

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: In this novel we meet Taņa, a young Latvian woman on an intense quest for her own identity. As the novel unfolds, Taņa's search becomes intertwined with the responsibility she feels for her children, falling in love and being in love, her countless losses and rebirths. After she is abandoned by her husband, Taņa suddenly finds herself alone with three children. She plunges into adventures – losing herself, then finding herself again. She gets involved in various messes, but never hangs her head in defeat; she is a character who might cry briefly, but then always gets up, dusts herself off with a smile, and carries on. *The Little Love Affair* offers a cross-section of an untamed, young woman's world, where all moral judgment is left up to the reader.

Excerpt

When I was very small, I sometimes used to hunt for grasshoppers. Having captured them, I would tear them to pieces and thread their ripped-off heads onto a fine wire. I had made a corner for myself in the yard, over near the fence, where I would make a little fire - roasting the grasshopper heads until they turned a burnished red. Then, I would store my trophies away in a matchbox, pour some salt in and give the lot a good shake. In the evenings, withdrawing to the farthest end of the bed, I would fish the salty nibbles out with a pin and,

whilst munching on them, indulge in my most secret, childlike thoughts – about the prince who would save Snow White, about immeasurable, endless warmth, about eternal and all-forgiving love. The singing of grasshoppers, lulling me to sleep, streamed into me, intensifying with every head I ate. Back then, I didn't know that grasshoppers sang with their feet.

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Nils. He carried his pain around on his chest like a mirrored surface, an even shield – anyone could detect each and every one of his personal hurts on it. His entire body was in pain – even the non-existent womb. His entire body was smothered with long, never healing cuts, made by sharp barley heads. Constantly searching for solace, he wandered from one healer to another, from one woman to another, but never stayed anywhere long. Sympathetic looks, soothing whispers, tricky advice on cures – all of that gave just him short-term relief.

Nils was a victim of the future. Foaming from the side of his mouth, he was chasing tomorrow and, once having embarked on his race with time, he was unable to stop. Wise folk told him: "There's no tomorrow. It walks ahead of us and refuses to grant us access. There's no us in tomorrow. You'll be allowed to see it just once – and then you'll be in a place where no *you* exists. It will be the end. So, you'd do better to live in the moment and enjoy it." Made edgy by such predictions, Nils soon stopped visiting healers and, searching for oblivion through his women, avoided speaking to his inner self. However, no woman was ever clever enough to detect in his question the panicky fear of life of his, and refrain

from offering him solace in an obtrusive manner. As if sentenced to death, Nils saw an affirmation of his doom in every demonstration of sympathy.

Gradually, Nils learnt not to mention his feelings at all, thus protecting himself from himself. Looking at him from the outside, the guy seemed to have his head full of compulsive ideas – such as how to find gold concealed in an old house, how to work out how to win the lottery, how to look for the black oak, how to sign up as a mercenary in a tiny African country at war and make a load of money and last, but not least, how to invent the eternal engine.

He got married so he could give erotic underwear to someone, after having shown it to his friends over a drink. He had children but didn't know what to do with them. In a way, he wanted them to be geniuses, in a way, he wanted his children not to hurt like he did but ... all to no avail. The children reflected themselves onto his shield of pain but couldn't get close to his heart. They grew up clinging to the folds of their mother's skirt, only ever responding to their father by peeping out from behind it.

He found himself a mistress. At times, he even had two or three on the go at the same time. At home, they were all sick and tired of his endless tales and deaf ears, but he just couldn't keep quiet. Every silent moment threatened a new flash of pain, an even louder outcry: "Run! You have to make it in time!" He ran. When the others were still trying on their first dancing shoes, Nils had already worn through the leather on the soles of his. His ragged-bottomed trousers dragged along the ground, threads hanging loose, but he paid no heed to mud, nor pavements nor the first snowflakes under his feet.

Pushing people aside as they came towards him, Nils broke through the crowd like a zebra hounded by a pack of hyenas.

When I grabbed his shoulder and he stopped, he vomited out of pure fear all down my neck. He didn't apologise. Having wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, he squatted down in front of me and began spouting his lifeless theories, never once stopping for breath. A few years later he admitted to me: "You had such a look in your eyes back then that I knew instantly that had I shut up for just a second, you would have asked me something I wouldn't have been able to answer. So I had to keep talking."

And oh, how he talked. A man who always had something to say. About everything. Every deed or thought found in him its theoretical explanation. Usually, these theories were embellished by the quotes of famous philosophers but sometimes the theories were contrived by Nils himself. Easily and effortlessly. Nils had the knack of analysing just about anything in a sophisticated fashion, from how to brush your teeth, to primitive physiologic needs right up to conceptually grounded flights of fancy. He could wax lyrical about meeting famous people, eulogise about the discovery of antique literature and post-soviet psychology. When, breathlessly, he started talking about his previous incarnations, I began to fear that a similar destiny awaited me to that of the psychoanalyst, Somerville – who was tied inside a church bell tower with the bell clapper - ding dong - attached to his brain.

I listened patiently to all he said – at the beginning it all seemed quite riveting but after a short while I was plagued by a single thought – how was it that he made quite exceptional topics so deathly boring? Later, I managed to submerge myself in a weird, trance-like state during Nils' endless mumbling. We are sitting on the steps of the Opera

House, Nils has already floated off into unreachable heights and I'm watching the windblown leaves in silence. I manage to attain an all-encompassing sense of unreality in under seven minutes.

It was quite funny actually, listening to him joyfully spouting forth about Kirk Gregory, Borges or Frisch as if he had just discovered them, quite convinced that even the names were double Dutch to me. I raise no objections – let him pontificate and ramble on – so at least the poor thing didn't vomit all over me. But when, instead of a proper gift he handed me a collection of Proust translations for my birthday, his face wearing a meaningful and somewhat teacherly expression, my patience simply ran out. I decided to kill the man – he was insane. I invited him for tea and biscuits and, excusing myself by saying I was out of sugar, ran down to the local shop, leaving Nils to wander round my apartment on his own for a while and peruse my bookshelves. When I came back, he was rooted to the spot with a stony expression on his face, his back like a ramrod as he stared frostily at the dregs of his tea. For the first time in two years, he barely uttered a word the whole evening. I told him of the difficulties I was having with the neighbours, gave rather a basic analysis of a series currently on TV and, seeing him out, wondered aloud as to Nils' quiet mood. My surprise managed to come across as sincere.

I didn't see him for quite a while after that. In the meantime, he left his family, resigned from his job, gave up on his friends and, probably, started a completely different life. I ran into him at a public event. He seemed to shrink a bit when he saw me but then, pulling himself together, he came over and, looking me in the eye, said: "So, how are YOU?" I smiled, babbling away for a while and then, with great satisfaction, listened to his life story

Dace Rukšāne "Romāniņš" [The Little Love Affair]

Excerpt

Translated by Žanete Vēvere-Pasqualini

– which was full of real emotion and suffering. Nils had become interesting. He didn't need me anymore. I was delighted.