path leading past the lilacs leads to the pastry shop. Lilija has the feeling that the correct way is in the other direction. She turns and slowly, but with an air of certainty, heads down the narrow sidewalk, which hugs the edge of the wide, asphalt street.

It was definitely a good idea to bring the cane, she concludes after just a few blocks. Lilija hardly ever uses it when she walks to Luīze and Arnolds's little shop, only on days when a magnetic storm is raging, which has a profound effect on her sense of well-being, disturbs her blood pressure, and can make her extremely dizzy. But today is a good day. Walking down the sloping street, her cane is just the right companion. And she'll still need to climb back up later. Lilija realises that she must have left the letter back at home on the table... Eh, she grouses, well, what can you do, she opens up her knit purse and rummages around for a moment examining her wallet, comb, mirror, lipstick, two old theatre programmes – oh God, it had been so long since Lilija had been to the theatre! – then also a few old receipts, a card with a picture of the Virgin Mary. No, Lilija isn't all that sure of her beliefs, she's probably not a believer, but sometimes she gets a little scared, what if God does exist after all, and how will it be when at the appointed hour she'll have to stand before Him and answer for all of her sins and mistakes, for the answered prayers that caused nothing but pain and disappointment. Lilija wants to truly believe, but belief isn't something you can

plant in someone's head like a seed in the ground. Believe or don't believe, and if you doubt your own belief, then it's clear you don't really believe.

The letter isn't in her purse. Just a hint of lavender. Lilija always makes sure everything around her smells clean and fresh and not, heaven forbid, stagnant or stinking.

You smell good, He always said when he'd hug Lilija. She never believed Him and was always consumed by doubt, the constant movement, work, and heat caused her to sweat; I stink like a horse – that was her first thought when in the middle of the day He suddenly burst through the door, like a swift wind, unexpected and yet so welcome. Wait, I'm sweaty, I'll wash off, she awkwardly wriggled out from His embrace. No, no, stop. He took a deep breath, His nose pressed against Lilija's short, clipped, but still full, black hair. You smell like a woman, like a real woman, do you understand? Lilija blushed and didn't believe him. How long are you going to stay? Two months, maybe a little more. He said unconvincingly, turning away as if something in the room had changed, was new. Nothing ever changed in Lilija's home, except perhaps the tablecloth, the rug by the bed, a new cup replacing a broken one, a different indoor plant, a candle taking the place of one that had burned out, a new photograph behind the glass in the cabinet. Nothing changed. Except for her as she slowly aged, twenty-six, already thirty, thirty-three...

A week later He stopped bringing it up at all. Every night His arms would still wrap tightly around her body. Lilija could never stop being amazed by how perfectly their bodies fit together, it was as if her ample flesh was meant for His lean, defined bones, which she could almost count. And sometimes Lilija would do exactly that: a collarbone, shoulders,

one, two, three ribs, a masculine, solid nipple (brush it with my lips), four, five, stop, that tickles, a narrow pelvis, a hip bone, skin, lips, breath, tongue. He didn't count Lilija's bones, and it wasn't even so easy to do, His hands and lips brushed across her warm, tense flesh over and over again, she'd lost count how many times. Then, holding her close, still burning with heat, He would inhale deeply from the space between her breasts pulling the air into His nostrils. What do I smell like, she asked. At night, like freshly baked bread, in the morning, a little bitter, like marigolds or sometimes like green apples, and then you also have a smell that I can't describe, maybe that's the real one, the one that's just yours, He laughed. That one is rare though, only when I'm leaving. He fell silent. I love you, do you know that? Yes. I know, she answered, smelling like warm bread.

At the end of the second week, His embrace hadn't loosened after all. In truth, it never did. But sometimes at night He would jolt upright with a gasp, which sounded a bit like a cry. Lilija knew that soon He would stop talking. Then He would become irritable. And then one morning after another week, He would pull her so close that she wouldn't even be able to see into His eyes, He would bury His lips in her thick hair, and every one of His words would feel like warm, heavy stone against her scalp as He spoke them – I just can't anymore, I need to go. I'll come back.

Lilija had walked part way down the hill. She hadn't turned down any of the small side streets – their yards bubbling over with blushing bursts of burnet roses and clouds of blooming lilacs in every shade under the sky, their air filled with the pungency of the nearby shore, the fleeting scent of flowers, and the always present odour of cat and human urine. The street levels out here and Lilija stops for a moment. It's cool, the sun is drenching the

city with light and heat, but even so Lilija is always feels a bit cold. She stands there with her hand lifted to shade her eyes and looks first in one direction, then the other. A few flushed passers-by in summery clothes, necks dotted with sweat, and skin blushing in the light of the first sunny day, walk past her quietly, as if they were moving through her, they are all going in the same direction, but Lilija doesn't know, nor does she even sense that her path heads in the opposite direction. Every few moments, a gust of hot wind blows her linen skirt and hair about. Her hair is still thick and strong, but now completely grey. She continues on her way at an unhurried pace supporting herself on her cane. In a flash she feels she remembers the way and that on the next side street she needs to turn right. With the sun staring at her back, her black shadow sliding in front of her, Lilija's white form is right on its heels.

Back then, Lilija's apartment had no running water. Every day she had to walk to the water pump two blocks away with a bucket in one hand and a smaller jug in the other – she didn't need as much water for drinking. She used the water sparingly. Her arms were so weak and it was so heavy to carry. When He would suddenly burst in again, He would bring her so much that she was able to soak and splash in it to her heart's content. He would usually fill the large kettles on the wood stove in the kitchen with water, light the fire, and then place the tin washtub already filled with cool water right next to it on the floor. I got you your water, He'd say, wash, swim, dive into it like a mermaid, soothe away all your worries. And think of me while you're washing. I'm going for a walk, I need to cool down. And I'll be thinking about you, all the time about you. You know I love you, don't you? And then I'll be back.

The door slams shut and Lilija pours some of the hot water from the kettles into the cool tub with a smile, washing, diving into like a mermaid, and soothing away her worries. And she would think of Him. She would utter a silent prayer for something to change, for something to happen that would make Him stay and never leave again. Maybe not this time, maybe next time or after three more times. It slowly got dark outside. There was plenty of water in the tub and it had been heated on an open flame, Lilija was beaming, heated all the way through, and felt truly alive.

He came home with damp hair, excited and playful as a puppy. Leave the lights off, He whispered in Lilija's ear, lifting her warm and soft body with His cool arms, to carry her into the room. They caressed each other slowly, Lilija ran her fingertips across the scales covering His body, so that's why He didn't want the lights on, He's turned into a scaly sea monster; Lilija could smell the sea in His hair and taste the salt on His scaly skin. Where were you, what happened to you, she laughed, when they stopped they both were holding each other tightly again, mirroring each other's form with their bodies. Lilija, I found a house! I'll buy you a house, have you seen it – there, on the west side of the city, at the very highest point. Built from white stones with a red tin roof. The white house at the top of the hill, I'll buy it for you. Lilija kept laughing, tracing shapes with her fingers on His scaly back. Don't laugh, please, I'm going to make a lot of money and buy you a house.

Why is your skin covered with scales? I thought you'd turned into a fairytale dragon and were going to spirit me away to who knows where. I thought you'd take me with you and we'd stay together. Every day, every moment. You want to stay together, don't you? He laughed, leapt out of bed, and turned on the light. I'd gone swimming in the sea, I didn't

have a towel, but I ran back so quickly to be with you that the wind dried all the sand and seaweed onto my body. Yes, I'm a sea monster now. Lilija looked with wide eyes at His skin, the sheets, the floor, there was white sand and dried seaweed everywhere. I'm sorry, He said, I'm going to rinse off in the water you were soaking in while you waited for me. And then I'll clean everything up. Lilija laughed, and her tears ran down onto the sandy sheets.

The walk has made her a little tired, but here was the small park with the fountain, she remembers it, nothing has changed. Lilija sits down on the bench next to two stone fish, which are vomiting water straight into the air, they're tightly entwined with each other, just like she had once been with someone else, Lilija tenses as she tries to remember that person's name, but it's gone, mixed in with the rest of that pile of people, places, and events. She can't arrange them properly in her mind or recall the special place she had put any of them so she wouldn't forget them later. He has no name, Lilija relaxes, she has never had any luck when she has let herself become anxious and tried to force something. Instead, when she needs to remember something she has forgotten, it will usually spring up at the least expected moment. Lilija looks at the moist, awkward bodies and thick lips of the fish. Clouds have covered the sky, and though the world still appears bright, gusts of wind are chasing each other through the tops of the linden trees and are shaking them. There's a sound like threatening whispers, and then everything is calm again. Lilija has no sense of how much time has passed since she started on her way. She is a little tired, it is still cool, but it feels like her destination should come soon. After the park she still has to walk past the small fuchsia-coloured Orthodox church, then turn right again, and then, yes, then there

should be a cobbled path up to the top. And at the very top of the hill – the white house where she can finally find peace. Lilija knows she is expected there.

And then Lilija got her wish, He stayed. After three or five more times, He couldn't leave anymore. Lilija had noticed during the last few times how His breathing, which had always been quiet, was now rattling and wheezing instead. He no longer burst in like the wind, He didn't carry Lilija in His arms anymore. Every time He entered her house it was like its entire volume, its full depth and height, were filled by him. From the ceiling down to even the tiniest space, everything became part of Him – fresh, serene, strong, and resonant. Lilija would dive into Him, swim in Him, flowing into His clarity, absorbing His freshness, and breathing His strength in deeply. And then, imperceptibly, it all slowly began to fade. The space was still filled by Him, but it felt different, maybe even a little difficult...

You know I love you, don't you, He held her hands as if He were pleading with her, afterwards He would hold her in an insecure, but still warm embrace. You smell nice, a tired voice wheezed into the hair near her ear. What do I smell like, Lilija asked. I'll stay here, my love, with you. Forever, He said, without answering her question. Lilija wanted to feel happy, but she didn't. My prayers have been answered, finally, how good, He will stay here, she repeated to herself flatly over and over again.

Lilija continues walking slowly, she leaves the park and looks around with confusion. Everything here is not as she remembers. There's no chapel and the streets run in completely different directions, not in the direction she needs to turn to reach the white

house. While Lilija is standing there befuddled, occasional, heavy drops start falling from the sky, they hit her skin here and there and leave grey, transparent, wet spots on her white clothing. It's cold. Lilija steps to one side of the sidewalk and stands underneath a large maple tree. Its trunk is scarred and warm, Lilija presses up tightly against it, outside the rain is starting to fall harder and heavier, but she feels safe here.

Several young people run past her laughing and shrieking without noticing the woman standing under the tree. A man in a suit with an umbrella rushes by quickly. Lilija looks on, gripping her cane tightly, she is confused, tired, and now rather cold. A group of boys approaches her, they're confident, calm, the rain falls over their dark faces and black eyes, but they don't run or try to avoid it. As they come closer, Lilija hears them speaking in a strange language filled with nasal, guttural sounds. Their sentences begin somewhere above their heads and then fall whistling and jostling to the earth along with the rain, sinking into the puddles already collecting in the cracks in the asphalt.

"Puis-je vous aider, madame?"

Lilija becomes frightened and at the same moment catches sight of his dark face and brown eyes. He smells like seaweed and in an instant he has filled Lilija's entire world with a strange, pungent, but still pleasant odour. Lilija stares at his face, a little stream is slowly flowing from his temple down past his chin, and she presses her purse closer to her breast.

"Puis-je vous aider?" he says again, Lilija doesn't understand a word and only shakes her head. No, no, she won't go along with the boy, she won't give him her purse, she won't give up, she'll scream if she has to. And just in case she grips her cane even more tightly.

The other boys say something in the strange language and the attacker apparently changes his mind. He smiles at Lilija and returns to his friends. They walk away, the boy turns around one more time and looks at her, but doesn't return, the acrid odour lingers everywhere around her, Lilija, shaking from fear and cold, breathes it in deeply several times. It irritates her nose and makes her feel drowsy.

The downpour stops. The maple tree protected Lilija fairly well, a bit of moisture soaked into her clothes and hair, but she really did avoid getting drenched. The sun peeks out from behind the clouds and in an instant everything around her is aglitter. Lilija remains under the maple for just a moment longer, but the strange, drowsy smell had dissipated, and, leaning heavily against her cane, she walks out into the light.

He really tried. But Lilija didn't know how to be with Him when He was like this. The rooms were still filled by Him, but there was no freshness or clarity. And now it was all the time, every day, every hour, every moment. The air grew stagnant, thick, it was hard to breathe... She was slowly drowning. He was becoming weaker every day, the packaging and bottles for His pills were piling up, the doctors only shook their heads. He asked for forgiveness. I love you, I'm sorry, you know I love you. She brought water for them both and every moment she could, she ran to the sea. To go for a swim, stand naked in the wind, breathe in, to feel strong and free. And to fight and battle the thoughts reminding her how she had hoped for this, prayed for it. Let Him stay here with her. Let it come to pass that He stays.

A year and a half later He had a heart transplant. It's a miracle, He said, when after the surgery they were permitted to exchange a few words for the first time. A miracle. Lilija stood at His bedside dressed in a sterile hospital gown with a mask on her face and wept. He recovered, His doctors nodded approvingly at every appointment. Everything went according to plan and two months after the operation He returned home.

I've lost my sense of smell, He said quietly as He came into the room. I can't smell a thing anymore. Lilija was afraid to embrace Him, so fragile, even more gaunt and transparent than before, and with a strange heart beating in His chest. She kept bringing water for them both, a month later He joined her and carried the jug of drinking water, and it wasn't too much longer before He would start bringing all the water again for their shared home.

His sense of smell didn't return. And they slept without touching at night. On weekends they would go on walks, exchanging words and phrases that were so unimportant that later on neither of them could even remember what they had talked about. Only once when a man was coming towards them with a dog, a brown, wiry, and frisky dachshund, He held onto Lilija's hand without even realising it. Hello, Mr Engelmanis. Hello, how are you doing, how do you feel, answered the slender, very tall man, dodging the question without removing his glasses. I'm really doing quite well, He answered calmly. Everything is good and I'll be seeing you again soon. For a check-up. I'm happy you're following my advice to walk, move, live a full life, the doctor said leaning down a bit in a tone that left no room for disagreement. His white teeth flashed below his dark glasses. The dachshund was fidgeting

and had wrapped its leash around the doctor's legs – it yelped impatiently. Have a good day, Mr Engelmanis. Thank you.

He let go of her hand immediately. They walked in a silence for a moment. I didn't ask them what they did with my heart. During that entire time, I didn't ask about that even once, not before, not after. Lilija didn't know what to say, they have rules after all, instructions, I don't know, utilisation procedures. You could still ask about it. He was quiet for another moment. I don't believe them, He finally said forcing the words across His lips. I don't know where my heart is.

At night He tossed and moaned. Lilija stretched out her hand and put it soothingly on His shoulder, but it didn't help. Lilija slid out of the warm bed without turning on the light and went into the kitchen. She dipped a cup into the half-empty jug, took a few sips, and poured the rest back. Back in the room He was sitting up in bed staring at the wall. Lilija, I had a dream. Lilija crawled back into her place, the sheet and blanket gently nestled her in the warmth she had stored and saved up herself. I had a dream, He said again. But Lilija didn't say anything, and He kept speaking quietly. I woke up during the operation but I couldn't speak or move. I saw everything. Engelmanis tossed my heart into an aluminium tray and everyone pretended not to see anything. The nurses, anaesthesiologist, some kind of assistants. There was a crowd of people there and no one gave a single thought to Engelmanis throwing my heart into a tray under the operating table. He was quiet for a moment. Then continued. And then he finished sewing up my chest and walked out, I stayed on the table naked and empty, completely powerless, until I suddenly felt I could get up, I could stand, and I decided to follow Engelmanis. I shouldn't have looked back, but I did and

saw myself lying on the operating table, naked, empty, with a dark red seam down the middle of my chest, restrained by cables, a tube coming out of my mouth. I hesitated for a moment, but then left myself lying there and went with Engelmanis.

Lilija was getting cold. She wrapped her blanket even more tightly around herself and pulled her knees up to her chest.

We went to the doctor's house. He was casually carrying the tray in his hand, I thought I could hear an occasional heartbeat echoing deeply against its aluminium sides. I think he knew I was there with him. Because when we got to his house, he unlocked the door and slipped inside so quickly that I wasn't able to dash in with him and so had to stay outside. I stood there for a moment not sure what to do next, I'm not sure for how long. Time passes at a different rate in dreams than in real life.

He became quiet again. Then He turned His head towards Lilija, in the darkness the space where His eyes would be appeared only as two black hollows. And then I smelled it. He continued. You know that I've lost my sense of smell... But I clearly smelled the odour of cooked meat with onions, bay leaves, spices, and a little bit of garlic. I snuck up to the window, the light was on inside, there were no curtains, and Engelmanis was using a knife to slice small pieces off my heart. Off a greyish-brown, steaming heart fresh out of the pot. He was cutting it into pieces, but on the ground was the dachshund, standing up on its hind legs, whirling around him. The doctor let out a cheery laugh and every now and again would say – speak! And as soon as the dachshund would bark, he would shove a piece of my heart into its mouth.

Lilija couldn't stand to listen to any more, she wrapped her head in the blanket and laid down on her stomach. He stopped talking. He sat for a moment, and then also laid down and stared at the ceiling. That's how they remained until the morning. Maybe one of them dozed off for a moment, maybe not. The next morning, Lilija woke up first and made Him breakfast.

When He walked into the kitchen, Lilija came up close to Him and hugged Him. His body shuddered with involuntary resistance. Lilija pressed her head close to Him so that her short, thick hair scattered across His face and was quiet for a moment. What do I smell like? What does my hair smell like? His body kept resisting. You know that I can't smell anything, He muttered. Do you love me? Lilija asked in a more demanding tone, lifting her gaze and staring right into His eyes.

I don't know, He turned away. I don't know, He said a little louder. I don't know if it's even possible to love with this strange heart. I don't know, He was almost screaming. His body was strong again, and His breath didn't wheeze or rattle, but He had lost His sense of smell. Completely.

Then leave. Lilija screamed back at Him. I can't and don't want this anymore. I have no strength, every room is filled with you, there's nothing else, you're everywhere, in every space, from the walls to the ceiling, it's just you, so heavy and impenetrable. There's no room for me here anymore, I'm slowly disappearing, drowning, dissolving into you and into hopelessness. Go away! You don't need me anymore, you're strong, much stronger than before.

Leaving the shelter of the maple tree, Lilija suddenly sees the small fuchsia-coloured chapel exactly where it had always been. Where earlier, before the rain, she couldn't find it. Smiling to herself and a bit cross about her earlier agitation, Lilija turns wearily in its direction and is now rather certain that it's only a short distance to the white house. The air is brilliantly clear and refreshing, the aroma of fresh grass, lilacs, and wet asphalt is coming from all directions.

Lilija is walking slowly, supporting herself on her cane, the road leads upward at a steady angle, but she knows that the final climb will be the most difficult. Still, Lilija is ready to walk, climb up, climb into herself, right now the white house seems like the endpoint of a long, difficult pilgrimage where she will at long last find peace and absolution... She passes the church, turns right, and after a few dozen metres more of a steady climb, she finally catches sight of the white house shining in the sun at the end of a steep cobbled side street. Lilija feels simultaneously relieved and anxious. Only this climb remains, it's not so long as it is steep. Catching her breath, she clutches her cane and heads up. It would be easier if the sun wasn't in her eyes. If I can't manage all of it at once, I'll rest halfway, Lilija consoles herself. And slowly, thoughtfully, and with the support of her trusty cane, she reaches her destination. Lilija is standing in front of the house, looking at its white stone walls, then tips her head back and gazes at the red tin roof glittering in the sunlight. Finally, she lifts up her shaking hand and, as her heart is doing somersaults, presses the button for the bell next to the door.

A young woman opens the door, she looks so much like Him that Lilija gets confused for a second. For a moment, the young woman looks at Lilija like she's seen a miracle, then

jumps across the threshold and hugs her. The woman smells like the sea, just like He did, but also in some other way that seems familiar to Lilija, but she can't quite place it.

"Oh God, where were you all this time, I had no idea what to think or do, I'd run over to Luīze and Arnolds, but they said that they hadn't seen you since yesterday, you upset them too. They said to call them if I needed help looking for you. I almost called the police, mum, now, where were you? Where were you walking, mum, and what's that letter on the kitchen table, who did you write it to?"

Lilija slowly steps across the threshold and walks into her house. Her fatigue prevents her from speaking, she walks to the guest room and falls into the large, soft chair. On the way, Žanete runs into the kitchen, grabs the letter off the table, pours some water from the carafe into a glass, then goes into the room, covers Lilija's knees with a quilt, hands the water to her mum, and, sitting down on the floor next to Lilija's chair, nestles up close to her legs.

"Who were you writing it to?"

Lilija greedily drinks the water, then stops – her memory suddenly snaps into place and spits out the name that Lilija had been trying to remember for so long.

"To Karels."

"To Karels, mum? Dad died," Žanete stares into Lilija's eyes as she speaks. "Dad died twenty-five years ago. Don't you remember?"

Lilija puts the glass down and pulls the quilt up higher. She really is cold.

"Mum, I'll move in with you, OK? It'll be easier for me, I won't have to pay rent, and there's more room here, we can take care of the house together, it'll be cheaper for both of us, I'll help you do everything around the house, what do you think?"

"You already help," Lilija says as if she had just woken up. "But what about your work? It'll be such a long trip for you."

"It'll be OK, I'll manage. So, does that mean I can move in? I'll have the same room."

Žanete is smiling, but her eyes are clouded over and dark.

Žanete was born when they were already living in the white house. The scar from Lilija's Caesarean section was healing just as fully and correctly as Karels's opened chest had once.

When Karels would lean over His wife at night and lie on top of her with His sinuous, lean frame, so He could caress each of her most hidden and sensitive spots with His mouth, their scars would press against each other and they could both feel how they would pulse, aching ever so slightly.

Karels's sense of smell never returned. He left her suddenly and unexpectedly. During the night. In His sleep.