

## **EXTRACT**

### **1. Morning in the bear pit**

Waking up wasn't too pleasant for them. Either it was that their tingling joints were calling out for help or something else had forced them to open their eyes. At first they didn't even understand where they were, because everything around them was covered in a pale fog.

When he finally realized that they were sleeping with their backs close together in their cocoon, which was located in a bear pit, his attention was drawn to the sound of splashing water at the far end of the island. Hearing that, Mārtiņš suddenly without thinking tried to wriggle out of his cocoon. And he moved so frantically, with so much energy that he ended up freeing himself pretty quickly. But he didn't crawl out of the bear pit yet – he rolled over onto his stomach and tried to spot something as he looked out over the edge of the bear pit.

Sitting up only halfway, Inese noticed that Mārtiņš was positively terrified. And what he said did nothing to hide his fear.

“Cannibals!” he whispered in horror. “If they've arrived here for their grisly meal, then it might go badly for us, too.”

“What cannibals?” Inese asked also whispering.

“The ones from the next island over, who eat their prisoners...” his tongue was twisting around. “I'll crawl closer for a better look, but, if I don't come back, swim away from here as fast as you can! Maybe you'll have a chance to save yourself at least from their cauldron.”

“Thanks for the valuable advice! But I'm going to go with you... I want to see these monsters with my own eyes...”

“Well, do what you want! But I warned you,” Mārtiņš moved his arms and legs slowly, slowly, moving off into the fog. Inese followed him crawling in the same way.”

## 2. A Ballast for *Emīlija*, Mārtiņš’ story

If I’d said that back then that looking at *Emīlija* made something tingle in my chest, then I wouldn’t really have been expressing anything at all. In the same way a confession doesn’t really fit here: I liked *Emīlija*. I really liked her.

It’s possible that adults, without really immersing themselves in any of this, which is pretty typical of them, would just conclude that I was in love with *Emīlija*...

I also liked our neighborhood’s speedy Inese. Yeah, I liked her even when we were running timed races around the little pond near the tram depot and I ended up half a length behind her...

But *Emīlija*! *Emīlija*... was just something else altogether! I could walk around her for an hour even, never dropping my gaze, and never feeling even the slightest hint of boredom.

Absolutely everything seemed interesting to me about *Emīlija*.

I was sniffing the air – how beguilingly she smelled – bitter and fresh at the same time – maybe a bit like the dune pines at lunchtime? But maybe also like fir trees wet from rain in the autumn...

I would get carried away by how gracefully, her body fully extended, *Emīlija* would lie on the grass under the older cherry tree.

I liked to watch the aromatic wood shavings all around *Emīlija* on the grass.

I couldn't stop being amazed by her gently angled curved back end and every so often I'd gently, gently stroke her determined front end with my palm.

I was also surprised by *Emīlija's* sturdy white little bench – how clearly and unambiguously it joined her right and left sides.

But her flat bottom couldn't even be described in words! You could feel it best with your toes – pushing against it solidly and boldly – without any fear of slipping! But I never got up to doing anything like that when I had shoes on. First I'd always strip down to my socks, no matter how full of holes they might be, and only then did I dare to step into this white, graceful, little boat. From time to time I might end up getting a splinter, but that never made me like *Emīlija* any less.

Maybe the only thing that hurt was a fact known to everybody in our neighborhood – this little dream boat, which clearly had been built only so I could cruise around all the many waterways around here, didn't even belong to me. For a number of weeks already it was being built by an older boat builder for Ādolfs, our neighborhood's street sweeper – a short, short man, who had decided during the summer that he'd like to try to catch rudd in the rush clumps that grew in the lake and so that he'd feel safer casting, he intended to name the ship after his sister Emīlija. She was even shorter than her brother and was so shy because of her small stature that she only rarely came out of her room to gaze at her namesake with the enchanting bench in the middle.

But, to dull my pain a bit, a strange offer came one day – to be this little boat's ballast while it was being towed with a motorboat to the dock on our lake's largest island – Rush Island.

“Why does it have to be towed with a motorboat?” I didn't try to hide my bitterness at all. “I'll row it as far as it needs to be!”

“Take a look!” Ādolfs touched *Emīlija*’s left side. “This boat isn’t meant for rowing.”

“But how else will it move?” I wondered out loud.

“You have to push it along with a staff – a kind of long pole that has a red knob at the end...” Ādolfs said. “Our lake isn’t deep after all and you can get as far as you want using a staff.”

“Then give that staff to me and I’ll push myself to Rush Island!” I wasn’t going to give up that easily.

“There’s something else you should know...” Ādolfs paused. “For the moment, the gaps between *Emīlija*’s boards haven’t been plugged with fibers yet and her bottom also hasn’t been covered with tar. So, she has to be moved away from the dock fast enough that she doesn’t sink to the bottom.”

“But, when I’m sitting in there as her ballast, wouldn’t *Emīlija* sink to the bottom anyway?” maybe a hint of doubt crept in for the first time.

“I hope not.” Ādolfs answered not all that convincingly. “You might have to bail a little bit of water out with the bucket.”

“A bit?” I asked.

“Well, a little, every now and again,” Ādolfs explained and pushing his cap further up, he rubbed the back of his neck, “but, I mean, you know how to swim, right?”

\*\*\*

I didn’t say a word to mom about any possible water bailing or about the swimming. And why would I even do that? The water in the lake had already warmed up enough and I knew how

to swim really well – and actually (or so I thought) much better than the other guys in my neighborhood.

But even so, mom didn't have any problem finding things to object to.

“Mārtiņš, do you realize that this is a flat-bottomed boat without a keel, so it's totally unstable. It could flip over any time it rocks even a little bit. And as soon as you stand up, then...right in the water...guaranteed...”

“I'll sit on her bench and I'm not going to get up until we get to the other side.” I also wasn't at a lack for words. “And it's not some huge distance – just across the narrow channel separating the shore from the island and then along the rushes up to the dock.”

“And usually there's a cold wind blowing on the lake!” mom already had her next objection ready.

“I'll wear a warm sweater,” I quickly retorted.

“And a hat!” mom added just as fast and then fell silent.

“OK, a hat, too!” I'd have agreed to a lot more, but amazingly no other conditions followed.

\*\*\*

And already a few days later one end of a rope was tied to the iron ring at *Emīlija's* front end, but the other to a hook on the back of the motor boat. Me with both hands gripping the edges of the boat, my feet supported against her flat bottom, I was waiting for the jolt that would come right after the motor boat started to move.

Our third floor neighbor, Berdigāns, a very large man, looked down at little Ādolfs – well, just like Goliath at David! – and slowly turned the gas lever on the outboard motor. The propeller kicked up a white water whirlpool right away and the motorboat gradually began distancing itself from *Emīlija*, while also at the same time pulling taut the rope that joined us. This was followed by a small lurch, which I'd feared the most, and then *Emīlija's* determined front end began cutting into the water. It was flowing evenly along both sides of the boat, prompting Goliath to give it a little more gas... Now *Emīlija* was rocking a bit in the channel sliced by the motorboat through the water, but that was neither frightening, nor dangerous, and I, having let my white-knuckled grip on the boat's sides even loosen a bit, also relaxed my legs a bit with which I was steadying myself. And at that moment something splashed next to my feet. It didn't take more than a moment to look down and conclude that water was seeping in through the gaps in *Emīlija's* flat bottom...

Luckily, the metal bucket was right there just an arm's length away and the lake started getting back its water.

"Oh, so it's coming in?" yelling over the boat's motor concluded Goliath and cut the propeller's rotations just a bit.

"Those boards will swell and grow together!" yelled David, whose head was barely visible over the body of the motor. "They'll grow together in time!"

But clearly that time wasn't even close and if at the start it was possible to fill only half of the bucket with water, then now every time the lake got back a really powerful splash.

"It's not far!" roared Goliath.

"Just about ten more minutes!" chimed in David.

“The water is pouring in like on the Titanic!” I yelled, because, unfortunately, I remembered the giant ship that’s been lying on the ocean floor for decades already.

“Where is it pouring in?” Goliath, it seems, had never heard anything about the tragedy with the giant ship.

“*Emīlija* must be going down!” David kept yelling as loudly as at the start.

“Her bottom has holes in it!” bailing with the bucket as much as I could, I hollered back. And right at that moment another bad memory came to me. That was our neighbor Valdiņš’ story about his uncle who had once helped recover someone who’d drowned. “And his eyes were completely white – well white like those of a boiled cod...” Valdiņš rolled his eyes back so far that just the whites glinted back and at that moment he did really look just like a boiled cod.

“If her bottom has holes in it, then let’s hurry up!” Goliath had found a solution to this problem and gave the motor some gas again.

The water in front of *Emīlija* immediately split into a wide channel, but the water that had been lapping in under her lovely bench had now reached my ankles already and was sloshing around just like in a bathtub... Even though I wasn’t hoping anymore that I’d ever bail it all out, I still didn’t stop working at it for even a second. And a moment later the boat’s motor suddenly fell silent, but *Emīlija*, still driven on by inertia, sliding on, bumped into the sandy shore of Rush Island. I was flung in the same direction as her earlier movement and then, after a forceful stop, fell back equally fast, and finally, seemingly remembering that *Emīlija* is a flat-bottomed boat after all, I tumbled over her right side into the lake... Wearing all my clothes and the warm sweater, and the hat on my head.

“We’re here!” Goliath roared one last time.

*Salty Pancakes* by Māris Rungulis  
Translated by Uldis Balodis

“Splash!” David followed my fall with his gaze and patiently waited until I, soaked to the bone, but alive and well, clambered out of the water. “Look, he’s smiling already!” David described what he’d seen and, turning to Goliath, said:

“So we all can be sure there’s good fishing with *Emīlija*, let’s each go drink a shot...” it seemed that about me, *Emīlija*’s ballast, he had totally forgotten. No, he remembered me after all!

“Mārtiņš, fish your hat out of the water – otherwise, it’ll float away!” he instructed me. “And then wring out those wet clothes quickly! If you don’t, you’ll end up getting the sniffles...” that’s what they call a cold where I’m from!