

**Biography:** Dace Rukšāne (1969) is a Latvian writer and journalist. Rukšāne became known in 2002 for her novel *The Little Love Affair*, which touched upon the subjects of feminine sexuality and gained great popularity. It was followed by other books as well as many articles and columns devoted to intimate subject matters and relationships. During the 1990s, Rukšāne also wrote poetry, and in the early 2000s several of her plays were staged in various theaters in Latvia. Her works have been translated into numerous languages and her novels have been published in translation abroad.

**Synopsis:** The novel explores the lives of two women, Emīlija and Meldra, a mother and daughter, in the occupied territory of the Latvian S.S.R. during the 1950s and 60s and, more specifically, the mother's forbidden love for a representative of the occupants – a Russian. Emīlija lives on a farm not far from Liepāja. Her husband was killed during the war, she has a teenage daughter to care for and life in the countryside is tough. Stalin dies, Khrushchev comes to power and deportees to Siberia start to return home. Incredible poverty is endured in the kolkhozes so, to break free from the hardships of such a life, Emīlija sets her sights on Vilis, a builder who has arrived from Liepāja to build wood burners in country houses. They get married and the new family moves to the city. Emīlija starts working as a cook, Meldra attends the city school and Vilis starts making large sums of money, his skills in high demand after the war.

## Excerpt

### Prologue

A sweaty, foam-covered horse reared onto its hind legs in the hollow of Emily's throat. The jockey's polished leather riding boots slid with a quiet smack down the sweaty sides of the animal, the stirrups pressing down against its coat, the spurs caressing its ribs.

Here he is – the Grand Duke of a dead and buried Russia – Dmitry Pavlovich Romanov! So handsome, so reserved, clean-shaven, straight out of his saddle. In full uniform in all its splendour, at the feet of Coco Chanel. Just for a fleeting moment. An instant of former glory, gratitude to a seeming happenstance, a polite gesture. He is no longer able to hide his love. He has been feigning for so long, running away from it for so long, he has endured an enforced refrain for so long. Chanel's necklace tears, the grey pearls scattering across the fine silk sheets. His breath smells of tobacco. Coco has just eaten an orange, her fingers still sticky from the juicy peel.

'Emily, when did you last smell oranges?'

Emily slides her fingers in the hollow above her collarbone and draws the fragrant drop downwards. She looks in the mirror and sees her younger self. Her eyes as shiny as the filly's on the days she swishes her tail aside in expectation.

'Mum, why don't you take a dip in the lake to freshen up? That perfume isn't doing you any favours.' It smells like an old shed where a bucket of soapy water has been upturned. The sight of her mother looking so insane makes her daughter feel close to tears.

Meldra is frightened. Meldra is standing in the doorway, watching her mother staring in the mirror, completely lost to the world. She is holding an old bottle of *Cuir de Russie* and slowly going insane. Her mother doesn't hear, she is enthralled to the mating season. Emily turns towards her daughter, looks into her eyes and smiles. It's one of those homely smiles, the sort Meldra has known so well and for as long as she can remember. Momentarily, the tension in Meldra eases and she takes a few steps into the room before startling and drawing back - she hasn't taken off her shoes and she can't go in like that.

## Meldra

Sea eagles – those seafarers don't live far from our house in Baltpurvs. They have an enormous nest high up in a tree and I often go there in late autumn. But only in the autumn. My mother wouldn't allow it in the spring or summer – those great birds must be left in peace then, they mustn't be disturbed - they are not as fearless as the storks that steal gristle from under the dog's nose right in the middle of the garden. Mummy loves everyone. She loves the Germans, the Russians, the birds, too. When I was born in a basement in Liepāja during a bomb raid, German soldiers offered us food. When the Russians came, they gave cloth for nappies to all the women who had recently given birth. Mummy said we should love all living beings. My dad disappeared during the war - I don't know if he is still alive or if my mum still loves him or not.

Mum has me, Meldra, and a black goat that spends half the time in the old, crooked apple tree by the cattle-shed (kuts). She also has a whole room to herself in Skrīveriene's house not far from Krote. I have a bed in a tiny box room behind the kitchen.

We live like two well-to-do ladies, considering that after the war we were tossed from one house to another, from one neighbour to another where we often had no more than a corner of the floor to sleep on. Skrīveriene is generous and kind to us; she believes mum shouldn't share her room with a child as she is too young to bury herself away. I don't really know what she means by that, I wouldn't have anything against sharing the room with her, I wouldn't try to bury anything but Mummy seems glad to have her own breathing space.

'Oh Milda, Milda, what would we have done without you? We would have been tossed from house to house, wasting away with hunger, something horrible could have

happened to us in some unseen corner!' Mum sighs and throws her arms round Milda's neck.

The two of them stay like that, clinging to each other and muttering, 'Oh my, oh my.'

Yes, Milda Skrūve is a true heroine - the only person in the immediate neighbourhood still permitted the use of her own horse and granted special authorization to keep sows, something others have been denied. Of course, she was forced to part with some of her piggies, not to mention their meat in autumn, and every morning she had to collect milk from the neighbouring houses and take it to the dairy. And yet when she wasn't working, she would saddle her bay stallion and race to see her neighbours, standing upright in her cart, singing. And why not sing when during the war, right below the eagles, someone had dug out some sort of bunker, home to three cows kept in secret, piles of potatoes covered for winter and several sheaves of rye hung to dry under the roof. You could buy milk, butter, sour cream, a slice of cured meat or even something stronger from her there. No one gave her away. No one.

They knew what was what in Courland. Several years ago, almost half of the houses suddenly emptied overnight. Folk soon got wind of who had drawn up lists and informed on them. The poor Judas ran into some very bad luck – he drowned. Spring in full bloom, his eyes poked out, his limbs broken.

Mum's father didn't return home that night. He wasn't one of the ones rounded up, he wasn't on the list of deportees. All the same, when everyone next door was taken away in the dead of night, including a child sick with pneumonia, he offered to use his horse to take them all to the local council building, in the hope they wouldn't come down with something worse. He went but they didn't let him return home - he was put on the train

with the others. Mum's mother died of heart failure the night the family home was burnt down.

My mum's sister Berta lives in the house next to ours, right behind the red-cupped scaber stalk grove. She calls herself comrade Pele – comrade Mouse - as under this government she is no longer permitted to call herself Mrs. Pele. There she is, married to a former servant who escaped conscription thanks to being lame. The owners of the house were taken away in 1941, so the house was left to the Mouse family. Almost the same day as I was born, a little mouse entered the world of the Mouse family; my cousin Judīte. We are the best of friends and, while our mums are slaving away at the kolkhoz, we fry pancakes, make soup and keep an eye out for the old pastor driving home from the cemetery. We would love to hit his car windows with pebbles to get some pretty bits of glass. But we fail miserably – the car always drives by too fast and we miss it, messing about. Mum used to say that we, too, would have a car one day – all white and shiny. Oh, how I would love to see it!

Comrade Pele, just like Skrūveriene, is hiding something near Milda's bunker. Quite some time before the war, Mum and her brother had reclaimed a field from the forest there. He managed, just in time, to pull the stumps out and burn the lot, but land is land. The rye they sowed there isn't flourishing but for all that, it is still theirs.

'What can you expect of earth taken from the forest?' comrade Pele sighs. 'It didn't give itself willingly, it was taken by force. Now the rye is as fragile as God's hair.'

Their brother didn't return from the war. He fell near Leningrad and was buried there.

Judīte and I go to the same school. I like reading whereas she prefers sums. Judīte has a notebook where she keeps a tally of everything; all her incomings and outgoings. She

uses her lunch money to buy candy that smells of petrol. She unwraps it, lets it air off, then wraps it up again and sells it at a profit at school. After that she goes to the cinema. I don't want to rush back home either as I'm always put to work - weeding, picking grasses and milking the goat, a task as hard as the clay earth. Which is why I disappear off to the forest, climb up the gigantic fir tree, make myself comfortable in the eagle's nest and read. No one can find me there. My favourites are books about animals, birds and other living creatures. I have read all the "Animals of the World" books by Alfred Brehm three times.

Mum grumbles all the time about my reading. 'You must work, you must, there's no time to sit around with your nose in a book!' But I know better – comrade Pele has told me all about it. Mummy was educated in Riga, graduating from the famous Kaucminde Housekeeping School. She worked as a governess for a Jewish doctor's family then gained a place studying chemistry in the Faculty of Science at the University as she wanted to become a master perfumier. She would only return fleetingly from the restless city for my birthday to visit her relatives; nowadays she can't bear the farm work she does and constantly mourns her lost opportunities. We should all forgive her and carry on doing as we please. Back in the day, my mum had been a great reader; clever and erudite. I will become like that one day – I will study, become an ornithologist and write my own books.

Mummy is a great cook, when she had something to cook with, that is. There are times when we are without even the bare essentials. She assures us that she is the queen of desserts, but you need caster sugar for those. What is that? I only know sugar beets. Even Milda doesn't have any caster sugar.

One fine day on our way home from school, Judīte and I notice some Russians in army uniforms. They come towards us, shouting loudly to each other and laughing.

'Oh my god!' Judīte wails quietly, 'they are coming to take us away to Siberia!' We roll down the ditch and, keeping low, run to the kolkhoz fields to warn our mothers. I take a deep breathe, keel over and roll over and over, down to the bottom of a damp ditch. My school uniform is soaking wet from the cold water while a seafarer glides high above me in the blue sky. The eagle is free, oblivious to my ragged breath.

The bird is suddenly replaced by a pair of eyes, bluer than the sky. My white collar and red neckerchief are reflected in them.

'Come here,' he says in Russian, beckoning with his finger.

This is it, it's the end. There's nowhere to hide. I will not give Judīte away. She might still make it.

'Have you got any salt at home?' the blue eyes ask me.

'What???'

'Salt.'

Emīlija

I'm so sick and tired of all of it! Cattle all around, everywhere you turn. At home, I spent my life at their rear quarters the whole time, the same on the farm, even my child has to take care of these pigs. No, I'm not saying a word, I'm not provoking the wrath of God, we have much more than the others, thanks to Milda who took us in to Baltpurvi House after our family home was burnt down. Although, I do understand her choice – better a fine damsel with a child than those crazy farm women, they would send her someone anyhow. I want to get back to Riga. Although, it's true what they say, that Riga is full of cattle as well – as a university friend told me in a letter, every room of Madam Adler's eight room

apartment is now home to a whole family. Madam herself, along with her husband and children I babysat and taught, disappeared as soon as the Krauts arrived. At that time, I had already left for Liepāja to be with my family, Meldra was to be born any minute, so I don't know exactly what happened to the Adlers, but it couldn't be anything good. As the Germans swept in, almost all the children from the local Liepāja working class Pioneers' Camp, here in Krote, were taken away, too. They were loaded onto a bus and off they went, without even warning their parents. They said it was to save them from the enemy, they said many were Jewish and would have been shot immediately. I wonder, where are they now? How are they? After the war, their parents searched for them ceaselessly across the vast Soviet Union.

I'm still searching half-heartedly for my Pēteris but I have lost hope, I can feel it in my gut – he is no longer amongst the living. The village council refuses to issue his death certificate, so I'm still considered married but, I'm sure, in due course they will lose their resolve and come to the same conclusion. He disappeared in the very early days of war – I received a couple of letters from him and then, silence. He never even saw his own child.

Do you know what it feels like, Pēteris? I loved you, I loved you deeply, but these long years I have had to endure so much without you. What have you seen of my life? Just oompapa at a country dance, polka dancing at weddings and sighs between the sheets. When Meldra was born, I thought I was going to die from the pain – my shrieks didn't help at all as the noise of exploding bombs grew louder and louder, depriving me of the satisfaction of hearing them echo around or reverberate in those present. Then she was placed in my arms, in that old basement of ours that always smelled of wee, and I was told – go! Go where? I couldn't walk, I couldn't even sit for two months after that bloody birth, Pēteris! Thank goodness I had milk, but if you only knew how that milk hurt. Meldra sucked



milk and blood, milk and blood. First, she tore my insides, then my breasts, now she is tearing my back to pieces with all the bending I have to do over cows and pigs. I wonder when she'll come after my soul?

I want to go back to Riga - to my studies, my chemistry, my University - but who will take me back now? I'm over thirty with a teenage daughter hanging round my neck, up to my elbows in cow manure and pig food. I really don't know why I didn't go overseas after the war. What was I holding out for? Peteris' return? For the Russians to let Latvia go free? For father's return from deportation?

I felt, I had a premonition, that I should stay close to the land, live in the countryside, that no one would let me run to the city. But I was still so young! I could have started over somewhere else. Anywhere else. America, Sweden, Germany even.

When I won a place at the University, no one there could believe their eyes – a couple of peasants had raised a chemist, a specialist of fine chemical substances! And moreover, a woman! And she had come to Riga all alone! Ha, take that! I could have left. Easily. Now I would be a perfumier. But something held me back. No, it wasn't the baby, I could have taken Meldra with me, and yet, there was something else, something inexplicable that I couldn't get to the bottom of. If someone whispers to me, asking why I'm still here, I say it's because of the sea. Let them wonder what kind of sea I have here in Krote, what kind of sea I have in Baltpurvi. Riga is by the sea, too – it's finer, silkier, but it's still sea. I need it. When it's warm, I can lay on the sand dunes and feel myself merging with the water – my hair become waves, my back – sand, my arms – fish. The fact that I don't see the sea every day does nothing to stop me from loving it.

No, nothing holds me back from loving anymore. I have my own room and there's no holding me back. Skrūveriene shakes her head but she doesn't say a word. Since the war

and then the Russians, many women seem to have lost their senses, unable to let the trousers drooping all around them just pass them by. Men who can get it up are in great demand and babies are hatching like chicks in spring throughout the neighbourhood. I have enough noble knowledge to prevent myself becoming heavy with child. I would like other children, it's not that I wouldn't, but not from Kārlis who has a son in Apses and another in Roņi, and a daughter in Medulāji. Nor from Arkādijs who is so virile he can visit three girls on the same night, whipping them all up into a rage with each other before taking refuge with a fourth. My child will be with someone who wants me, who will help me drag myself out of this bog of a kolkhoz. Best of all to Riga, but the hope of meeting anyone like that here are slim, or non-existent to be more precise - no hope whatsoever. At least to Liepāja. I could start with that.