

Biography: Zigmunds Skujiņš (born 1926, Riga) is a renowned and established Latvian author of prose, poetry and drama, one of the greatest names and literary minds of the 20th century Latvian literature. His books are among the most widely read and published, many works have been adapted for cinema and theatre, and many translated into English, German, French, Russian, Lithuanian, Czech, Georgian, and other languages.

Synopsis: The novel *Nakedness* turned Zigmunds Skujiņš into a literary celebrity across the Soviet Union and "radically changed the Latvian prose scene," according to Latvian literary critic Guntis Berelis. Since then, two popular films have been made based on the book, and it's still the Skujiņš novel that most people first come into contact with. The novel's protagonist, Aleksandrs Draiska, comes to a small textile factory town looking for a girl he's been exchanging letters with. Finding somebody else at her address, he sets off on a search across the town, where he discovers that almost everyone is pretending to be somebody else. This mask-wearing becomes the cause of death for the girl Draiska has been looking for, driving him deeper into despair. The final twist is saved for last, however, when we discover that it was not Draiska, but his army friend who came to the factory town after falling in love with the girl from the letters, deciding to masquerade as his friend in order to find her.

Excerpt

And yet it's strange that she didn't slip in a single word about the house she lives in or even mentioned the floor she lives on or the view that spreads out in front of her window. This thought surprised him, but only passed through incidentally, just a "by the way". It was no joke, he was worried, his thoughts jumping around chaotically, scattering every which way

like beads from a broken necklace.

There were four doors on every floor along the stairwell, which meant that Apartment 15 had to be on the fourth floor. Best to climb slowly, no need to rush, the most important thing – to keep calm. He was put off the most by his embarrassing habit of blushing when he felt flustered; feeling the heat from the blood surging into his face, it would usually seem to him like his ears had become giant and heavy like the red velvet curtains at the opera. Recognizing his absurd appearance, he'd become even more flustered, the thought about his ears would stick and he wouldn't be able to free himself of it; that kind of debacle occurring on the occasion of a first meeting would be a real catastrophe.

And still it was strange that Marika, herself appearing very clearly to him, lived in his mind's eye in a decidedly empty space, like a picture cut out of a magazine placed on a blank screen. So, for example, he didn't know anything about these stairs that she ran up and down every day, the same with Apartment 15 on the fourth floor, where she would wake up in the morning and lie down to sleep in the evening, where she would iron her dresses, gaze into the mirror, write and read her letters. Only in one letter did she mention in passing that four girls live in the room. Admittedly, he had imagined the dorm a bit differently – with a long corridor and many white doors on all sides with an old, curious watchwoman and a box for hanging keys at the door, but instead this was a normal apartment building, an excellent example of the convergence of architectural styles. Certainly, it can be that it may not occur to her to give a description of a place like this. Well, no matter, in a moment it will all be clear. The main thing – not to drop character.

Keeping his nervousness in check, he tried to remember Marika's last letter, which he had received two days before his long journey home; he could repeat every word, having reread the letter many times on the train, as he had tried to convince himself, because of boredom, but in truth more likely because he was impatient and woozy from his new freedom, propelled into some kind of feverish enthusiastic mix of joy, longing, and hope.

Dear Sandris, As to the question of what it is that I'm doing, it's possible to answer very simply: as always – I'm waiting. Everything that's happening right now is only temporary, without any real value or significance. In moments when it's difficult, I think about you, reread your letters, and gain new strength.

The bird cherries are blooming, I'm putting a small sprig in this envelope, though I don't know whether it will still have any scent when you receive it. The days are staying hot and the flowers are already starting to fall off the trees. It was especially hot on Sunday. Old Mārtiņš, the kvas salesman by the station, kept on sighing, "It's like hell, like an oven, I'll have to cut the ends off my pants." I was working the evening shift and there was a labor union meeting afterwards. Coming from work I went to look right away whether there was a letter from you, but there wasn't. I got terribly sad, I couldn't fall asleep for a long time, later on I must have dozed off, but I jerked awake terrified in the middle of the night, thinking about how already for a second week I haven't received a single line from you. Even so, I'm still continuing to write you the same as always, because then it feels like time passes quicker, bringing the moment closer that I'm awaiting with such fear and such hope.

Without a doubt, he was in a much better position, being able to prepare and consider everything in advance. Marika had no idea: what if I catch her naked or, let's say, with rollers in her hair. Maybe then dropping in this way is too disloyal? Maybe it would have been better to send a telegram from Rīga – giving her enough warning so that she could still manage to get through the line at the salon or at least put on some nice lipstick. And what if she's not at home? That wasn't ruled out at all – the first shift goes from seven until two.

He anxiously looked over his reflection in the window pane and stroked his cheeks. His chin smooth as a grindstone. Only the short, wet from combing and afterwards dried out hairs stubbornly resisted, but that was a defect that only time could fix. Also, his suit fit acceptably enough, but as he was used to wearing a uniform he had the feeling that everything around him was fluttering and flapping: the suit jacket's corners, the buttons' loose fit at his chest, his collar's long lapels.

On the steps at the third floor there was a girl sitting who had stuffed herself into a thin calico dress – round cheeks, round breasts, round knees. She was loudly chewing on candy and reading a book. He was just about to push past her, when the girl rose up unexpectedly and examined him with a cool, unsettling stare.

"Excuse me..." he murmured.

The girl didn't answer.

"Apartment 15 is still further up?"

"Yes."

"Thank you."

"You need Apartment 15?"

"Yes."

Looking back over his shoulder, he saw that the girl was still studying him. The smell of fried fish was coming from somewhere. Golden dust motes were dancing in the brilliant sunbeams and, buzzing as if singing, flies darted about.

Here... In the process of drying out, the door jamb had contracted a bit and a gap had formed between the brick and wood. The handle hung limply as if dislocated. He must have knocked too loudly, because the echo in the quiet stairwell scattered all the way down to the bottom. Everything fell silent on the other side of the door, no one came to open it.

"Don't waste your energy in vain," the girl called from the third floor,

"there's no one there. I already pounded on it."

"At number 15?"

"Of course. Who would sit inside on a day like this. The gals have run off to the riverside. Do you happen to have a key?"

"What key?"

"It doesn't matter. I can't get into the room."

"No, I don't have one."

"Well at least a knife. We could try to pry it open."

"Too bad, I'm not an expert."

"I'm an expert myself. If only there were a knife."

A light flashed in the gap after all, on the inside, possibly a door had opened. He thought he heard steps. He knocked again.

"Who's there?"

The question wasn't spoken too kindly, but the voice sounded pleasant. It's possible it was Marika. Almost coming off as too well-behaved by reciting his first and last name, at the last moment he caught himself. Is that the way that Aleksandrs Draiska was supposed to come on stage, the poet and seasoned adventurer who would burst through any wall like an armored tank?

"Who's there?"

"It's not worth saying, you wouldn't believe me anyway."

"Don't fool around."

"Honestly."

"What do you need?"

"Just a moment of your attention. Does Marika Vītiņa live here?"

"Wait."

He recognized her right away, as soon as he'd seen her in the twilight of the front hall, the similarity with the photograph was surprising: the straight nose, the somewhat high forehead, the angular jaw. Only her hair color didn't match his assumptions, he was expecting all sorts of colors, just not golden faded copper redness. Wrapping herself in a short terrycloth robe, she was looking over here with a fairly suspicious curiosity, pushing along a slipper with one unclothed foot in which she hadn't in her speed been able to fit her toe. Did Marika really not sense it yet? With every moment that he was standing here, Marika's value seemed to grow, at the same time his own weight seemed to be decreasing in inverse proportion. His fired up courage soon collapsed.

"Allow me to introduce myself: Sandris Draiska, demobilized Special Forces *Yefreytor*..."

Now everything was supposed to change in an instant. It wasn't even ruled out that she would fall into his arms with surprising speed. That really could happen.

Sandris! It's you! This is crazy! My goodness! And what a fool I was in not recognizing you. In my wildest dreams I never could have imagined that you would be in a suit. Oh, and how I look! Right away! Wait for one moment! But not behind a closed door. Please come in!

Sandris, you rascal, why didn't you warn me? That's not fair. You caught me completely off guard. Look how my heart is racing...

"What do you want?"

"I've arrived."

"That's hard to deny. And would that be everything?"

This was some kind of a mistake, some kind of idiotic misunderstanding. They just were so strangely similar. The retouched, shadowy photograph could also mislead. Maybe Marika has a sister, possibly even a twin sister.

"I'd like to see Marika Vītiņa."

"Then please look faster, I have to get to work."

That couldn't have been a joke. She was saying that with complete seriousness.

"You're Marika Vītiņa?"

"Do I have to show you my papers? Are you from the police?"

"No, I already said – I'm from the army."

"Extremely interesting."

"And the most interesting thing is that we should know each other. You've sent me forty-nine letters. And have received just about as many in return."

"Letters? What letters?"

"Well...in my opinion, completely normal ones."

"Then to what place did I send you these "completely normal letters", if I could ask?"

"To the army unit."

In the front hall, buttoning his shirt, appeared a tall young man, wide in the shoulders and thin in the waist, fairly similar in appearance to him, they even had something in common in their faces and movements.

"What's going on?" the young man asked. He probably didn't feel all that comfortable.

"Come over here, Varis, listen to this unimaginable fantasy."

"Maybe you should invite this person in. I feel like your dispute isn't going to end that quickly." The young man, looking on with a sly grin, winked with one eye. She immediately stepped back from the threshold, this movement apparently was intended as an invitation. The young man, sticking his hands into the pockets of his black Spanish-style pants, let them pass, seemingly underscoring with all his behavior that he was a bystander with no intention of interfering in their conversation. The room really did have four beds. One of these had been sloppily covered with a checkered blanket. Expensive curtains fluttered by the open window, while last season's radio-gramophone cowered shyly between suitcases piled up behind a three-doored wardrobe.

"Please sit," said Marika. Everybody kept standing anyway.

"So, I've written you forty-nine letters..."

Now he wasn't angry anymore, just deeply amused. Judging by how quickly her face cleared,

her harsh coldness in no way reflected her underlying nature.

"Yes, my poems were printed in the magazine "Liesma". After that you began to write me. I received your last letter two weeks ago."

"Could you show me these letters?"

"Unfortunately, no. They stayed in Rīga; too big of a pack to carry them all around with me. But I can show you the photograph that was in the third letter. Opening his wallet, he felt Marika's stare on his fingers and purposely tried to lend his movements an inattentive quality. The conversation had turned out to be incredibly silly. To a certain extent even insulting. It had turned into a kind of exercise in making excuses, he wasn't believed, but he objected, stubbornly persisted, and tried to prove what he was saying.

"Here it is."

Marika looked first at one side of the photograph, then the other side, and shook her shoulders.

"Truly interesting. Well, Varis, what do you have to say?"

The young man's bright, puckish cheek wasn't shining nearly as brightly as earlier.

"A pretty picture. My dog says: like something I've seen before."

"So, the picture is yours?"

"I guarantee it. But I didn't send it to you. I didn't send you anything. It must have been

some kind of a stupid joke."

"Very possible. I just doubt that someone would write forty-nine letters as a joke."

"A complete mystery. Varis, what do you think?"

"Excuse me, but when did you receive this photograph?" Taking a long and careful drag on his cigarette, the young man lifted his head.

"About a year ago. No, not quite that long. The poem was published in February of last year. In winter, in any case."

"Ancient history," the young man said. "I got mine long after that."

Marika shot Varis a lightning fast look almost like a slap to the face. "Don't be an idiot. You heard. The last letter was received two weeks ago."

"Well, then somebody's writing."

"And receives letters in my name? Ha. Why?"

The young man pulled the cigarette pack out of his shirt pocket again.

"I must have forgotten to offer you any. Let's poison ourselves together, if you don't mind. My dog says that we've got a reason to get to know each other. Varis Tennis's son Tenisons."

"Aleksandrs Draiska. Thank you, I don't smoke, I've got other vices."

Varis's eyes flashed darkly. "Oho! I guess I didn't hear you quite right. What did you say?"

"I've got other vices."

"Smoking isn't a vice... Aleksandrs Draiska... Smoking is a weakness. Yes, yes, all kinds of miracles happen in this world. Sometimes you have to wonder about that just like a Gypsy: dad's white, mom's black, where did the black twins come from?"

"It's a vice to brag about weaknesses," Marika added.

"I think it's an even bigger vice to hide weaknesses."

Varis's answer sounded cool and distant, though that was aimed only at Marika and continued as long as they kept exchanging glances. After that Tenisons went back to his decidedly friendly chattiness.

"I also didn't smoke in the army. And you know why? I had to quit at the gasoline depot. I came for my first guard shift and the sergeant major was at my pockets right away, and with the matches in the toilet, all I heard was the warble of the water. 'From this moment on you're a non-smoker,' he said. 'It's not possible to quit smoking that easily,' I tried to object. 'A real soldier can do anything,' the sergeant major replied. 'I, for example, have quit smoking thirty-five times already.'"

"That's from Mark Twain."

"That's possible. Our sergeant major knew his literature. Yeah, military service – what a strange thing. While you're counting up the mess, it feels like the end, but when you get home and you're living as a free man again it's nice to remember. Isn't that so?"

"You know that better than me, I haven't lived much yet as a free man."

"The most important thing is to take off your uniform. And right away it feels like you've got a completely different head attached."

"For the moment I somehow don't feel it..."

Tenisons had undoubtedly shifted the conversation on purpose to army matters, to give him a chance to comprehend his situation. His initial surprise gave way to disappointment, which was difficult to hide. He didn't feel so much deceived, as ashamed. He'd made a fool of himself. His entrance on stage had been so impressive. He just hadn't foreseen one little detail – that the boards on stage just might be slippery... And now he was lying on his back. A more perfect flop it wouldn't have been possible to imagine. Still he needed to leave with his head held high. Maybe Tenisons, out of a sense of old army boy solidarity, was trying to make his retreat easier for him, diluting any uncomfortable talk with jokes and innocent chit-chat. On the other hand, that actually seemed completely incomprehensible, because in this situation they turned out to be almost competitors. But it's possible that Tenisons was just playing a role in front of Marika pretending that he's immune, standing above it all, and – heaven forbid – didn't feel any tendency towards any foolishness like jealousy. But in truth their roles had completely changed. Marika became increasingly friendly, Tenisons was keeping the conversation going, but now the suspicious and careful one was him.

"So you're from Rīga?" asked Tenisons.

"Yes...To a certain extent."

"Where are you staying? I mean, here?"

"Nowhere. I'm going to return on the next train."

"That wouldn't make a lot of sense. If I were you, I'd stay in Randava, at least until Sunday night."

"Why?"

"For different reasons. First of all, because during the summer it's pretty dumb to return to Rīga on a Friday night. Second – out of curiosity – what if he, I mean the letter-writer, shows up?"

"You meant to say 'she'," Marika corrected him.

"Well, let's assume, 'she'," Tenisons kept a steely calm. "And, third, because it's important to never hurry too much. Especially, if there are dealings with women."

"I think I'm going to go after all."

"If I were you, I'd stay...Aleksandrs Draiska. Really, I'd stay. At least until Sunday night. Right, Marika?"

"Why not? Randava is a nice town."

Through the thin door voices became audible in the stairwell. A moment later this was followed by forceful knocking and a head sticking partway into the front hall asking with exaggerated politeness: "May we come in?" After this prelude, the room's narrowness was

suddenly filled with the energy of three individuals completely unlike each other in appearance and behavior: a lithe, chatty, dark-haired girl, extremely pretty, like from a fashion magazine, a short, squat, but fairly burly tomboy, and an awkwardly blushing schoolgirl with pigtails.

"Well, look, how wonderful," said Marika, "the cabin crew is in full attendance."

"Filled out with a few out-of-place people." The lithe one flashed her painted eyes mischievously, without even pretending to hide her interest.

"Yes, a guest has come. May I present: Aleksandrs Draiska, a retired Special Forces "*Yefreytor*". Did I get that right?"

"Like from a book."

"Very pleased to meet you," the dark-haired girl theatrically extended her hand as if expecting it to be kissed.

"KK. Kamita Kancāne."

Pigtails blushed even brighter and quietly murmured: "Biruta."

The tomboy stared and barked gruffly: "Caune."

"Maybe one of you knows Aleksandrs?" Tenisons smiled with his sly Cheshire Cat smile.

"In what way?" replied Kamita.

Tenisons didn't respond right away, but kept watching the girls. They all looked surprised.

"He writes poems. And publishes them in the magazine 'Liesma'."

"Really. How thrilling!" Kamita pushed her arms into her hips and pushing up her breasts stood directly across from him. "Can you imagine, I've never even seen a real poet. Last autumn there was one giving a reading at the Culture Hall, but back then I just happened to have a shift to work. And do you know what he said: I'm a potato blossom. Isn't that amazing? A potato blossom with black, kinked hair. We don't even have a variety like that here in Randava. Tell me, are you especially unique?"

"In terms of agriculture?"

"Well – like Čaks or Pushkin. With all kinds of focuses..."

"I don't really think so. I'm just a typical beginner."

"What does 'typical' mean? A poet can't be typical. If that were so, you'd find a poet at every turn. Also in Randava."

"Kamita, you're incredibly wrong if you think that there aren't any poets in Randava."

Caune, having settled onto the edge of the bed, was rocking her knees back and forth rhythmically. "Ruskulis works in the Communist Party Executive Committee and the cleaner at the Invalid Center also writes. Precisely."

"Ruskulis?" Kamita interjected laughing. "That acne-covered slob. I'm going to faint! That, my dear, is no potato blossom. That's potatoes mashed in a pair of pants."

"But I remember your poems." Biruta shot him a look and then quickly shied away again

flustered, but immediately drew closer to him again, already more secure, with a kind of spitefulness. "One of them is called 'A flight into dawn'. Another was about a soldier who rested for a moment on the firing range, lying down in the grass, watching a movie about home in the clouds."

"...An old movie, already watched a thousand times.

A movie that cuts out after the order 'get up!'...

And after that I think it was about a girl, one who you're expecting a letter from."

"And, and, how did it go on? Mr. Author, be decent," Kamita said imposingly.

"Does it really matter, I can't remember."

"Your poem?"

"I've filled about seven binders with my writing."

"That wouldn't even be the greatest misfortune." Tenisons clenched his face into a theatrical grimace. "The worst is that our poet is insulting us all by leaving. On the next train..."

"Well, that's just not going to happen," Kamita's voice resounded with both indignation and unshakeable conviction. "We won't let anyone slander our noble Randava. Even more so because tomorrow is my birthday. Assume that in honor of this solemn event, the schedule has been changed and all of the trains from Randava have been cancelled."

"I'll be with you in spirit."

"I fear that your spirit isn't a particularly good dance partner."

"On the other hand, it would never step on your toes."

Biruta seemed to still be trying to remember the lines of the poem.

"And you're really already leaving us?" she said. "How sad, you must have had some important errand in Randava. Maybe you came to tour our factory?"

"No, no particular reason. I just wanted to go for a ride. I hadn't been on a train in a long time."

"You're not telling the truth. You're trying to seem light-hearted, but actually you're embittered, it's easy to tell."

"Well, then don't interrogate this person like you're the police commissioner," Caune said snidely staring at the ceiling. "As if you always only told the truth. Apparently, there's a reason. And really you shouldn't become obsessed, that's so provincial of you."

"No matter," Kamita didn't relent, "we're not letting you go. Don't forget that tomorrow night at 7 you have to be at the lifeguard station on the Gauja riverside. The celebration will take place outside and will start precisely on time. Will you be there?"

"No."

"Thank you. It's all clear. So – we'll expect you."

Having gotten out of the room, he breathed a sigh of relief, realizing somewhat unclearly that despite everything, he had come out of that situation mostly intact. Like a drowning man who had at the last moment managed to pull himself out of the water onto the safety of the shore, still woozy from all of the water he had swallowed, standing there now with shaking legs. He had felt something similar only in high school after the final exam in chemistry. Now it was best not think about any of it. It's all over and done with. He had gotten out. And the door behind him was closed. How wonderful! Even if his ears were still burning.

Running down the stairs was pleasant and even relaxing in a way, his legs driving on without him having to force them. He flowed like water from a sluice gate that had suddenly been opened. But maybe he was just running away, still not feeling entirely safe?

The girl was standing on the platform by the window. She still hadn't gotten inside. Horrible! The moment when he'd come up the stairs belonged to a past so distant that it had already evaporated from his awareness. Poor thing, she must have decided to keep waiting here even until she went grey.

"The ladies are still at the river?"

It seemed rude to go by without saying something if only because they had spoken earlier. No, now everything was perfectly alright. He was bounding athletically, jauntily, smiled a little, made a little joke... Sure, she had probably heard the blabbering start to his conversation with Marika.

"Of course. And the book will be finished too in a moment. Did you meet her?"

"At least I found out."

"But I lied. Sometimes I lie accidentally..."

"Eh, a trifle. No matter. A joke is a joke. I can give you a newspaper with the short story."

"Thank you. I only respect crime novels."

"Really?"

"Yes. They're interesting to read and most importantly – they always have a happy ending.

All the mysteries are solved, all the guilty are revealed."

"Then I can't help you."

"Maybe you want to try?"

"To read crime novels?"

"To help."

She roundly turned the window handle and pulled open both sides.

"See, the balcony door is open..."

He instinctively looked down, down below there was a grassy patch overgrown with weeds and a flower bed lined with whitewashed bricks. It wasn't too far down, but still daunting enough.

"The key should be on the table. Well, will you try?" The girl's voice sounded challenging yet disinterested, as if she were asking him to take a suitcase down from a shelf or something else insignificant.

"To climb up onto the balcony?!"

Was she serious? Of course, it wasn't impossible. The ledge seemed wide enough. Yeah, just one moment, it's nothing. And how wonderful it would feel to wave to her from the balcony; nimbly grasping the railing, a dashing leap – and he's already in the room... To say "no" was incredibly unpleasant. But to just take a risk like that. If it were, let's say, as a bet, then that would still make sense...

"Of course, you won't climb up."

"I was just thinking whether it's worth it..."

"Worth it? I'm not planning on paying you. But you're not from around here, that was clear right from the start."

"How do you mean?"

"You think too much. And most importantly – you don't know how to get onto a balcony at a girls' dorm. See, you have to do it like this."

She leaned out the window and threw a book up onto the balcony. After that, she deftly pulled off her slippers and threw those up there too. The calico dress was pulled up, her round limbs flashed by, white shorts, and she was already standing on the ledge. It all

happened so fast that he didn't manage to even fully comprehend it. For a moment he choked, he'd been planning on holding her hand. But there had been no point. From below a clipped call sounded: "Look where Lība is! Watch it, crazy girl!"

When she lifted her eyes, she gathered up her things on the balcony.

"Well, you saw, simple, right?"

"Yes...Almost like at the circus. You've got a talent."

But silently he thought to himself: she's crazy, completely crazy.

And he ran down the stairs listening to the rhythmic knock of his own steps.