

Biography: Jana Egle, born in 1963, is a Latvian poet and prose writer. Her first collection of poems *Dzirdēt noklusēto* [To Hear the Unsaid] was published in 2002. She has been writing prose since 2011. In the 2015 Prose Readings Festival, she received the main prize for her stories *Tāds Rudens* [Such Autumn] and *Aiziet jūriņā* [At Sea]. Egle's collection of stories *Gaismā* [Into the Light] won the Annual Latvian Literature Award 2017 and her episodic novel *Svešie jeb Miļeņkij ti moi* [Strangers or Milenky ty moy] was shortlisted for the Annual Latvian Literature Award 2019.

Synopsis: *Into the Light* is Jana Egle's prose debut. It includes eight stories whose themes connect with the not-so-sunny moments and aspects of life. Jana Egle brings to light subjects that have been kept hidden or considered unsuitable for discussion – violence against women, paedophilia, transsexuality. The themes running through this collection are guilt, domestic abuse, helplessness – how these form, how they affect a person's later behaviour, what effects they have on the direction of one's life. All eight stories are about family relationships – about brothers, about mothers and daughters, fathers and sons. Each story brings to light secrets or occurrences that are typically hidden and not spoken of in our society.

Excerpt

"When I grow up, I'm going to be a painter just like my dad," the boy said, his knees pulled up under his chin as he outlined designs, decipherable to him alone, with a stick.

"Do you think you're good enough at drawing?" the girl asked, glancing incredulously from the boy to the lines he had etched on the ground.

"Yes, of course. Dad taught me." The boy looked across the pit to the white gravel road. A

black car crawled along like a lazy fly, the hum of its engine just about audible as it weaved elegantly along. The cloud of dust at its rear suspended in time immobile in the air . . .

"Where is your dad?"

"Far away."

"My uncle is far away, too. He is in Denmark but has come home twice already. When are your mom and dad coming back?" Anete was persistent in her line of questioning.

"Soon," the boy snapped, pressing his cheek against his dirty knee.

"And when will soon be, exactly?" The little girl wouldn't let up.

The boy stared at the cloud of dust frozen mid-air.

"Soon means soon. And quit asking so many questions, will you? Curiosity killed the cat!"

"Like the one your granny used to have? No one's coming to see you, just you wait and see.

So nyah!" The little girl stuck her tongue out before disappearing behind the bushes.

"Markus! Marky!"

The boy heard well enough but didn't move a muscle. His bottom seemed to have taken root in the earth, his hands and legs molded from soft, damp clay. Closing his eyes, he lay back and gazed through his eyelashes at the sunset. If you screw your eyes into narrow slits, the whole world glitters in clear, pure tones like a watercolor painting scattered with gold dust. The underbellies of seagulls floating above him were as pink as flamingos in the rays of the setting sun as the distant forest, trembling through the boy's eyelashes, lifted its gray-

blue branch arms eerily skyward. Markus turned his head and pressed his cheek to the sand.

It was warm.

"Markus! Why aren't you answering me? It's dinnertime. And then it will be time for bed."

"I don't want to."

"I see." Grandma sighed heavily. "There are a lot of things I don't want to do, but I do them anyway."

"We could do with some rain," Grandma mumbled as she turned her attention to slicing bread. The boy knew no reply was needed. After living alone for many years, Grandma was used to talking to herself. "There are no cucumbers and we won't be getting any either, and there's no knowing if those potatoes will swell before the autumn, they are that tiny."

"We are going to the cemetery festival tomorrow. I need to see if you have anything half-decent to wear," she continued, glancing sideways at Markus.

"I don't want to go."

"Is anyone asking what you do or do not want?" Grandma didn't sound cross, merely exhausted. "I went today; tidied the grave, raked it over, watered it. We will lay some flowers down tomorrow before the festival starts."

"Have you finished your soup?" By the sound of her voice, she was clearly speaking to the boy again. "At least you have a decent appetite, thank goodness for small mercies."

Markus thanked her and somehow, seemingly unintentionally, managed to avoid his grandmother's rough hand as it reached to caress his fragile, slightly hunched shoulders.

"My sweet little hedgehog," Grandma sighed quietly when the boy had set off for his room.

Markus undressed slowly. It was still light, so he didn't turn his bedside lamp on. The moon was not yet an entire orb, one side blurred as if smudged by a careless paintbrush.

Sometimes, the nights here were pitch-black in a way they never were in the city. As he burrowed into his bed, the only light was the thin line outlining the closed door, behind which Grandma was doing the dishes, discussing the events of the day with herself. When Grandma went to bed, the light disappeared altogether. On such nights, the boy felt frightened. On nights when he hadn't yet fallen asleep by this time, he would lie there awake—his eyes open but unseeing, he too scared even to close them.

Nights had been so different at home. Light from the streetlamps shone into the room. Even in the dark, the tram rails beneath the window creaked and every so often Markus's bed trembled slightly as a tram rambled past. Dad always left the door ajar, even when his buddies came round and sat smoking their roll-ups right there in the next room. That was the fun part; everyone sitting round listening to some kind of prehistoric music—Joplin, The Doors, Bob Marley—all of them laughing nonstop. And all the while Markus lay in his bed, joyfully inhaling the weird-smelling smoke drifting in from the room next door and wanting to join in the laughter. Other evenings, when there were no visitors, his dad would stay up late on his own, standing at his easel for the longest time, the sound of his brush quietly stroking the canvas lulling the boy to sleep. He missed the city lights, the sounds and smells, and his dad.

Markus shoved his hand sleepily under his pillow. There it was. His penknife with its sharp,

paper-thin blade. It was the only thing he had been able to grab from his dad's room when Grandma, the policeman, and the woman he didn't know had come for him. As the boy's fingers touched the knife's smooth, plastic cover, he calmed down and, closing his eyes, yawned drowsily.

In the morning, Markus woke without being called. Grandma was bustling about the kitchen, chortling softly to herself. A deliciously tempting smell was wafting through the cracks around the door. The boy quickly pulled his clothes on and opened the door.

"Good morning! Do you want some pancakes? Strawberry jam, or cream and sugar?"

Pancakes sat steaming in a ceramic bowl on the table—thick, fluffy, and golden brown with crispy edges.

"Jam." Grinning, he dove straight into his breakfast without so much as washing his face.

Grandma carried on cooking, glancing over her shoulder with satisfaction at the boy as he wolfed down pancake after pancake, dipping them into the puddle of jam on his plate as he went.

After breakfast, the boy went out into the garden. The feel of the cool grass tickling his bare feet was lovely; Markus stood a while trying to snap a long blade of grass between his toes.

"Hey, Markus! What are you up to?"

"Nothing." After a moment's silence, Markus added, "If you want, I can show you my secret?"

"What secret?" Anete widened her eyes.

"Well, a secret." Markus dragged out the answer elusively. "Let's go!"

Markus set off at a run. Bare feet flashing, they both made toward the dip. At its edge, the

boy stopped dead in his tracks. When Anete reached his side, Markus said, gravely, "Do you really want to know?"

Looking excitedly into his face, the girl answered impatiently, "Yes, of course!"

"OK, we need to run, stay close by and don't leave the track!"

The boy ran along the side of the dip without looking backward, at times running bent over, at others leaping. Pigtails waving, the little girl dashed after him, furtively straining to look ahead and discover what the secret might be. Suddenly, the ground beneath her feet gave way, something in her tummy tickled, flipped, her legs still running despite being momentarily up in the air before her frail body landed with an almighty thud and rolled to the bottom of a deep, narrow pit.

There was a desperate wail. The boy's head appeared over the edge of the pit against a background of clear blue sky. "So, how do you like my secret! Didn't I tell you to stay on the track?"

The girl stopped howling and pouted.

"Give me your hand!"

"No way, it's not going to be that easy. I'm going to play ip-dip. If I lose, I'll help you. If you lose, you'll have to do it on your own."

"But how can I do that?"

But the boy wasn't listening. Pointing at his own tummy then at the girl at the bottom of the pit, he recited the counting-out rhyme in a monotonous tone. "Ip, dip, sky, blue, who's it, not YOU!" he finished, his outstretched finger aimed at the little girl's heart.

"OK, I'm off then!"

"Wait! Marku-us!" The girl called but the boy's head had already disappeared from the little spot of the sky, now glittering bluer and clearer than before.

She tried to clamber up the wall of the pit. The dry, silky sand slithered beneath each step she took—it was hopeless, she would never get out on her own. Anete sat down in the pit. What a terrible mess. Every so often she called out Markus's name, each time louder than the time before. She had no idea if he was coming to help her out of this secret. She tried desperately, over and over again, to climb out, but the cool sand just kept slipping smoothly down the wall of the pit and covering her bare feet. The whole time, she felt a rhythmic thud in her ears . . . lp, dip, sky, blue, who's it, not YOU . . .

Markus was on his way home. Grandma had probably been expecting him for some time. The boy felt dizzy with elation, a lightness spreading through his limbs. Now the secret was truly real, alive. He straightened his back, relaxed his shoulders, and galloped off home with a light, dancing step. His hair shone like polished copper in the morning sunshine, flopping up and down at his every leap.

"Markus! Where have you been?"

"Nowhere much! Right here!" The boy marched calmly into the yard.

"Come and clean up and we'll get ourselves ready. We don't have long. Give me that T-shirt you're wearing. There we go, now I'll give you a clean one."

Flooded with the sudden desire to throw a tantrum, the boy pushed away his grandmother's hands as they reached to peel off his dirty T-shirt.

"Don't touch me," he hissed. "I'll do it myself."

"OK, OK, there you go. Just get a move on. I've put some water in the bowl in the hallway.

Go and have a good splash. You're always so on edge, I really don't know how to handle you." The last utterance, accompanied by a heavy sigh, was to herself.

Standing with his feet in the enormous bowl, the boy scooped up water and poured it over himself several times; the tiny, refreshing rivulets splitting then reuniting as they ran down his itchy skin. The wounds had almost healed but they still hurt. Markus took one damaged palm in the other and pressed. He moaned quietly yet continued applying pressure. Then he scooped up water in the palm of his hand and let it caress the inflamed, slowly healing skin. Half an hour later and the pair of them set off, all dressed up and flowers in hand. It was a fifteen-minute walk, going at a decent pace, to the cemetery. As they passed by their neighbors' fence, his grandma stopped in her tracks. The woman was quite worked up about something, waving her arms about as she spoke. Her husband just shrugged.

"Ilzy, aren't you coming to the cemetery festival?"

"We are, Aunt Velta, yes. Only we can't find our daughter." The woman turned her eyes on Markus. "Have you seen Anete?"

Markus shrugged his shoulders in silence and shook his head.

"She never goes off far but we haven't seen her for almost an hour and I'm starting to get worried."

"She must be somewhere nearby," Anete's dad remarked, seemingly unconcerned. "We will have to give her a good talking to when she comes back."

Konrāds Kaparkalējs (1946–1999) and Velta Kaparkalēja (1948– . . .) A black butterfly had alighted on the oak leaves and inscription chiseled into the polished stone. Spreading its wings, the butterfly proudly displayed its bright orange spots and impressive wingspan. The

boy placed his hand on the warm stone and slowly let it creep toward the butterfly. But the creature fluttered off playfully.

The white shirt Grandma had made him put on was a bit too tight; the seams cut in under his armpits and around his neck.

Standing in the chapel beneath an enormous cross, the pastor preached at great length and extremely tediously. The women's choir wailed at great length and extremely piteously.

Parish members sat down, stood up, and joined in the wailing as necessity required.

Markus looked around at the congregation, bored stiff. Thinning white hair, faded, wrinkled, paperlike faces and knotted hands. He listened to the quivering voices. It was dreary but peaceful. Behind his grandfather's headstone were two graves overtaken by weeds. Markus went over and sat down beside them. This was the final resting place of Grandma's grandparents. Further off were some smaller graves with tiny crosses, encrusted with yellowish-gray lichen. His grandma had told him on a previous visit to the cemetery that they were her mother's brothers and sisters who had died in their first few years of life.

"Why did they die?" Markus had asked at the time. "I don't know," Grandma replied, raking the sand next to Grandfather's headstone into a pine-cone-like pattern. "A lot of children died back then. It was after the war, times were tough."

The boy stared, immobile, at the dark crosses for quite some time. Then he looked up; he seemed to see identical crosses in glittering white paint against the bright blue sky. Markus became pensive, what if Anete dies? Then she would be buried and have a tiny cross just like the ones he'd seen on her grave. Or maybe a headstone like Granddad's. The boy pictured a small, neat wooden coffin with Anete laid out within, her hair neatly braided in

pigtails. Last spring, Grandma had taken him to the funeral of a distant relative. He had seen her laid out; yellowy pale in white lace, her eyes sunken and blackened, as were her cheeks. She had definitely died because she was so old. Anete's suntanned face is so pretty. If she actually died, Markus would probably feel very sorry.

The wind rustled through the trees in the cemetery, tugging rain clouds like a dark gray blanket across the sky in the blink of an eye. Moments later and the occasional heavy raindrop began to fall. In no time at all, the crosses, headstones, and trees were blotted out by a thick, white sheet of rain, and blundering figures stumbled about in search of shelter. Markus pressed himself up against the warm, rough wall of the chapel and watched his grandma in the rain, turning this way and that as she scoured the surroundings for her grandson. When her eyes alighted on the chapel, Markus waved. Grandma scurried over to him and wriggled under the narrow space next to the boy.

Slightly out of breath, Grandma asked, "Didn't you get caught in the rain?" as she brushed the rain from her clothes and ran her fingers through her hair to tidy it. Markus just shook his head without taking his eyes off the congregation who, now crouching over and soaked to the skin, were still trying to escape the rain while holding song sheets and bags over their heads.

"Velta, I can give you a lift home, it's on our way!" a lady running past them called out. "It doesn't look like it's going to stop."

The car was parked right behind the chapel but Markus's white shirt still got soaked by the rain. His skin glowed through the wet patches and, as he climbed into the back, Markus carefully inspected his left palm. There was nothing to be seen. Grandma got into the front

seat and, her feet still outside, banged the soles of her shoes together to get rid of the thick layer of sandy earth that clung to them.

As they drove along, the windshield misted up. They were dropped off right on the doorstep. Once indoors, they changed into dry clothes and Grandma put some tea on. The rain pelted down all around.

Then something happened. There was a knock at the door and, without being invited in, someone stormed straight into the house. It was Anete's mother . . .

Markus shrank deeper into the room and, barely breathing, pressed himself up against the unlit wood burner.

"Where is that bastard grandson of yours, the degenerate!"

Grandma instinctively stepped in front of the door, barring the way.

"What is it? What's happened?" she stuttered.

"It's insane! How could you, you little creep? How could you do something like that?" Ilze tried to push Grandma away so she could get at the boy. Markus shrank closer to the wall.

"Will you tell me what's going on? What has happened?" Grandma asked, rock-like as she held her ground.

"The dog found Anete. At first I couldn't understand why he was yelping and trying to get me to follow him. As far as that old quarry pit—there are still some pole shafts that haven't been filled in." Ilze had begun speaking in calmer tones before suddenly remembering herself and starting to shout again, even more furiously than before. She knew Markus was in the next room. "And don't you dare try and say you weren't there!" Tears caught in Ilze's throat.

At a loss for words, Grandma put her hand on Ilze's shoulder. "But is she all right?"

"Well, she's alive."

"Then everything is going to be fine . . ." Grandma murmured and, taking Ilze by the elbow, made her sit at the kitchen table. Not knowing what else to say, she reached for a tea towel and wiped the sweat from her neck. "Shall I pour you some tea?"

"Her dad has taken her to the doctor's. The child was stiff with fright."

At this, Markus finally let his breath out and felt his entire body, which seemed chiseled into the wall, finally relax. Hearing him sigh, Ilze leapt up and flung herself toward the door again. Grandma was quicker; she got there first and barred it. "Why on earth are you defending that bastard! Just you let me get at him!"

Grandma clung to Ilze like grim death, her heels digging into the floor. Then she raised her voice, too, telling Ilze to sit down. She should be ashamed of herself, attacking an old lady like that. Ilze calmed down and sank back into the chair. Grandma reached for a cup and was about to pour her neighbor some tea when Ilze spoke up again. "How can the earth bear such vile creatures?" Raising her eyes to meet Velta's again she continued, her voice lowered yet still audible to the boy in the next room, "Why did you have to bring him back here from that junkies' den? If you only had left him where he was, everyone would have been better off. We would have been, definitely."

Replacing the teapot firmly but quietly, Grandma said, "I think it's time you went home, your daughter is probably back from the doctor's by now."

Ilze grew even more agitated and started shouting again. "Oh, do you think so? You know what, your daughter-in-law did well to dump the lot of you. None of you are right in the

head. None of you!"

Markus was sitting right there on the floor. Tonight, the moon was perfectly round. He hadn't uttered a word the whole time. Grandma asked him repeatedly how he could have forgotten about the girl. What on earth had he been thinking? He should never have run away and left Anete in the pit, not even for a moment.

But Markus hadn't forgotten about the girl, not for a moment. It was just how things had turned out, it had all been quite fair. Ip, dip, sky blue, who's it, not YOU! He had played the counting-out game and it had landed on her; it was what they had agreed. And it wasn't as if she had died—she had only fallen into a pit. Markus thought he heard Grandma crying when she went back to her room.

Markus crawled silently out of the window. The earth was soft and smelled of rain. The rain had stopped, only the odd cloud drifted overhead without ever completely blocking out the moonlight. A sharp, honeyed scent rose from the flowerbed. A light was on in Grandma's window. The boy snuck quietly across the wet grass to it, standing in the flowerbed so he could peep inside. Grandma sat slumped in the chair, her back to the window, staring at the painting on the wall. Markus had always known there was a painting on the wall but tonight, for the first time, he took a good look at it. A tranquil landscape drowned in golden sunlight and green life. Markus knew it well; it was the scene from the edge of the forest beyond the pit. Only that in the painting, in the place of the enormous gravel pit hole, was a meadow full of dandelions.

One corner of the painting carried the year it was made—1998. The other, the initials MKK.

Modris KaparKalējs always signed his work like that. In awe, the boy realized that his dad

had done the painting, although it was far removed from the ornate, impetuous pictures he used to paint at night in the spare room of their city apartment . . . Markus's eyes started itching; he glanced at Anete's house. The only lit window there was in the kitchen, yet it somehow appeared just like the glittering, sunny landscape in Grandma's room—now lost to them forever. His feet were freezing cold and he felt incredibly lonely.

Markus crawled back to his room. Having rubbed the soles of his dirty feet against his shins, he took off his shirt and slipped into bed. He thrust his hands under the pillow and felt for the knife. Then he let his fingers run over the back of his left hand and the already healed cut—MKK. Markus Kaparkalējs. The boy pulled the knife out from under the pillow, flicked it open, and took it in his left hand. Cutting clumsily, he slashed crosses, one after another, from his right shoulder down to his hand—one, two, three, four. The blood ran in warm black streaks down the length of his arm in the moonlight.