

EXCERPT

More than anything else, Jacob wished that a terrible, one-eyed comet would bear down on the city. Or failing that, some other massive calamity that would cause the dark waters of the river Daugava, brimming with catfish, to overflow its banks and swirl through the streets and boulevards of Riga. Fabulously tall ships, as high as nine-storied buildings would then glide, proud and solemn, along Brivibas Street right past Jacob's dining room windows, conveying secret, highly valuable cargoes to warmer, distant shores.

The previous evening, young Jacob had gathered up all his courage and, his voice trembling, whispered:

“Riga is READY!”

Now, while waiting for the evening news at half past eight, butterflies were busy fluttering in the boy's stomach. He hoped with all his heart to hear electrifying news about Riga sinking to the bottom of the Daugava river or some other natural catastrophe which would transform the familiar landscape outside his dining room window beyond all recognition.

In the event of a catastrophe, he would be the best aide out there for ships' captains – he knew the city streets like the back of hand, despite rarely getting to walk down any of them. It was strictly forbidden as unaccompanied children were not allowed on the streets. But what fun can be had while adults are watching?

Children were forbidden from doing virtually everything. From talking to strangers, especially men. From getting into unknown cars. From crossing the street at a red light, even if there were no cars around. From playing ball on the pavement or in courtyards – especially if it was

laundry day and white linen sheets, not to be touched at any cost, were drying in the sun under sharp, watchful eyes somewhere within the ground floor apartments.

But all those rules were completely meaningless if children were not allowed out on the streets on their own! It made more sense just to stay at home.

Jacob was allowed out with his dad... but he was always at work. This was why Jacob watched the real world go by from his dining room window and knew everything he saw off by heart. At home on his own, the boy spent days on end stretched out on the windowsill, observing the noisy bustle on the main street below.

In all honesty, children were not allowed to stay at home on their own either, but that was more difficult to check up on as they were forbidden from opening the door to strangers, too.

When Dad came home from work he often said to Jacob:

“Give me a moment to myself, some adult-time on my own, won’t you!”

There was plainly some subtle connection between being an adult and being on your own. Jacob had already been an adult for quite a while. Ever since his home tutor, Mademoiselle Poupette, had stopped coming and shortly after which Marta, the fat housekeeper, had also disappeared. She must have decided to devote herself full-time to keeping a proper household, or maybe the home of the man she used to mention so often - Jesus Christ!

Jacob’s mum was not there. Some people might wonder at this but, for a variety of reasons, some children only have their dads by their sides. Others only have a mum. These things happen.

Jacob’s dad worked long hours, spending most of his time being a big, important boss and not a dad. But at weekends when the two of them, Mr and Master Bird, Jacob and Peter, went on

expeditions to department stores, they sometimes threw in a few extra rounds of the city streets. On days such as these, the usual display on offer from the dining room window was exchanged for the deafening noise of the city's main road - Brivibas Street - wafts of food and courtyard smells, exhaust fumes, a maddening commotion and loud conversations. Grand buildings literally sprung up before Jacob's eyes and transformed into a huge, living, breathing city. His eyes grew as wide as satellite dishes, trying to take it all in, his ears expanded to increase his hearing. Birds were taken by complete surprise when they found themselves, in amazement, inside Jacob Bird's wide-open mouth, which they had taken for the entrance hole of a birdhouse. The boy memorized it all to the last detail so he could then mark it all down once back at home on his handmade Ship Navigation Map of the Streets of Riga.

A SHIP ON BRIVIBAS STREET

The summer was so hot that he had no difficulty imagining the terrible, one-eyed comet taking the sun's place above the city, innocently curling up like a cat and then nervously fidgeting the burning tip of its tail, just waiting for the right moment to strike and cause unprecedented disaster.

Jacob was alone at home. Occasional, dull noises and echoes were heard from the courtyard in the silent, four-roomed flat, coming in through the wide-open kitchen window at the boy's back. Once in a while, pigeons landed on the tin windowsill and strutted about in curiosity – as guileless as the first time they had appeared there. Without attracting any attention, they flew away again, making a noise with their wings similar to the thwacking sound of a shaken-out newspaper. In the total silence, even the sun could be heard gliding across the wooden kitchen floor, climbing up the

boy's spine to his neck then leaping up between the slats of the half-empty shelves, drying the spots of water on the sink – and not until late at night could the furniture be heard to sigh with relief in the cool of the darkness.

Bent over the kitchen table, Jacob was eagerly drawing a navigator's map for sailing along the city street fjords. (See Map N. 1).

Between Elizabetes and Dzirnavu Street, the ship's course was halted by the sound of ships' horns. Jacob carefully scanned all the side streets on the map where some unfortunate, lost ship might have gone off course. The horns went off again. But there were no ships around! He heard them again. Now Jacob had come to his senses and went to squint through the spyhole in the door of his four-roomed flat in Brivibas Street.

"I know you are at home – open the door!" called the commanding voice of a creature with a huge head and a bony bulk of a body (they all looked the same), pressing on the doorbell again.

"I can hear you BREATHING there, behind the door, Sir," she commented crossly, after a while.

Jacob jumped back from the door.

"There's no Sir, just me!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, Jacob!" the tone of the voice changed. "It's me, Mrs. Schmidt. Do you remember me? I'm the landlady!?" she purred from the other side of the door and pressed her head tightly up to the spyhole, her nose broadened like a giant cucumber. "Open the door!" she pleaded.

“It’s not polite to keep a lady waiting,” the woman with a tiny head and disproportionately large body remarked, as she filled the entire entrance hall when Jacob finally did open the door to her. “Go and tell Daddy I’m here, will you?”

Jacob suddenly realized what he had done. He had opened the door to a stranger whilst *all alone* at home! He was going to be in real trouble!

“Run along, now,” Mrs. Schmidt was talking in a loud and particularly slow manner, as if children had hearing and comprehension problems because they were smaller in height and the words had further to travel to their ears. “What’s the matter?! Are you feeling unwell? Oh, you look really pale. You don’t get much sun, do you? Let me feel – your forehead is burning up! You must be really ill!”

An idea popped into his head. Jacob arranged his features into a grimace of pain and whined:

“It’s my heart, it hurts ... Dad has run down to the chemist’s to get some medicine, he’ll be back any second!”

Mrs. Schmidt clapped her hands, poor boy, he’s really sick, - she thought to herself, - and here I am, coming here at such a bad time with the unpaid bills, just look at him, he needs to go straight back to bed!

Jacob was moving restlessly from one foot to the other, worrying about how the ship was doing all on its own on Brivibas Street without him to look after it, guide it.

“Is it really sore?”

Jacob nodded a bit too hastily to be totally believable so, just to be on the safe side, he put his hand to his chest round about the spot where the ache was meant to be.

A shadow flitted across Mrs. Schmidt's face. She narrowed her eyes and drew in her breath in disgust.

"It's very naughty to tell lies," she finally spat out.

The entrance hall, and Mrs. Schmidt with it, suddenly started expanding, growing monstrously huge and Jacob, tiny as he already was, shrunk even smaller – though sadly not small enough to be able to hide under the rug.

Mrs. Schmidt was waving a large, reprimanding finger in front of his nose:

"The heart is on the other side of the chest, boy! *On the left side!*"

She had grown quite angry.

"Every child knows which side the heart is on!" she continued her sermon. "If you go on lying like this, your heart will really get sick!"

Jacob swallowed a heavy ball of saliva. It was all so horrible. And Mrs. Schmidt showed no sign of calming down.

"Your father must have told you to feed me this nonsense to try and get sympathy and pity from my marvellously generous, kind and noble heart. Isn't that so? But rest assured, he won't get out of paying all the rent he owes me that easily! I will talk to him about this later!"

Mrs. Schmidt turned on her heel and staggered up the stairs, still mumbling something about the recession, bills outstanding for months and also something about the world coming to an inevitable end because, in her day, such horrid things really didn't happen.

Gradually the entrance hall regained its original size. Jacob looked out of the window to make sure the terrible one-eyed comet was not approaching and the world was not actually coming to an end. Afterwards, he started mulling over what his dad would have to say about him opening the door to a stranger.

“Every child knows that, bla bla bla!” – the more Jacob thought of it, the more furious he became with that silly Mrs. Schmidt who didn't realise he hadn't been a child for quite some time.

“And... if I am not a child I might very well not know exactly where the heart is!” Jacob muttered. “And who on earth thought of placing the heart on the left side?! I like the right side better because the right side is *good* and the left is *bad*. If my left leg is itchy, I immediately scratch my right leg too, even if it isn't itching, so it's not put out that I'm paying too much attention to the *bad* one! Ok, well... humph! So, it's on the left ... the heart is on the left ...”

How on earth could the heart be on the bad side?!

Jacob had often heard women in the courtyard talking about someone going over to the bad. Turns out it must be some horrible, maybe even incurable heart disease, Jacob reasoned to himself as his Brivibas Street ship disappeared beyond the horizon.