

Biography: Andris Akmentiņš (né Andris Grīnbergs, 1969) is a Latvian poet, translator of poetry, and musician. In 1994, he graduated from the Department of Philology at the University of Latvia as a journalist, and has worked for various magazines and newspapers, as well as in advertising and marketing. In 1992, he received the Klāvs Elsbergs Prize and has received other awards for literature and creative work. As a creator and writer he has been involved in producing and promoting the Annual Latvian Literature Award ceremony, and authored various large-scale events and campaigns. Andris Akmentiņš often performs his poems in the bardic manner accompanied by guitar.

Synopsis: This novel highlights the significance of teachers and education in 20th-century Latvia. Akmentiņš strives to single out the heroic endeavors of rural teachers – the nurturing of a new generation of intelligentsia to replace those previously deported and exiled. The novel is structured as a hyper-lively reality in the modernist spirit, which also echoes the atmosphere of Khrushchev's political thaw. Akmentiņš' heroes might misplace their cause and lose their lives, yet they refuse to play the part of the victim, instead getting by on their wits and cunning, a characteristic of peasants in Latvian folklore. The new post-war generation and the contradictions of Khrushchev's era are diverse and interesting themes, demanding a vivid dualism – hunger and the desire to live, modern science and fashion, the theory underpinning the Party versus its true face. Competitive in everything, two sisters intend to uphold the professional tradition of their pedagogical family.

Excerpt

Come to work my friend,

Let last year's thatch burn in every corner:

The smoke may at times be bitter,

But the bread will only be the sweeter.

(Jānis Breicis)

Exams, which were like another season squeezed in between spring and summer, were over. Few knew what to do now. The children from the countryside went back home and picked up the work that was waiting for them there. Valdis Ķīvīte must have been the only one who had sufficient freedom and also the wherewithal to make something of it. He wandered around the forests, caught fish in the Tērcē, occasionally showed up at school begging for books. He'd ask for one, but steal others if he could get to them.

Ever since that misfortune with the cow breeding, Sarmīte wasn't so sure whether she even liked Valdis.

There were various renovations underway at the empty school, it was all very boring. Already at the beginning of June the required reading lists vanished like the contents of a punctured bicycle tire. Sarmīte was even enjoying ploughing for a change, but hay season hadn't begun yet. She was just taking turns at herding the cows and sheep, filling the rabbit feeders, tending the bee hives, whittling branches for rakes, gathering rotted wood for the bee smoker, and a hundreds of other useful, but bothersome chores. They'd all seem insignificant and yet they would take all day to finish. For the teachers it was the start of a beautiful season – a 48-day vacation. Such a long time and not available (or understandable) to so many others. Nevertheless, it was filled for them with stressful work and the simple goal of not starving to death during the next academic year. Strawberries ripened first, then came the first potatoes and chanterelles – but Beria loomed over them all.

Who could forget the mad Beria period. The first amnesties, the hope and relief. Sarmīte snuck in just to hear what Mother would sing to the child of the teacher, Mrs. Ozoliņa. That was the surest indicator of the political situation. That's how we learned who was most important in the country – from Mother's calm whispering to the child. Her voice would quiver in the little room where four, or sometimes even five people, would push in

together to spend the night: "Beria will show you the brightest pa-ath..."

Power had changed hands and reached the farthest corners of the country. Of course, the political situation was also helped by the knowledge of poetry she had from her time at the Kaucminde home economics school. Thanks to this, Voroshilov couldn't make it into the song even if he'd wanted to. Voroshilov, despite his famous accuracy, just didn't fit the rhythm. Adding on just a syllable was nothing though, then you could get the version: "Bulganin will show you the brightest path..."

Or if worse came to worst, "Voroshilov himself... will show you the path," but that pause that seemed to be begging for a last name seemed not good enough to sing to a child. Another option would have been to stretch out the "i", which also wouldn't be appropriate because of the content... Voroshilov also wasn't any kind of a "self", as he was already dead. Also, what could someone like Bulganin even decide in the country? At the same time Khrushchev's prospects were complicated by phonetics. A child wouldn't fall asleep peacefully hearing Khrushchev's name, but would instead get startled thinking that Mother had come down with a cough. So, as a result, no one thought much of Khrushchev's chances. It turned out that his chances were good after all and so once Khrushchev came to power, Mother seriously considered abandoning the lullaby principle for putting together the government and returning to singing about the moon as in the original song.

In this politically significant situation, Sarmīte became crazy for the sea. In the summer following Stalin's death, the Kurzeme shoreline, which had been earlier designated a military zone, was once again accessible and with it also the sea. Border patrol vehicles weren't moving around checking the raked over sand for footprints. People were suddenly drawn to the sea not because they wished to flee the country, but to gaze at what had been forbidden. There was hope again and most of society just wanted to enjoy a peaceful life

here, in their familiar home, not out in the frightening uncertainty of some foreign land.

What would come of it all? To see the liberated sea, one had to take multiple buses with schedules that didn't line up, pay a lot of money for tickets, choke down dust, spend nights in unfamiliar places without any chance of calling an acquaintance for help. But it all felt like no obstacle at all.

The idea that all of the vast Soviet Union belongs to every Soviet person kept being repeated everywhere and gradually began to do its work on the sisters. And truly, passion for travel became increasingly easy to understand, because a Soviet tourist with full ownership rights to their country could try comprehending its incredible wealth not only by going north to south, but also could put up a tent in any pretty meadow and light a fire for some tea without fear of an owner's dogs. And what of it, if there's no way to get across the border? The geographic diversity found in one-sixth of the entire planet was more than enough. Unfortunately, everyone at home, especially her always timid Mother, thought that Sarmīte was still too young for this kind of fun. The usual villains, her parents and Velta, but also her friend Kristīne bristled at the idea and didn't want to run off with her to the sea. She was speaking just like Mother. The only difference was that when she couldn't talk Sarmīte out of it, she just turned off completely.

"What did you lose by that sea that it's so important for you to run all the way across all of Latvia!?" Kristīne said shaking treacherously.

"Exactly that! Just the chance to run across all of Latvia!" Sarmīte was surprised that the sea didn't cause her friend to be just as excited. "It's going to be an amazing hike. The night, a gun, and the green forest! Well, OK, calm down, maybe we'll make do without the gun."

"You're out of control, what am I going to do with you?" Kristīne huffed.

"Yeah, and usually you like it when I'm like that." Sarmīte sulked and their row reached a new level.

"No chance! There's not going to be any gadding around at night. Wolves have shown up around here again," Mother announced. "Right around here, near the Sili household, a lamb was attacked in broad daylight!"

Sarmīte was a little startled, thinking about the same happening to her, but she didn't give up, her body was nothing compared to the sea, "There aren't even any wolves in the outskirts of Rīga. That's only around here, we'll just take the bus to get there!"

"Imagine, Kristīne, you and me, like proud women from Kurzeme somewhere up high on the Jūrkalne seashore bluffs, the wind tossing our hair about... Maybe we'll even get a chance to take a ride on a ship."

For some reason, the mention of the ship scared Kristīne especially. Pale, pressing her lips together, she wandered home, and did not participate in any future conversations about the sea. If Sarmīte wanted to get a rise out of her, she only needed to mention the word "ship" – "you're as stately as a ship today", "don't keep the ship of your dreams in dock", and so on. Kristīne would hiss or send out other subtle signals or just get up and leave altogether. The sea had power – if it got in your mind, it couldn't be dislodged from there so easily. A stream of loud and persistent weeping could be enough to wheedle a swim in a forest pond after the hay chores were done. But the sea, so vast and lovely, the Baltic Sea, the subject of so many songs – where the eel went to marry the seal – made comments like "it looks like you've never even seen water before – better go and wash off at the well" seem all the more depressing and ineffective both for the victim and the one keeping them from going. After a few days, a crack appeared in her parents' fortress – Dad, tired of her non-stop whining (this was also a bit of a contest, in the evenings he'd want to

whine about his swollen feet, which Mother would rub for him, taking a rest from worrying about the child), said:

"Maybe both of the girls should go, before hay season starts. We'll manage somehow."

"Me?" Velta was home for a few days and her eyes grew wide.

"In two weeks I have my major exams, my final meetings."

"Can you not be such a teacher for just one day!" Sarmīte summoned up her strength and tried to be encouraging. "I mean, you're at the top in almost every subject."

The sea, after all, was too vast. To see it, one had to be willing to make sacrifices.

"It's not true, I'm worried about educational theory and psychology," Velta sparred back.

Mother wasn't happy, but "making it work" was her middle name. It was clear that her mind, tested by difficulties, was already weighing options concerning what was to be done. Until she finally said: "Fine." In the first moments of her joy, Sarmīte didn't even notice the trap that had been set for her and in her mind had already flown off in a white dress somewhere near the Labrags marina, when instead of a ship's horn, the death sentence was pronounced. It sounded like a scythe hitting stones:

"But I can't let you go for more than two days. Dad needs his medicine, maybe I'll even have to summon up my strength and give him shots. I have to take care of the little one, the teacher, Mrs. Ozoliņa, is still weak, the bees have to be tended to, the livestock too. And you have to know that the entire time you're gone I'll be frightened for you."

"Two days!" Then it would better to lock Sarmīte in the basement for two days (of course, only after she had spent a week traveling around Kurzeme). To see Kurzeme and come back in two days was just impossible. The family laid out a map of Latvia, bus

schedules, and train timetables on top of the table, and – until it was bedtime, amidst tears and sniffing – a plan for the trip was hashed out which included three days for visiting the Vidzeme coast and on the way home a chance to stop in Limbaži to see distant relatives, drop off the first honey, and so on. A letter was written to Uncle Pēteris; the hope was that a long-distance called could be placed from the school tomorrow to finalise the arrangements.

Kristīne refused to go – even just to the Gulf of Rīga – that traitor. Later on Sarmīte remembered everything about this trip, except for what a nightmare it had been.

The hot, stuffy bus rattled down the country roads at the jaunty pace of a hobbled horse. It was doing its best to gradually come apart, and so it had to be put together again at its frequent stops. While the fainting passengers staggered off for water and to pee, at least two baskets full of chicks were loudly cheeping. They almost seemed like a confirmation that life would go on even after the quickly approaching and agonising death of the passengers. For the length of the entire trip, the sisters were the only vacationers, nobody else was traveling long distances. Their suffering at least had some higher purpose. Even the shy oil-smearred driver – wearing a ridiculous straw hat, which gradually was getting greyer, while streams of sweat were clearing off bright lines across his cheeks – seemed almost as if he'd been put there to punish all of them for anything bad that Sarmīte had ever done in her life or would yet manage to do. When everything that could come loose in the bus had done so, a dust cloud began to rise between the passengers and was no smaller than the one outside of the bus on the road. Sarmīte and Velta were turning green and watched the occasional tractors and new farms outside. They also saw the emaciated livestock wandering around aimlessly, who seemed to be protesting their quickly approaching slaughter with every step they took. The cattle still looked better than the passengers, as

they at least could move around and be in the fresh air.

Closer to the sea, at least the landscape became smoother, but their nausea was replaced by melancholy. Gadflies and electrical installers were active in the country. The installers could often be seen hanging off the tops of poles along the road baking in the sun, wearing absurd shoes that looked like they had stag-beetle horns on them. Still, their suffering was still just a trifle. They were able to sweat in the open air and the cloud of dust raised by the bus was soon gone. It would leave them grey-faced and choking, but at least they had the hope that before death they would manage to unbind themselves from their telephone poles and reach the local stream to rinse off. The gadflies, meanwhile, were running into the windshield from both sides. The ones inside filled the interior of the bus with an unpleasant drone, but those outside exploded with a pop against the windshield, transforming into a yellow sludge that divided up into little streams and slowly flowed downward.

"When the gadflies on the inside of the bus start exploding, I'm going to die," Sarmīte observed to no one in particular and closed her eyes. The bus began to drive over the parts of the road deformed by caterpillar tread. The rosy darkness offered by her closed eyes didn't improve anything. She saw flashes in time with the bumps in the road, and felt dizzier with her eyes closed than when she'd had them open. Then the large windshield jiggled out of place and began to hiss. At this, the most challenging moment of the journey, when there was only a short distance left until their destination, the driver came to his senses. He took pity on the fainting girls and left to look for water at every other stop. He would pour it out onto the floor of the bus, while everyone lifted their feet up obediently onto their seats. Much to her delight, she was immediately able to breathe again, though the smell inside of the bus testified to the origin of the water. It had clearly been taken from

a marsh or some farmer's bilge. One of the machine operators who was taking the bus for just one stop held a small jug in his lap the entire time. Sarmīte wanted to discover the contents of that jug just so she could avoid the substance inside and the stench it was creating for the rest of her life.

At any rate, just a few hours on that bus was more than enough time for Sarmīte to understand what a complicated and dangerous phenomenon choice is. She had to live with the consequences herself. Though they hadn't reached the open sea, they had waded into the gulf, which still counted.

That day at Saulkrasti there was a sea breeze, small waves sloshed about, and characteristic of the early summer, the stingy warmth of the upper layer of the water had been driven far away from the shore. The infrequent swimmers were shivering. The sisters' knees were already freezing a moment after stepping into the water, and frosty legs didn't make for much fun. Worst of all, when Sarmīte looked into her sister's eyes, she was met with the gaze of an older and smarter person. There was no sign of joy at seeing the sea for the first time in her life, but instead just a crabby question posed by an exhausted adult: "Well? Did you get what you wanted?"

Compared to this kind of question, the bus seemed rather tolerable.

On the way back it was both harder and easier. The sisters managed to even ride in the baggage trailer, happily shouting "eel and seal, ha, ha, ha" into the wind. Maybe it wasn't the right moment, but Sarmīte suddenly remembered when Pērse was brought for breeding and became pensive, saying: "Soon there'll be hay frames everywhere out in the fields. And we sure know what they're for." Velta was absorbed with watching the road and holding her kerchief, and didn't pay any attention.

"Isn't that right, Velta!"

Her sister responded with a start. "What are you talking about?"

"Well, a girl gets chased into a narrow space and she doesn't struggle too much," Sarmīte answered.

Velta froze with shock. Sometimes it really wasn't at all clear to her what was going on in her sister's head. She wasn't sure what Sarmīte had meant and decided it was fine to just stay silent and appear as if she'd understood her sister.

Sarmīte, for her part, decided that there were some things that girls just didn't discuss out loud. Despite her sister's crabbiness, during this trip she'd felt closer to her than ever before. For the first time it was just the two of them doing something together. She didn't want to ruin it with idle chatter, and just let herself watch as horse-drawn carts and the occasional cargo truck slid past them going in the opposite direction. Their small town still was wrapped in haze in the distance with its petty arguments, dreams for the future, constant worries about livestock and food. At that moment, she understood that she would be unlikely to find a single spot anywhere on the map of Latvia where life was all that different. Sure, larger schools than her own went by, some chimneys seemed taller than others she'd seen before, but that was it. As if it were all just one large periphery. It turned out that Uncle Pēteris was a friendly and jovial older man. Though, the pot of honey meant as a gift had cracked a little and its contents had soaked into her bag, but no worries, her uncle had plenty of his own honey. That's how it goes when you rarely exchange letters or talk.

The next morning, the sisters put their heads together and took the bus all the way to Valka and returned home on the small-gauge train in the evening. They made the rest of the trip to school on foot. Everyone at home tried the honey Uncle Pēteris had given them to compare with their own and raved about it. As they'd agreed, the sisters didn't stop

carrying on about the sea or their nice trip. Sarmīte didn't want to even think of anything else for a long time after that.

Even a few years later, their trip to the sea became one of their brightest memories, which they'd often mention while splashing around in less impressive puddles. At such moments, one sister would say to the other with delight, "Swimming in the sea was really something else, that vastness." Soon after that, the army closed off access to the Kurzeme coast again, no one even uttered a peep, and the sisters didn't worry about it too much either, because they knew that Saulkrasti was just as good and closer. Beria's thaw had ended.

Meanwhile, hay season had started. Just two days later Sarmīte was already awfully bored with ploughing and her legs itched after being poked by stalks and stung by mosquitoes. She was unsuccessful on all fronts, even the snake on the edge of the swamp went and bit Velta instead of her. Her sister was rushed off to the hospital, but got to come home soon after that – all fuss, no muss – she must be a pretty big witch for that venom to leave her be. Maybe it hadn't been a snake at all, but something else that leaves two red dots? Velta just kept on working like a Singer sewing machine, and it seemed to Sarmīte that during difficult moments her sister had started to twist her face into a crooked smile just like Dad – when there's actually nothing to laugh about, but you need to pull yourself together.

What a sister. If Sarmīte had gotten bit by a snake, she'd definitely be taken completely out of commission and would wallow around sick for at least two weeks. Velta, meanwhile, was managing everything swimmingly, even in educational theory she'd received a "four" and ended up being among the best students in algebra.

One day, Dad sat down on a hay swath and couldn't be lifted up onto his feet again.

The teacher, Mr. Melderis, was riding by in the school's horse and wagon, helped Dad in, and brought him home. Sarmīte didn't see any of it herself. He was back on his feet within a week, though one corner of his mouth was a bit more pinched, his left arm a bit stiff. But, despite his illness and to the considerable horror of everyone else, he went off to Rīga for his continuing education courses. They're required, if a person wants to work at the school.

"But you don't even want to work at the school!" Sarmīte almost blurted out, but then lost her nerve.

Soon enough short, sensible messages began to arrive from Rīga. About the lectures Dad was attending, what he'd seen in the capital city, what he'd gotten to bring home to everyone, how many lottery tickets he'd bought. "I can already see how it's going to be this time: those who want much, get little. I bought a cup and spoon. While I was looking for fabric for a suit, I noticed a hat. I was trying it on and meanwhile the cup disappeared off the counter. There was also a robbery on the tram recently. A young, smartly-dressed man simply ripped a woman's purse out of her hands and jumped off the tram. I was at the eye doctor, I needed to get new lenses and frames. The frame selection is really limited; some of the optics stores are even closed. Today Comrade Buls read a lecture on Marxism-Leninism, it was hard for me to follow, I'm not used to it yet. The subject: 'Comrade Stalin's Teaching on Building Foundations and Above-Ground Construction.' Tomorrow we'll learn the elements of geometry, Marxism, and educational theory. I've heard from trusted sources that an order came down from Moscow for the Party to correct its past mistakes. In the future, more people will be appointed who speak Latvian and know the local situation.

Kisses — Dad."

When he came home it turned out that he'd bought the hat after all. It was white, incredibly impractical for the countryside.

"But wasn't it expensive?" Mother worried. She was easily knocked out of her routine and was afraid to touch the hat.

Sarmīte, on the other hand, was happy and comforted by the purchase of the new hat. It was so modern. Nowadays all sorts of chairmen were wearing those those.

Meanwhile, Mother didn't say anything out loud, as usual. But Sarmīte had noticed her habit of sitting on the bed side in the evening studying her big toes. It was never a good sign.

Also, Mother was slowly tracing out circles across the carpet with her feet, as if she were trying to even out certain difficulties threatening her family. Sarmīte didn't notice any danger. It seemed to her that Dad had really managed to pull himself together well after the incident on the field and had gotten through his courses in Rīga brilliantly. All of this despite the fact that he should've embarked on his well-earned rest long ago, started drawing his pension, and allowed the children to be tormented by younger teachers. Teachers like Velta.

Your soul, pierced by a thousand arrows,
Golden sparks cast off by the rushing wind,
Drunk on the flaming joy of creation,
And you'll hunger to be torn apart.

(Juris Birzvalks)

When we'd work, nobody could keep up with us. We'd work until dark either in our own fields or those of the collective farm, then keep working until it was light enough for us to walk home singing. And how we studied! Nobody studies like that anymore. We'd keep studying until the first rooster crowed. We managed to do it all, but I can't understand how we did it. All of us worked far past the limits of our physical strength. After the war, there was new construction across the country. It was breathtakingly ambitious – real magic. We felt that man had freed himself from centuries of bondage, that he'd found untapped reserves of energy within himself. The wind whistled through our minds as the lines written by young poets came through the radio speakers and called us to do battle by working in the fields. The newspaper headlines were dominated by the youthful fervour found behind the wheel of the tractor. The same energy sparking through the schools could be felt even in the dedications written into books, and it all called out with the same word – passion! But is this any reason to claim that good teaching involves keeping children cold and half-starving, just so their characters are strengthened? A teacher must find ways to draw the interest of their students even in the present day when circumstances are far more felicitous..."

"What a nightmare," Sarmīte muttered angrily, putting her sister's secret writing back into the folder, feeling like she had just stepped in a cow pie.

"She's talking like she's ninety, how can she blabber on like that."

"Khrushchev will show you the brightest path!" Mother hummed quietly, discovering at long last that she was a free person and could sing whatever and however she pleased. The school barn was full of fragrant hay, the same was true for the collective farm's barn, another mighty stack stood with a temporary roof covering it, and one wanted to believe that everyone would have enough hay to last until spring. Sarmīte could finally relax from the horrors of that rustling hay, but the habit of swiping cream had stuck with her. She would rub it into her shoulders and other sun-baked spots.

"Soon all the school birds will flock together," Mother thought and wondered why the usual happy excitement at the approach of a new school year was absent. Arriving home by train, Dad appeared in the yard struggling to push the bicycle he'd borrowed at the station, his bags hanging from the handlebars. The solution was mathematically brilliant and the only possibility was that he was so exhausted that he couldn't manage riding it or carrying his bags.

"You could have sat and waited at the station and let someone know to come and get you. How was Rīga?" With a mechanical motion, Mother distributed the goodies he had brought everyone. Dad wasn't all that happy either: "Rīga looks worse than during the war," and he slept unusually long, but Mother didn't dare wake him. Later too, Dad didn't get carried away with stories about his Rīga trip. The newspaper "Cīņa" published a list of winning lottery numbers, but none of them matched the ones Dad had picked. Sarmīte didn't understand how bad things were for her family. It's possible even Mother wasn't thinking about it; their family was struggling like everyone else's. They had run of the school and so there was always at least something to eat for everyone. The only thing in short supply was money. Paying back debts and also buying fabric for a new dress seemed like the height of extravagance, but what about other things? Velta didn't have the chance to enjoy

her time in high school, and it was clear that neither would Sarmīte.

In the evening before going to bed, the sisters whispered to each other about becoming educated and the life that lay beyond that. They settled on a hopeful vision – Dad had bought that hat, because he was getting ready to fight. A teacher in the countryside was constantly on the spot, he had to be an example on every level.

Meanwhile, Mother kept tracing out circles across the carpet ever faster every evening. All this activity with its white hats and lottery tickets looked like confusion and chaotic action to her, which were not characteristic of pedantic Dad.

While Dad's job at the school hung by a thread, Sarmīte was so restless there was no keeping her at the house. The roots of this problem lay with Valdis Ķīvīte, because mushroom and berry season had begun. Sarmīte was the only one who seemed to care, unfortunately she wasn't allowed to go on her own, there was enough to do at home (when we go, we'll all go together), and she didn't have the patience necessary for berries. She wasn't going to the forest with Valdis because of baskets overflowing with berries, the real reason was that she couldn't shake the thought of possibly being known as the wife of a Decembrist. Sooner or later Valdis would be arrested, that was more than clear, and OF COURSE she would take care of him and also wait for him at the prison gates! Valdis was still unaware of any such turn of events in his life, he would usually steal whichever book was left unattended without giving it a second thought. If he wasn't caught right away, there was always a second chance – right after reading the book at lightning speed, he'd put it back, and snatch the next one. When Sarmīte would secretly sneak away to the forest together with Valdis, she couldn't go too far, otherwise she'd never get back out by herself. Her inner compass had already been faulty and unreliable since her childhood, that is, of course, if she'd ever had one at all. So, Valdis's duty during these forest raids was to keep

signalling his whereabouts, so the brave girl wouldn't get lost. And that's how they'd wander around together, By mimicking bird calls, Valdis had learned how to replicate the sound of his namesake the lapwing¹ and also the call of the talkative watchman of the forest, the jay. At times it was easy for her to confuse who was actually making these calls.

That day the talkative jay was in a pointless hurry, pulling Sarmīte along, she barely managed to stop at the better mushrooms, one hill, another hill, in the rush they all seemed the same. When along the way they happened upon a grove of birches and large ferns she'd never seen before, Sarmīte began feeling a bit unsafe.

There hadn't been other stories like this in a while, but, all the same, last year some girls had been in the forest nearby and had gone to relieve themselves against an old moss-covered pile of firewood when all of a sudden a moss-covered hatch popped open behind their backs exposing the bearded, smirking face of a Forest Brother.

"Oh, wow, what cute little behinds! Hey, come on, don't run away!" That rough voice behind their backs kept haunting them for a long time afterwards, as they scrambled over the moss, pants half-way down, because who could spare the time to stop and pull them properly all the way back up? Oh, mummy, they weren't think of their baskets or any mushrooms anymore. They'd abandoned all of it where it fell! But those cepes had been so pretty...

After she'd heard about it, Sarmīte decided to never pee in the forest ever again, she couldn't be paid to do it. Her pulse was racing and she could make out the sound of a single jay... in the direction they had been galloping towards. But behind her back she could hear another jay shrieking, a little out of breath. It couldn't be much further, Sarmīte decided to keep running in the same direction as before, but to speed up, and so if it turned out this jay

¹ Translator's note: Valdis's last name – *kīvīte* – is 'lapwing' in Latvian.

was not the right one, then she could try the one in the other direction. Sarmīte gathered up her strength and ran off after the first jay at an even healthier clip than before, occasionally stopping with delight, "look, what a beautiful bilberry patch!" and other times noting, "look, what a nice lingonberry patch, but so many of them are still not ripe!" as if she had even the slightest chance of returning to these places ever again in her life.

Sarmīte was now completely out of breath and suddenly the jay she had been following, fell completely silent, another one was angrily shrieking behind her back, and still another further off to her side. Off in the direction she was running, if it even was the right direction, there seemed to be a sort of thicket of leafy trees in this otherwise sparse portion of the forest. Suddenly a young man approached her and lifted his hand giving a sign that Sarmīte instantly understood as meaning "stop". You fell for it, sweetheart. Sarmīte sank into the moss up to her ankles and tried to catch her breath, as she took stock of her new obstacle. Quite a contrast with the Forest Brothers. Army trousers, a white shirt with suspenders, visible muscles. His smile appeared friendly, but also dangerous, yes, there was something dangerous about this person, what was he doing here, what did he want? It was typical for a person walking around the forest to be holding something in their hands – a basket or a knife, or a rifle in the worst case, but this guy didn't have a thing, and that seemed even more suspicious.

"Miss, you can't go any further!" the young man said speaking in perfect Latvian. But Sarmīte didn't believe it was his native language, his face seemed a little dark and foreign.

"Why not?" Sarmīte fixed her kerchief flirtingly, as her pulse pounded in her ears. What was she to do all by herself in the forest?

"There's army training." The man said smiling or smirking derisively, Sarmīte couldn't tell which it was. And then the stranger slowly began to move towards her.

She probably should've screamed, Sarmīte didn't believe his friendly smile, which suddenly seemed like just a frozen mask, but she couldn't get a single word across her lips. The young man stopped close to her, his nostrils flared, as if he lived off of the smell of fear. Sarmīte didn't smell a thing. Her enemy had appeared out of nowhere. There wasn't a single pine needle stuck to his perfectly smooth shirt and his gaze sharp and hypnotic. Sarmīte felt that any moment now she won't be able to stay on her feet and would faint. Then the young man's gaze and the whole situation softened, he looked over Sarmīte's shoulder. There was the crunching sound of someone running through the moss and bilberry patches, and now she was saved, because her jay Valdis ran up to her, out of breath and angry.

"Where did you run off to? Who's this joker?"

"I told you already, there's training going on here, you'll have to leave," the young man explained.

"What training?" It wouldn't be Valdis if he wouldn't try to start an argument, Sarmīte pulled him back by his arm.

"Well, go on then if you really need to, I just wouldn't want either of you to get shot. After that there's usually a big hassle," the young man added, but Sarmīte began to think as she watched him that he'd meant the exact opposite. She began to understand that smile of his, it was automatic, independent of his cool, calculating eyes.

"Really? Just that simple?" Valdis wouldn't let up. "Where is the sound of the engines, the shots? You think we don't know that the ground shakes during actual training?"

"There can be different kinds of training," the young man added. Sarmīte pulled Valdis away as forcefully as she could, it was clear that otherwise the situation would just get worse and worse. The stranger stayed where he was and watched them carefully. They felt tense, as if they were in the crosshairs. It was uncomfortable to look back, the strange

young man kept looking at them, his feet in a wide stance, his hands behind his back.

"Who do you think he was?" Sarmīte shivered. "Haven't seen him around here."

"Some army guy, they're really jumpy, imagine who knows what!" Valdis kept to his usual style bragging a bit and even began to blame Sarmīte: "Why did you drag me away from there? There were more of us – two to one!" Sarmīte bit her lip. What was her dream boy even thinking about? That she and him were fellow brawlers or buddies?

"And where did you, Valdis, rush off to like a tractor?" The accusations kept coming.

"You know, it's not that easy make a jay call while you're running. You need to prepare for it." Then the worst thing of all happened, a friendly nudge in the shoulder: "Don't worry, next time we'll ride our bikes even further."

And then he was gone, her dream Decembrist, what miserable dreams! Sarmīte wasn't sure that she'd want to come back to the forest all that soon. Some things are more clear in your memory when no one tries to teach them to you. Of course, at home Sarmīte got an earful, but she considered it payment for her adventure. For some reason Mother had been rather anxious lately.

Only after the school's new generator was turned off and the last kerosene lamp was extinguished did Velta lay back in bed as Dad's powerful snoring mixed with Mother's gentle lip-smacking as they both slept. Thoughts of all the other things that could have happened meeting that stranger in the forest shot into Sarmīte's mind. She wrapped herself in her blanket and shuddered. But young people heal quickly. And it wasn't just her finger that had gotten cut by the fern that had to heal. The morning sun and Mother's yell that it was time to get up, came soon. She could now think about new adventures. It was significant that at school later, her classmates, who were all together again, had also encountered strangers in the forest and bumped into barbed wire. A dangerous secret had appeared in the forest, but

already at the very start of the school year, the teacher, Mrs. Krāce, looked to ruin it. When Dad had finished his September 1st speech in the performance hall, upbeat as usual and full of its typical lively paradoxes ("Because the only thing I can teach you is to think! Think!" While preparing for his speech he had addressed these words and shaken his finger at the sheets drying out in the garden.), Mrs. Krāce took her place next to him with various announcements. Sarmīte immediately forgot how important any of them were. Her ears perked up only with the last one:

"Esteemed students, you should know that a new Soviet military division is being stationed in the forest not far from our community. ("Not far, at least ten kilometres, if not more," Sarmīte smirked.) It's advisable not to go there without any particular reason," Mrs. Krāce continued, "and, honestly, dear children, I don't know of a single reason for any such need to arise, to go near this part of the forest. It's mushroom season, but there are enough mushrooms in other parts of the forest. There are still weapons left over from the war. It's best not to go picking mushrooms without adults and not to touch strange objects, so you don't get blown up by a mine."

Fear of danger. That must be the way that this language offering no room for objections, which Sarmīte knew from her own parents, had developed. It didn't permit any other opinions, which were deemed "completely out of the question". Wouldn't it be incredibly witty to call out right now: "If I may, of all the unknown objects out there, I'd rather like not to touch algebra. It's quite a minefield."

But Sarmīte didn't say anything. That must be part of learning to be an adult – learning how to stay quiet increasingly often.

Then Sarmīte imagined Krāce sitting there by a drawing of a New Year's tree and crunching on mushrooms cut out from cardboard. That helped for a while. If she'd listened

more diligently, she would've learned something about scientific discoveries, the new, bold ideas in agriculture as well as a bit about peaceful coexistence and would've thought about how well a new, secret military division fits into the framework of coexistence. Enough about that, there are now parts of the forest where it's best not to set foot, just like in life where there are also parts where it's best not to let your memory wander.

Actually, Sarmīte was quite receptive to the idea of peaceful coexistence. Krāce could stand next to her and talk up a storm, while a completely different life was unfolding for Sarmīte, which Krāce couldn't influence at all, yes, that was perfect coexistence. There was no sense in attacking the putrefying imperialists, it was clear they'd collapse all on their own, resting in their pride, seeing the dizzying accomplishments of the Soviet state, until they'd explode. She asked Dad directly: "If it's clear to everybody that Capitalism will collapse anyway, why are they still making such an effort?"

Dad just smirked and explained that society develops very slowly. Large disturbances and revolutions are the kind of shake-ups that nobody would want to experience. Revolutions, just between us, should be brought about by the types of people who usually aren't the ones starting them. Smart people. And he warned her never to speak about such things outside of the house.

Rubbish. They usually didn't speak about politics inside the house either, protecting their children from nonsense.

At school, Sarmīte looked down a bit at everyone else. She was in the final grade and would finish school this year. As long as, of course, nothing unexpected happens, as is often the case in the education system, for example, a one-year extension due to changes in the programme. She often tended to blurt out something characteristically mischievous, for example: "You come to school and all you have around you are kids!" – but that was just a

caprice of hers, nothing more. Sarmīte remembered well how big the older students once seemed and with what wonder she was likely being watched by those in their first year. And not just her. Her friend Kristīne had returned from her summer torment, brown and elegant like a Spaniard. Meanwhile, Valdis – between his forest wandering and book stealing – had managed to get carried away with volleyball and was trying to quickly put together a class team. Unfortunately, the news had already reached tall Artūrs that volleyball, unpleasantly enough, combines two of the world's most dangerous activities – moving and thinking.

And in addition, in this conspiracy against Artūrs's peace, there was some kind of net involved, which divided the players into two parts. The right place for a net was probably in a river, for catching fish. She had to laugh, Valdis Ķīvīte had already tried that a long time ago, but the fish didn't want to swim through such a wide mesh. Well, no, right now there was just now way to get Artūrs to play.

Meanwhile, the Cīrulis brothers had already managed to get into an argument with each other and everyone else about which of them would be the better setter and who had the stronger serve. The brothers had grown and matured from doing farm labour, it was nice to look at both of them. Jancis had become more even-tempered, Pēteris – more ambitious. The dangerous and muscular Raimonds seemed to have become more kind-hearted after the summer. The chatty Valda and Irēna had gotten a fashion magazine and were chattering on about how the young people of today should look, that there's going to be a new teacher who is ter-ribly cute. Meek Māra slid out from the corner as if she'd been sitting at school for two days already, just in case, so she wouldn't miss anything. Everyone now had seen each other again, felt reenergised, and were curious and full of life. Maybe someday they'd even learn how to spike the ball like in professional volleyball. The dance was at an end, taking the teachers by the hand and walking through the halls of the school,

running a lap around the sports field and wood shed, barns, generator shack. Sarmīte watched as Dad, in his impressive white hat, took Mother under his arm and walked through the merry bunch of students, calling out something to a boy running by, waving at someone else. It seemed that Dad had summoned up his strength after all, the school leadership was in safe hands, and in some ways even Sarmīte was part of this leadership. Sarmīte ran up to her parents, tugged at their sleeves, and wanted to yell something inspiring, so she enthusiastically invoked the new word she'd learned: "Happy September 1st! Long live peaceful coexistence!" But why weren't her parents happy about her greeting? Go figure. Dad gave Sarmīte a tortured smile and added: "Of course, the main thing is that there's no war."

Then her parents moved through the rest of the crowd of students, and Sarmīte wondered why they seemed so distant and strange like giants existing on some higher plane. She suddenly thought of a game from her childhood where she would close her eyes half way and imagine that the clouds lit by the sunset on the horizon were mountains. Her familiar, hilly surroundings changed immediately and became wondrous. Maybe it's the same with people. Close your eyes half way and imagine their true size. Maybe you'll be more careful walking up to giants, maybe you'll be kinder to mosquitoes.

A few days later, word spread that the teacher, Mrs. Ozoliņa, was expecting another child and wouldn't be up for much work. Sarmīte shivered, it seemed to her that the teacher wasn't managing with just her first child. But Ms. Meijere would have a different last name in the future, as her fellow teacher, Mr. Lagzdiņš, had proposed to her. Their wedding fell on a Saturday, Sarmīte remembered it very clearly for several reasons. On weekends she liked to wake up early and walk around the grounds near the school when no one else was up yet and the world seemed to belong only to her. It felt like ancient, secret morning magic

walking around the empty school yard, through the birch grove, across the sports field, by the furnace building where on the darkest days of the year the good-hearted Dragon Generator droned steadily as it created light. The school with its dark windows was her castle, which was brought to life by hundreds of candles as carriages stopped in front. Or perhaps it was the complete opposite, the school moved off far into the energised future where the best class in the history of the village (the class headed by Sarmīte, of course) had created an agricultural science laboratory. They were enthusiastically discussing the newest varieties of vegetables, which they had cultivated in honour of their great homeland. After their jolly lessons, director Sarmīte worked with groups of the talented children who had been born in great numbers in their village (most likely as a result of planned mating). The school also had a new, modern addition built onto it. It seemed the teacher, Velta, had at that point been already been fired for teaching classes, which were too boring and it was only because of director Sarmīte's good heart that she hadn't been sent away. She was permitted to perform various tasks connected with school maintenance, but nothing too complicated. She was permitted, for example, to clean off the chalkboard.

No matter the sort of dreams that Sarmīte got carried away with, they always were best early on weekend mornings. All it took was for one little pipsqueak to run out of the boarding school and give a shout for the magic of the morning to disappear just like Cinderella's carriage at midnight. That's the reason Sarmīte remembered this particular scene so vividly. She remembered the student teacher, Ms. Meijere, standing in the garden in her worn-looking dressing gown with rollers in her hair, enthusiastically eating a huge, shiny white apple with its delicious juice spraying across her cheeks and dripping down her neck. Ms. Meijere laughed and with a spring in her step bounded over several vegetable patches, grabbing a hold of another apple. At the moment she jumped it became clear that

she wasn't wearing a bra – the harness also gradually beginning to constrict Sarmīte's life, mostly because nearly all the girls in her class were already buckled into them. Sarmīte wasn't sure if it was at that moment when she remembered Pērse being brought to the bull and the whites of that animal's wide eyes. History isn't clear on that point. But something was off, as far as Sarmīte was concerned, and it was ruining the the idyllic nature of that morning. She muttered: "How shameful! Look at her gobbling that down without even trying to hide it! She's not even shy about someone seeing her, even though everyone knows what's going to HAPPEN with her tonight." Because it occurred to Sarmīte that things like that ALSO happen to teachers. It felt like there was almost nothing sacred and wondrous left in this world.

Regarding the other issues, she was recently informed of them rather directly. She hadn't known that something like that could happen, nobody had told her. Terrified and with her lip trembling she ran up to Mother at an inopportune moment. Just then Mother was trying to add up an expense sheet for the school. "Mum, I've got..." She grimaced as she pointed downward hoping that Mother would automatically understand what was happening.

Mother froze and then slowly lifted both of her hands off the table, as if she were holding some invisible ball. Then she bounced this ball a few times against the table, it was very quiet, as the ball was invisible, and so didn't break or thud.

The fact that the invisible ball didn't break made Mother noticeably calmer, she sagged a bit, pushed the paperwork off to the side, and without releasing the ball from her hands, asked: "Well, what's going on there? Does it itch? Is it white? Red?"

"I've got a...red panic." Sarmīte pouted.

"Talk to your sister." Mother tossed the ball away and turned back to her papers.

That wasn't especially tender, but what other way was there to teach someone that what had happened wasn't anything special? Mother took pity on her and continued somewhat theatrically: "Oh, right, your sister is far away. Fine, I'll take a little walk."

Mother stretched, got up, and soon Sarmīte received a miserable-looking block of gauze and cotton, the sort she'd noticed when laundry was being washed. Now she had to carry it around in her underwear. It hung there awkwardly, as if a girl of her respectable age had soiled herself. That's the end of the story.

"In a few days, it'll go away on its own," Mother explained. "Congratulations. Try marking on the calendar when it ends and when it starts again in a month."

"Starts again? Why?!" Sarmīte shrieked, but Mother smiled.

"If you need help, just call. I can't give you much else besides that block of gauze to help. Just know that this happens to every girl. Absolutely every one of them. Some say that some girls get more anxious on those days. I hope you won't be one of them. We can agree on a code word, so you can tell me without all these..." And she grimaced copying Sarmīte's expression. "What's your code word going to be?"

"Red dawn," Sarmīte said the first thing that popped into her head.

"I'll write and warn Velta, too."

"Definitely talk to her, you'll learn more. I'm sorry, but I really have to finish this report."

"And do the teachers also have a red dawn?" Sarmīte managed to still ask as she stood on the doorstep.

The invisible ball returned in an instant to Mother's hands. It was horrible. But no matter, armed with the gauze and her code word, Sarmīte felt safer. "Red Dawn" was also the name of the first collective farm in Tērce, the farmers of the village had founded it

themselves fearing that otherwise they'd be deported. They drove their horses and equipment into the largest barn, covered the table with a red curtain, and wrote the name of the collective farm on a large piece of paper. For a while it had helped against deportation. Surely, it'll also help with other matters.