

Biography: Author and art scholar Gundega Repše (1960) is a writer of prose, an essayist and critic. Repše has worked as an editor and contributor in various magazines and other media discussing culture and literature. Her prose has been published since 1979. Repše has published many novels, several of her works have been adapted for theatre. Gundega Repše is a member of the Latvian Writers' Union. In 2011 Repše received the Annual Latvian Literature Award for *We. Latvia. The 20th Century* novel series idea.

Synopsis: The book describes a time before both the author and the novel's narrator, Erika, were born; its historical foundation is rooted in the post-war life of the Latvian intelligentsia, in the tragic fate of the so-called "French Group" and their search for intellectual nobility. The story is told from the point of view of Erika, born to Kārlis and Magda during the exile of Kārlis' wife, Dagmāra. Just as the French Group's members were exiled to Siberia, the novel's heroine, Dagmāra, also suffers the horrors of deportation, as did Kārlis' mother before her. Their lives are destroyed by the age in which they live – Kārlis stops painting because his work isn't being recognized, and he undergoes treatment for alcoholism. Dagmāra dies early, her translations unpublished. *Marked by Fire's* cyclical style ends in 1987, when, rereading what she wrote thirteen years prior, Erika marvels at the self-righteous tone of her memories. Taking into account that these notes were written when she was eighteen, Erika's impatience with the vagueness of historical events is an understandable youthful ardor. At the end of the novel, Erika is working in the library of a seaside village, where she is more certain than ever that the passage of time is no excuse; even a world of valuable books is like an eternal flame – a memorial site that never grows dark.

Excerpt

I don't even know where to begin. With the fact that I was born in 1956? But who really remembers what kind of a year that was and what people were thinking about at that time?

Dialectics are only possible through shared memories.

Magda Vairoga brought the author of these lines into the world on a cold, frosty tenth of January at three o'clock and thirty minutes. A very loud child weighing four kilograms.

I, Eriks Karlis' daughter Vairoga, promise to speak only the truth from this moment onward, I do not wish to bring harm to those who were involved in my and my parents' life with what I am about to say. You may be surprised that I remember too much, that I remember a time before I was born. Don't let this confuse you. I am convinced that we all also live other people's lives and time cannot change this. Because time is not an argument.

*

At the time, Dagmara was 26 years old. She was regarded by others as an exceptionally intelligent, talented person, surrounded by men. Dagmara finished university in just under two years and was given high authority in Riga's intelligence ranks. More recently, she devoted herself to modern French literature and translation. Dagmara lived alone. Her father had been killed in the first few months of the war, but her mother – a French speaker, who observed fine customs and etiquette, and was a music critic – died a year before Dagmara met Karlis.

That happened in 1949 on the first Thursday in March, when a small group of interested people set out once again to "an afternoon with Dagmara". The young painter Olafs Subins, who was just becoming recognized, invited his former classmate along - a recent graduate from the academy – Karlis, my father.

The stairwell in the building on Strelnieku street smelled like tomcats. A dim, yellowish lamp in a quivering chord lit the gloomy space under the roof.

The door was opened by a petite, dark-haired woman with a Pola Negri hairdo. She wore a black fitted dress with a low-cut round neckline and held a cigarette in her nervous, fidgety fingers. Dagmara. Even today, after so much garbage and drama have passed like a landslide over such an unassuming scene, Karlis sees Dagmara like this – confident, accomplished, like a charcoal tracing of an Ionic column. And her dark eyes, which back then stared sharply at him, assessing his big black jacket – Karlis will never forget them. Even if he wanted to, he would not be able to.

In the room were bookshelves from floor to ceiling, crammed full of books. There were more on the window sills and in the corners of the room in leaning, messy piles. The air – gray, smoky and, it seemed, impossible to air out. A narrow sofa with a blue blanket and a veneer clapperboard by the window in place of a desk.

Three teachers, a middle-aged sculptor, a small, fidgety scholar, two engravers, a slothful poet and two youngish linguists were thoughtfully drinking tea at the round table made by a master cabinetmaker from Bauska, waiting for Dagmara's lecture. She didn't always speak. There were afternoons when they discussed theatre and exhibits together, someone would debate Debussy or Montaigne, they would read Dagmara's and other poems in translation.

What exactly happened that evening in March, Karlis doesn't remember. Only that the usually chatty, boastful, and witty Olafs Subins was completely calm and was listening with

burning ears to every word spoken by this beautiful woman. A revered defender of modern culture, Karlis was surprised that she did not speak about Camus, Valéry, or Apollinaire, nor about Braque or Picasso, but about Victor Hugo.

Dagmara sat on a kitchen stool, her slender, dark-stockinged legs crossed, and in a calm and confident voice concluded:

"In the 30s of the nineteenth century, Victor Hugo writes the play "The King Amuses Himself". Before the performance, the young people sing "La Marsellaise". The Minister bans the play, as it is said to violate public morality and undermines good morals. The enraged poet takes the Minister to court. This is the first lawsuit of its kind. Everyone in France is talking and arguing about it, even his opponents admire Hugo's courage. The courts, of course, decide in favour of the Minister, but Hugo, in a brilliant speech, proves that justice is really on his side. The play in question, after considerable revision, is later used by Verdi as the libretto for the opera "Rigoletto". Persecuted by the reactionary press, Hugo proudly renounces his royal pension. In eighteen fifty nine, when Washington judges John Brown, Hugo sends a letter to America and asks that the hero be set free. To quote his words: "Kings may leave, but the people remain, and the people need to know the truth."

The woman's voice and her last words left an abstract, but unpleasant feeling of fear. Karlis said goodbye and did not stay for the discussion. Her perfectly drawn arched eyebrows tensing slightly, Dagmara politely saw him out, but she did not invite him to come again.

The first time every participant could bring along a friend or acquaintance, but without Dagmara's invitation it was unacceptable to show up a second time. That was the protocol.

*

Karlis lived in the attic of a wooden house not far from the Ziedonis Garden. An easel, a collapsible bed, a couple of boxes with trivial things, and a few chairs. That was it. What else did a painter need? A view and the azure sky? Nonsense. He needed peace and time. Yet lately, Karlis' peace was disrupted by frequent visits from Olafs Subins. He was not considered a friend to Karlis, but was that a reason to send him away? Subins tended to show up on Thursdays, so that an hour later he could stand up with great importance and say:

"It is time to go to Dagmara's place. She loves precision."

Karlis couldn't be sure, but he sensed in Subins' voice something like triumphant joy.

"Why do you visit her, anyway?" – he asked once when he was feeling ill-tempered.

"I meet interesting people. You can't meet these types on the street and they don't write about them in the papers. It is a completely different army."

"Army?" – Karlis smirked, yet didn't get an answer.

A strange one, that Olafs Subins. Always charging around as if obsessed, as if driven by something, the importance of it in his furrowed brow. His eyes are always darting about too. Karlis had never seen how Olafs painted, so he assumed that this was a life in which this fidgety guy calmed down.

Subins was blatantly interested in women, but he was a small man. Being self-centred, this shortcoming was to him almost tragic. Subins had a tormenting fear of being in second place. It didn't matter behind whom. It didn't matter in what hierarchy. That is why Subins worked as if obsessed. Even with his own self-improvement. He developed a bright theatrical elegance and manner of speaking. He despised his teachers, and parodied them mercilessly when he was drunk, but, when he met them, with a courtesy, which was spiked with a childlike playful impertinence, disarming. "The stench of youth," old Silins had said, throwing up his hands in the face of Subins' winning charm.

Will Olafs be a big painter? Karlis was not sure. At times, he was jealous of Subins' flitting about as the centre of attention, his familiar relations with the professors, while no one seemed to really notice him, Karlis Dobs. It was true, lately his work had received the attention of some critics and their opinions were not the most flattering. But this did not upset Karlis. Rather, he was satisfied that he got noticed. No one wrote about Subins. People gossiped about him and learned to live with him.

What is this vacuous little man looking for in Dagmara's sophisticated social circle? Subins was annoyed by any theme where a world famous personality was mentioned or analyzed. Giotto had become a soft formalist, Leonardo – an omnivorous glutton, Michelangelo – a psycho, and so on. How was it that Karlis got along with him? Was it because it was too uncomfortable to tell him that there was no sense to the afternoons spent talking over a bottle of wine? In truth, Karlis usually didn't say anything. He had been troubled for the longest time by the feeling that nothing he does is actually his. His work

needed something ambitious, screaming from inside him, instinctive. However, right now Karlis' still lifes were called the subjective visions of an artist in love with himself.

What would a Dagmara say about his paintings? A twenty-six year old woman. On her own. Out of the blue he remembered his father's babbling, frequently repeated classifications by Viktors Eglitis. Would Dagmara be "highly intelligent, learned, independent, boring for a man, not longing for the protection of a man?" Karlis couldn't say that it was boring to observe this woman and listen to her sharp and threatening words. Perhaps she belongs to the "learned, unsuitable wives for bachelors and jovial men, who do not wish to be trustworthy forever, so they give their children to be raised in orphanages and they actually don't even know how to love"? Dagmara doesn't even have kids apparently, and even Subins did not mention any racy stories about her personal life. Perhaps this woman is the third category – "sliding from hand to hand, having erased the wonderful out of her soul, tortured by curiosity, a temporary employee, an unsuccessful artist, a young, easy hetaira and barmaid"? He had to laugh. If such deep mental abilities and obvious talent could be suspected of charlatanism, then who could you trust anymore? Dagmara was apparently a very interesting teacher. Therefore, one should trust the old rogue Eglitis the least. Who knows why his father kept repeating those verses, teasing his mother, and who knows why Karlis remembered them. Well yes, his father, European basketball champion, hated emancipated women and their theories. But Karlis was his mother's son. It ate away at him a bit, that Dagmara did not see Karlis as a sufficiently bright and suitable personality to invite to join her group. It's true, he didn't know how to throw a pointed question into the knotted web of conversations, nor any deep commentary, nor did he know how to feign a speechless shock at the impressiveness of her lecture.

Perhaps this is exactly why you escaped, Karlis? No, don't keep lying. In truth, you were scared. And you were even more scared when you realized that Subins had noticed this. That is why this guy comes to you with such confidence and persistence. To a certain extent this is how Subins shows you who is in control...

*

The next time they met purely by chance – after almost three months. Dagmara was coming towards him on Terbata street – head down, with empty eyes, unaware of anything around her.

– My god, why did I lose you that time? - she exclaimed and hooked her arm around Karlis' elbow. – I thought that you were a friend of Subins!

- And? Does that change anything? – Karlis asked rather sharply.

- Of course – the woman replied, not noticing Karlis' bruised ego.

They walked in silence. Damara looked back from time to time.

Karlis had thought a lot about this smart, proud, somewhat cool woman, who regarded him as an old, useless slipper, unfit to present in well-heeled society, yet he did not feel any real offense or desire for revenge. When she was walking next to Karlis in her black pleated skirt, he felt somewhat uncomfortable. He had some change in his pocket – not enough to treat the professor to a drink. What would they have to talk about? A windbag with claims of philosophy and the navel of world spirituality.

- Will you not show me your pictures? – Dagmara asked, but Karlis felt that the woman was thinking about something else. Under her dark, clear eyes there was a swelling.

In place of a June tan there was pale, grey skin. She was hooked into his elbow with a heaviness and tension. A strange, icy woman! Why does she keep looking back so fearfully?

In Karlis' attic Damara seemed to relax. Noticing her interest and the familiar way in which she handled the pieces of cardboard, Karlis had to control himself, so that the happiness welling up in his chest would not spill out and make a fool of him.

- Don't forget that praising abstractionism is dangerous, - Karlis joked awkwardly.
- Oh, so this is abstractionism! – Damara exclaimed equally awkwardly, seating herself on his creaky, clattering bed.
- Careful, don't fall over! It would be better to sit on the chair.

It did not suit the professor to sit amongst such a pile of rubbish. If he could offer her a silk-covered sofa, if he could casually show her glass bookshelves and they could sit in the gentle twilight under rich green palm trees, oh, that would make an impression. None of that existed anymore. He was alone like a rag – just him. Karlis Dobe. Let them stare and wonder if they want.

His mother had been in Siberia for nine years already, so it had not been easy to settle into work. He had tried particularly hard, to be honest, and he was also not looking for patronage. For a while he was earning extra income as a guard in a museum. They did not look for clean paperwork there, at least not for this level of worker. They could look for fault, however.

That time, in June of 1941, Karlis happened by chance to have gone to visit his Aunt Mika in the countryside – there, not far from Taurene. And lay there for two months with pneumonia. As if through a milky cheese-cloth, he remembers warm cowpies on his chest, Aunt Mika's round, terrified eyes and a lingering, sputtering sound – like an iron pressed on a wet cloth – war, war, war.

But his neighbour told him about that night in June, about the bright searchlights and his mother's screams. When Karlis couldn't unlock the door to his apartment, Mrs. Cesbers darted out from the apartment across the hall and pulled him inside. Stuttering and warning Karlis, she recounted how she snuck into their rooms, after his parents had been taken away, how she managed only to tear their wedding photo off of the wall, how five swearing men ransacked the place, until finally they sealed the door. Now she apparently heard Germans in there – three times a week. They did not swear, but they had also looked over her rooms with glassy pale faces.

Bare and young, shattered and having abandoned everything – Karlis, thanks to his illness, got his papers and enrolled in the Academy of Art. Yes, while others were dying, while others fought and liberated. But if he, Karlis, had fought, would he have gotten his father back? If he had run with the others with a gun in his teeth – row after row, shoulder to shoulder? Perhaps protecting the one who deported his father? No, Karlis had to start from nothing. His parents' silver, the library and his father's piles of souvenirs and medals seemed like insignificant garbage compared to the sudden unknown and fears, so he pretended not to see Mrs. Cesbergs' nervous drilling and hand-waving along their nutwood sideboard and with the silk-covered sofa, which, covered with sheets, quietly peeked out from the bedroom.

Four years later, the neighbour found Karlis and gave him a letter from his mother, which had been sent to her former apartment. His father died in the first months of the deportation.

Yes, after the war had ended, Karlis returned once more to his parents' apartment. A shortage of cash and life in the attic drove him to return.

A humble, stocky woman in a dressing-gown answered the door. Behind her back were two blue-eyed boys, reaching out for her. Karlis read in the woman's eyes an awareness of what is fair and a readiness to fight for everything that she would need. While Karlis was fidgetting, a tall man in a grey-blue sport shirt also appeared. From the way he carried himself, he understood he was in the military.

- Čto vam? – the man asked assertively and, having pushed his wife and kids away, came out towards Karlis.
- I live here. Ja zģes žīvu, - Karlis said.
- Ņiģevo ņe znaju, - the man snapped back and started to close the door.
- Let me in!
- Now, now. – With a forceful push the man threw Karlis back. - Vernulsja? A? Ot kģda? Vsjo provģrim! – a distrustful, imposing voice yelled out, and the door slammed shut. This time there was also no sound from Mrs. Cesberg's apartment.

Everything seemed unbelievable, distant and unrelated to him. The unfair and pointless hatred forced Karlis to control himself. To bite into life with all of his teeth, to the bone, so that it hurt!

He had to act. He had to help his mother. With Haralds encouraging advice, he brought a request to the Supreme Council. Swallowing tears of surrender and shame, he wrote: "I request permission to send to my mother – Victoria Dobe, who was deported from here in 1941 because of her husband, who is now deceased – a package of essential items (shoes, clothes, a blanket). I draw your attention to the following conditions: 1) my mother Victoria Dobe went to Tomska region without having taken any of the most essential things along; 2) in the past four years, as she has written, she has completely worn out her clothes; 3) she works at a collective farm and in the forest, where the need for additional clothing is

particularly great; 4) the weather conditions in her place of deportation are especially harsh; 5) my mother was deported not because of herself, but because of her husband, who incidentally died in the 1942 deportation; 6) attached to my request is permission from my mother's workplace in Nurolka, that she is allowed to receive a package."

Karlis received a positive response. Thereafter he could help her without corresponding beforehand.

At night he thought about his father. Was he guilty?! But what he wrote surely did not change anything. That which was made up by a drooling buffoon, after everything had been decided, is a bluff. The truth was already weighed. Still his conscience greedily swallowed every one of Karlis' intentions and stopped him from moving forward. His feet got tangled.

And so here he sat, chewing his nails, and he has forgotten the beautiful woman whom he wanted to seat on the silk sofa. She has been talking, but Karlis has not heard her.

- In the fall I will no longer be able to work at the school, - Dagmara continued to talk,
- I am being sued for my connection with a student in the eleventh grade.
- I don't understand, - Karlis murmured.
- Who can understand this? They don't like that in French literature classes I veer off topic, when I talk about culture. Do you not read the newspapers? Cosmopolitanism, reactionary art...

The woman sat stiffly, and almost too calmly, occasionally wiping away tears. Oh boy, she has problems, she is crying, the professor has come to tell him her troubles, but he, the idiot, chews on his mouldy memories and doesn't hear anything. Having taken a breath, Dagmara continued:

- There's no work. They throw the editorial pieces back at me without explanation. I sense this, I can predict it, but when it actually happens, it is not easy. I am being followed. That boy is just a guise. Yes, once he came on a Thursday, I invited him, he is very capable. I wonder who spun that all further.

Karlis felt the iciness disappearing. Beside him sat a beautiful being who had come into some trouble. He had to do something. Make some tea. Calm her down. Help her. Poor girl. Frightened like an owl which has been awakened.

- You need money. But I don't have any, believe me. I would gladly give you everything I had, but... – Karlis stammered.
- Stop it! Is that why you think I am telling you this? Oh, I am sorry, it is my fault. I should not have imposed. But your paintings are truly good. I would just like to see less caution, less calculation. No abstractionism, nonsense, you know that already, right?

Karlis stared blankly at Dagmara, not knowing what to do. Only delight, that a person brought to despair was paying attention to his work, excited and also confused him. What can he offer her? To tell her not to worry, to tell her that all will be well, that she is smart, beautiful? Idiocy. Everywhere idiocy, and he doesn't know where there is solace.

- Will you not invite me another time? – Karlis finally squeezed out a question, which shadowed his bruised ego.
- No, - Dagmara shook her head sadly. – No. I don't want you to get into trouble because of me. It is all very complicated. We no longer gather at my place. Every time somewhere else and only the same audience. Do you understand that I can't

live without all of that? – she became excited and continued with enthusiasm: - How can I be forbidden to read, understand and love Camus, Éluard, Sartre? How can I take that all in and not give it back to anyone? That would surely be the scariest and most uncivilized selfishness. Criminal! That is after all our nourishment, our air! I can't and we can't suffocate that way.

Dagmara paused after her passionate words and blushed easily.

Karlis felt his back straighten up. He felt excited not only with his heart. Besides feelings of gratitude, that this wonderful woman trusted him with her problems, there was a self-awareness growing inside him, a strength in which he had to trust.

- I must go, - Dagmara got up and bid him farewell. – Don't be offended.

It was snowing small, bright flakes. Dagmara, wearing her black silk dress, was standing by the open window. From the third floor, the part of the street which could be seen appeared to be dead. Yes, the thirty-first of December. Dagmara and Karlis' five-month wedding anniversary. In the kitchen, which was now divided by veneer sheets into two small sections, one could hear Karlis' dragging, thoughtful steps. When he was painting, Dagmara didn't so much as go into the dark part of the kitchen to make food. The sound of dishes and the smell of food would only bother her husband's work, which was already disjointed, as if deliberately leading it to fail. It was a good thing that neither of them were big eaters, and that Karlis didn't request a piece of bloody meat every night.

It was now approaching 11:00. Dagmara had laid a white frilly tablecloth and lined up the plates with the blue edges. The Wedgewood sugar bowl in the middle of the table

glowed coolly and mysteriously in the evening light. The white, festive vertical candles and pyramids of napkins looked bourgeois. Dagmara couldn't stand this old German lady aesthetic, but, remembering that it was their wedding day, she decided to observe the etiquette which would have appealed to her late mother. And if after all someone rings at the door! Dagmara hoped, she didn't say a word to Karlis, but was hoping like a child.

Nobody had come around for three months now. It was likely not just Subins' doing, spreading left and right all kinds of lies about their marriage. When Olaf got too carried away, trying to dissuade him from a deciding move, Karlis served him a good slap. And Subins left, worrying out loud as he left about the seduction of young boys. Oh, how Karlis swore that time, how he screamed and cursed, until he noticed Dagmara's dark eyes in the crack of the door, and he fell silent. He fell silent for an agonizingly long time. He became uncommunicative, sullen and unreachable. Sometimes he sat with Haralds – his colleague from elementary school – in the kitchen and drank grog. But even now he came almost cautiously, secretively. He didn't answer Karlis' questions, but chatted about all kinds of nonsense. As if out of pity and guilt he brought expensive refreshments, praised the paintings, which Karlis himself spat over, and quickly took his leave.

Dagmara shuddered and closed the window. The December air was biting and icy. It stabbed her cheeks and stretched with biting teeth along her neck. She smoked a cigarette while she lit candles. The room which was stuffed with books looked strangely festive this evening. The mountains of edited papers were now lying in drawers under the wardrobe, manuscripts which she had begun to translate were lined up on shelves in blue and yellow cardboard folders. Yesterday, rummaging through papers, Dagmara threw out piles of letters. From friends and colleagues, from here and abroad. Suddenly everything appeared

to be worthless, excessive and in the past. Because there were no letters anymore.

Memories without living juice, as she often said, are not worth anything.

I will wash my hands and we can start, - a dirty, depressed and tired Karlis still tried to be cheerful.

Painting was not going well. Now that Dagmara was without a job, Karlis started working a month ago in the product station. And she translated. Eagerly. Karlis did not object. He was just shocked by the persistent, genuine drive with which his wife spitefully continued.

Dagmara stretched out, enjoying the feeling of silk brushing against her body, and she smiled to herself. She did not feel twenty-seven years old. How could that be! Just watching Karlis in the distance, Dagmara felt small and childish. Even stupid.

Karlis' lack of conversation, discipline and routine still left a bad impression on her. Dagmara was ashamed that her husband could not devote all of his time to painting, but when she was working, she forgot this in an instant. Just like everything else.

With effort she tried to remember Karlis lighthearted and laughing. Only that time, when Dagmara agreed. Then yes.

- Turn on the radio, maybe there is music, - Karlis called.

They often listened to music. Sometimes they daydreamed to Beethoven or Rachmaninov right there in Dagmara's bed. In general, Karlis slept in his workshop chamber on that same narrow creaky folding bed which he had brought with him. It was like that almost from the start.

Dagmara worked at night and smoked greedily, but Karlis like an early bird was already up at six o'clock pacing around the easel. For the past month now he was in the station at this time. They were together only during morning hours, around ten o'clock, when Karlis

came to wake Dagmara. Children conceived in the morning are said to be talented, Karlis used to joke shyly.

- Coffee is getting cold!

- Coming,-- Karlis answered, turning in the corridor in front of the mirror. Tall – as the son of a basketball player, but thin like his mother – a dance teacher. And those “awful blue” eyes, as Dagmara said! A straight, sculpted chin, short, trimmed, brown, soft hair. The white dress shirt really did look strange. Dagmara was used to seeing her husband in black overalls for work, and that made him seem stronger, more decisive. When Karlis dressed “properly”, it was always pitiful. For this exact reason Dagmara unknowingly avoided going out with him. She was afraid of these feelings. That she felt sorry for her tall, incomprehensible husband, that she could become his mother. Even though from the beginning of their lives together Dagmara felt that Karlis was older, more experienced, and more cautious. And yet they were both born in 1923.

Karlis came up to his wife and kissed her hard. Dagmara liked it. Karlis had a unique scent, she had noticed this already then, when Olafs brought him along. Warm flesh, a little chalk or something floury. When she was in Karlis’ embrace, she forgot everything. All it took was one caress, and Karlis was no longer pitiable, nor older and not more scared than she herself. Especially in the dark. Then Karlis had a hot and powerful strength. But that happened rarely. At ten o’clock in the morning in the sunlight she saw over Karlis’ shoulder the dirty windows, speckled with flies, which she had not yet managed to wash.

He sat at the round table and Dagmara pushed a bowl of peas towards him.

- Let’s not cry. Everything will get sorted out, Karlis. Everything will be alright, -

Dagmara was just comforting him. She knew that she had to say these and similar things to her husband more often than to other people. Karlis did everything instinctively. He

agonized over searching inside himself, digging, toiling, not saying a word, but always afraid of making a mistake. Yes, he didn't know how to argue. In his place, Dagmara could lay out Karlis' concept for the aggressive tabloid press and demagogues, who were in all the papers, and summarize in such a way that they might fall silent. If for only a short while, so that Karlis could work in peace. But Dagmara was not permitted to do so. And certainly not as his wife.

- Just ten minutes away, - Karlis glanced at his watch.

- Everything will be alright for you too, don't worry. The truth is the truth. And don't worry about money, - he said with difficulty, embarrassed at his words, and caressed Dagmara's black silk shoulder.

Pale, wide cheekbones, dark, coloured eyes and bright, short hair always shocked him when combined with black clothes. Since Thursdays had become too frightening, Dagmara did not have get-togethers. She generally did not pay attention to her looks, and Karlis liked this. He could not stand fashion queens, believing that all of the intricate scraps of clothes served only to cultivate elegance and debauchery. His Dagmara, buried in her books and manuscripts, was just as beautiful and was able to transform in minutes into the most astonishing elf or demon, if she wanted to.

- The Kremlin's chimes are ringing in the beginning of 1951. We, the Soviet people, greet the new year with exultation, because we know that 1951 will be even more successful and prosperous than last year. A socialist country does not know how to stop, it keeps moving endlessly forward, and every following year is an even greater step towards communism than the last.

- Turn it off, - Dagmara looked at her husband, begging.

They drank their champagne in silence and after clearing the almost untouched dishes, they went to bed.

- Dear unhappy owl, - Karlis whispered, carressing her. The night had become thicker, enveloping them completely. In the silence could be heard Karlis' finger moving over her skin.
- Scared, - Dagmara said in a deep voice.
- So quiet, as if there was nothing left in the world.

Karlis didn't answer. He was sleeping perfectly still, looking up at the shadows on the quivering ceiling, and tried to suppress the growing, inexplicable pain inside him.

- Stay with me tonight, - Dagmara whispered.
- Of course.

*

On that January day they each worked in their own room. In the afternoon they met in the little kitchen nook and, seated at the narrow table with the yellow and white oilcloth fastened to it, they ate yesterday's sauerkraut with pork.

- I will go tomorrow. Maybe this time they will take me, - Dagmara said. – Otherwise, I feel like a parasite. You are working, because of me you lose time for painting, and I am rotting in my low self-worth. I shouldn't have married you, then everything would be different for you. And also my guilty conscience would disappear.

- Stop it! A parasite is an organism which lives on a host organism and takes nutrients for itself. But – harming the host. By the way, between the parasite and the host there is a complicated biological interaction. Truth be told, I am the parasite. You feed me. I exist only with your strength and belief in me. You know this very well, so don't be coy with me.

It is enough for me that I became delicate and white, while others were killing each other.

Do you think that I am too good and lame to provide for my family? – Karlis ended bitterly.

- The same old song! – Dagmara sighed. – When will you understand, for once, that your war with yourself as an artist is more important for people? Don't talk back, hush! That is why I can't stand it, that you have to work at something else. Unfortunately, since we moved in together, since I haven't had work, we have not been able to send your mother anything. We scraped in order to spend New Year's Eve together, like philistines, with champagne. And that was only so we could shield our eyes from reality. Instead, we should have, should have... – Dagmara pushed the plate away in helpless despair.

- Calm down! – Karlis ordered. – I wrote to her and explained our life.

- What could you have explained? Have you lost your mind? Do you think those kinds of letters reach her? And what do you have to explain? We have to help!

- Let's stop talking about this. Don't be nervous. Do you really think that this life without work and money, this underground life will never end? Everything will change, you will see. You know well what you are and that your work is necessary. If you will understand, others will also understand, be patient, - Karlis spoke with a domineering tone, and Dagmara saw how hopelessly he was trying to believe his own words. She embraced her husband around his neck and with sincerity tinged with regret said:

- Forgive me. I was weak. You are right.

She closed the door behind her and, having finished her cigarette, sat down at the clapperboard desk.

Thinking about Karlis' mother did not give her peace. Her own mother was still so closeby – there beside the little etagere was the sofa on which she died – shrunken and yellow like an autumn leaf. Her conscience smouldered. They spoke so little about life,

about her father, about herself. Always only work, talks about work, almost military discipline. Ideas about the world were learned only through hundreds of books, through her mother's probing questions, instructions. Dagmara's mother told her clearly:

-You have to become a big person. That is the only way you will justify your existence, that is the only way they won't break you. I am not thinking about fame, that is useless. I don't want my daughter to grow up to be a weak and sickly person.

From a young age, Dagmara read her mother's books, wrote her reviews about them, translated texts she was given from French and Russian. Yes, all thanks to her mother. Dagmara did not have an ear for music, and could therefore not follow in her mother's footsteps, but her parents strategically considered other options. In the beginning, her mother taught her French herself, but from the age of twelve Nelda Reinsmite came – a disshevelled, smart spinster. Every other day for two and a half hours, Dagmara obediently completed her exercises, gritting her teeth, grimacing from the overpowering sweet scents and powder which this capricious woman used with no sense of moderation.

Dagmara could not say a word about her headaches to her mother. She generally lived as if she was immortal, - vital, disciplined, without complaining. She even took the news about her father's death like a man. Dagmara trembled when her mother, wiping away tears, said curtly: "But he fulfilled his duties. We can only learn from that."

When her mother was already dying and Dagmara sat vigil by her bed, their relationship changed. Her mother became more open, but those were short moments.

- Don't take this too hard. I believe that Marcus Aurelius was completely correct about death. He said that we have to wait for it without grumbling – as if it were simply the division of the elements which comprise every living being. For elements that is not such a horrible thing – well, that – constantly changing from one to the other. That is why we

must not fear the overall transformations and divisions, because that is in synergy with nature. And that which is in synergy with nature cannot be bad. There you have it, my girl! It is possible that, if your father were still alive, I would not think this way.

This is what her mom said just a half hour before she died. Dagmara hid her hysterical sobs in the kitchen, clattering the dishes, but, when she returned to the room, she had already died.

The next day, Dagmara sold her mother's upright piano. She had no money for the funeral, and she could not ask her acquaintances for money. Her mother would have understood. Somehow. This thought tortured Dagmara from time to time. With the money remaining after the funeral, she hired some men who renovated the room in one week's time, tore down the temporary walls, which earlier had divided her parents and her sides of the room, in this way keeping herself busy with business matters, to help get over the pain in her mother's distinctive manly way. Yet then, when Mozart or Liszt were playing on the radio, Dagmara had to look for her nerve pills.

Now, when she imagined Karlis' mother in the far north without regular food and without much news about her son, Dagmara lost her self-control. Surely something had to be done! How could he wait for changes, staying silent, clenching his teeth, not knowing how many decades it could take, if ever. Such a dawdler!

Yes, she will go against her conscience. Despite her sacred promise to her mother to never, under any circumstances, never sell one book, she will do this. Already today.

Dagmara already knew a buyer. The Knut Hamsun Collected Stories.

Dagmara took her large leather bag and filled it with the orange-red volumes. For a moment, her hands trembled, but she did not allow herself to get emotional. Wearing her gray winter coat and her little hat, she carried the bag outside.

-Karlis, I am going out for a bit of fresh air. I have a headache. – She poked her head into Karlis' studio.

He looked back thoughtfully at Dagmara's bustling determination and waved to her with a smile.

-But...wait. – He suddenly came towards her. – Be careful. Please!

Dagmara waved without a word and closed the door.

*

When in her black leather bag there were four packages of flour, oats, cookies, tinned food, sugar, tea and coffee, as well as salt, cigarettes and a warm training outfit for Karlis' mother, Dagmara was stopped on the street, not far from her home.

*

Haralds had seen this and ran upstairs to Karlis, out of breath and completely drenched in sweat.

-Karlis! – he was yelling already outside, without waiting for him to open the door.- They took her away! Do you hear me? Took her away! I saw it myself. What now? Here, I brought whiskey and a sausage, I was lucky. Listen, what is in her manuscripts and books? You should throw them away. They will come here and search the place. They will take you away too, likely before morning.

Karlis stood mute, pressed against the windowsill and looked at Haralds with empty eyes, full of confusion, but at the same time completely devoid of hope.

-Get out of here! – he suddenly yelled.- No one is going to touch her manuscripts! No one! Over my dead body!

-Stupid man, - Haralds tried to smooth things over. – Calm down. You have to think of something, talk to someone. There is help.

- Who can help? – Karlis, already calmer, responded sharply nonetheless. – Can the people who lied about her help her, who threw her out of school, who crept along the street behind her like starving dogs? I don't know them, I don't. I knew that this is exactly what would happen. All of the circumstances showed this. I just didn't want to believe it, I was afraid to believe it. Oh god! – Karlis collapsed to the floor and, clutching his head with both hands, moaned.

- Here, drink! – Haralds had found some glasses and filled them.

*

Four of them arrived. Big tall guys with briefcases and stiff, smooth facial features. Karlis stood at Dagmara's desk while three of them threw books off the shelves, but the fourth slowly walked from one corner of the room to the other, thoughtfully leering at Karlis' grey expressionless face.

*

A few days later, when he returned from the product station, almost nothing from Dagmara's library remained. A few dictionaries, Marx, Engel and messed up, half-torn manuscripts. The buffet was open and the Wedgewood sugar bowl had been smashed into tiny pieces.

*

Soon after three different men arrived. More active, more talkative, apparently more peace-loving. They interrogated him about Dagmara's past, about which Karlis had no real knowledge, about who had visited there and whom they had both visited while they were married.

- We worked and did not walk around, - Karlis said through clenched teeth.
- Is that so? And your business is culture, yes? – rang the laughter of one of the three who was obviously the leader.

Karlis kept quiet. What was there to discuss.

- When will I see my wife? – Karlis asked.
- Do you miss her? – The leader winked his small wonder-filled eyes and got up. –

Thank the lord that you were in that mess only once. But we will still need to discuss this with you. In different circumstances. Do you understand? – He slapped Karlis on the shoulder, and all three slammed the door shut behind them.

Karlis was left alone. He went into Dagmara's room and fell face down onto her blue sofa. What should he do? To whom did he have to go begging? Whom did he have to sell himself to, and for what did he have to atone?

Dagmara's sin then was treason against her homeland. What was the sin of her mother and father? No explanation. Does a person come into the world aware of sin? Hereditary sin, hereditary crime in a person, for which they have to atone during their lifetime? For the first time in his life, Karlis caught himself in the thought, that he is too stupid, uneducated, to understand these politics.

Now he was alone. Left behind, no good for anything. Once again the good one. Untouchable, insignificant, unable even to convict. A fellow who is always just alongside. Who misses the deciding moment. It was a miracle that he got up his nerve and proposed to Dagmara. What heroism! What will happen now? Where to start? Where will she be sent to? And will she survive? Dear, unhappy owl, his beautiful wife with the Pola Negri hairstyle, in this muscular guy's hands! Tears burst into the corners of his eyes, bitter and stinging. He clenched his fists and banged them on the desk. Again. Again. Where will he stay? Loading apples and potatoes off of the wagons in the product station and never, ever again wanting to be the person he is. To forget who he is. To be needed. Like Subins. Will he be convicted too, it occurred to him. He so often supported Dagmara's "anti-Soviet bunker". His dear wife has betrayed her homeland, whom she served faithfully, even diligently – without ulterior motives and loud phrases.

Although there is calm work in our homeland,

We stand at the lathe as at a cannon.

And, so that we may overcome the enemy,

We need to work even faster,

So that the pneumatic hammer in the workshop

Will one day be clutched in our hands like a machine gun,-

was playing on the radio, and Karlis turned it off. His temples were throbbing and he was slightly dizzy. Since Dagmara left that day, he slept on her blue sofa and screamed in his sleep. He called her name dozens of times, hoping to wake up and find his wife right there beside him. But the silent book shelves proved that Karlis was as healthy as could be and that what had happened was real. Therefore, he had to get it together and live the way

Dagmara would have wanted. All of a sudden Karlis imagined that he could also be sent away. Sooner or later. That is exactly what happened to the poet's wife – first him, and two weeks later – his wife. Dagmara told him. He was so naïve! And he was just sitting there! He had to be ready. He had to buy a quilted jacket – he had sent one to his mother. Karlis knew what he needed. He took a worn-down old suitcase and rummaged through the closet, filling the suitcase with what he thought were the bare necessities. He had to buy a quilted coat! Boots! So naïve! It could happen at any moment. And Dagmara was probably taken away with just her handbag.

The doorbell rang. There! After closing the suitcase, Karlis put his ear to the outside door. He didn't hear anything. He opened the door. There was Haralds with a bottle of vodka and herrings. After a while he had already taken over the kitchen.

- Listen, Haralds, who are you, exactly? – Karlis asked.

- What do you mean, who am I? A grey, normal little person, a little nuts, ha! – he laughed a little, but his gaze anxiously assessed Karlis' tall frame rooted into the sofa.

- Get up! You are a man, damn it!

Karlis obeyed. They sat at the round wooden table. There were papers, folders and some open books strewn on the floor and in the corners.

- Look, what vandals! – Karlis waved his arm all around, as if to explain the messiness.

- They would have needed a truck to take this all away. Oh, the money here! – Haralds looked back and forth.

- Why are you whining about money! What literature! – Karlis, already tipsy, was bragging.

He wasn't one of the tough guys who could party and became weak after only three

drinks. His head also always hurt after drinking, to the point of vomiting. However now, with Haralds pitying him, he willingly drank, because at least afterwards he would be able to fall asleep without a thought in his mind. He did have to get past the weepy phase, which was so painful for him that he could slit his throat, but the next phase was full of determination and big plans, where he could unload all of his feelings of worthlessness.

- They are going to take me away too, - Karlis told Haralds.

- Unlikely, - Haralds snapped back and took a drink.

So Haralds Libeks went to the same elementary school as Karlis. At that time, they were not good friends, but when they met after the war, a sense of warmth and closeness developed between them. During the war, Haralds had risen in the ranks, but in his heart he had remained the same simple, sincere and slightly primitive country boy with a round, as if always smiling, face and bright, grey eyes. Blonde hair and a moustache, and tight muscular shoulders and back gave the impression that Haralds was more a professional tourist or mountain-climber, or at least a practising biologist, but not an everyday craftsman. Haralds' agile hands could fix boots, pointed-toe shoes, irons, watches, keys, crooked cupboard doors and suits which have become too tight. But he also knew how to fix brakes, if they had fallen apart after being driven to despair. That was why he was here, with Karlis. Yes, Haralds knew more than my father realized. Almost thirty years later Haralds will tell me, that at the time, he was only able to save my father, but not Dagmara. Haralds had helped many people in Kurzeme, so he was able to ask for certain favours from others. He saved my father without him knowing. But Haralds was an honourable man, and he did not fill Karlis' head with stories about traitors whom he had met face to face. Haralds did not give the traitor's name, not only for his own safety, but also to spare Karlis. Who is

this Haralds? He said it well – he was a nut. Yes, more than a screw or a nail, more. But it will turn out that his greatest life's purpose will not be his work as a craftsman or his short-lived "public" life, but rather his purpose was saving my father's life. What good would come of it, if they had both suffered. To this day, I can still not say who paid the heavier price – Dagmara far away or Karlis close by, choking on his own dregs and guilty conscience, that his love had been taken from him and at the same time his belief. Belief in his work. It is hard to say what united Haralds and Karlis, but this kind of "union" is rarely seen. They did not talk about art and painting, and Karlis was only happy about that. He could not stand gossip about sacred subjects. They had both agreed not to talk about politics. Haralds was for his part happy about this, as he regarded himself as a dirty trick in this regard.

They were friends. And they were no more and no less to each other. Now, when Dagmara was so far away, Haralds was the only person to whom Karlis was attached. But the emptiness remained. His wife's silent presence every hour of the workday. That was missing. Karlis was less and less interested in the intellectual life. If earlier it ate away at him how much time was spent reading, thinking, acknowledging, then now Karlis would much rather sleep with his eyes open on the blue sofa, listening to the radio and listening carefully for if they were coming for him.

On the radio came the news, that Vilis Lacis had just received the Stalin prize for exceptional work in literature and art for his novel *To the New Shore*.