

Dace Vīgante “Ledus apelsīns” [Ice Orange]

Excerpt

Translated by Žanete Vēvere Pasqualini

Biography: Writer Dace Vīgante (1970) was born in Jūrmala, Latvia. She graduated from the University of Latvia Faculty of Law. Vīgante has also attended the Latvian Writers’ Union’s “Literary Academy” program. In 2017, her debut collection of stories, *Ice Orange* (2016), was shortlisted for the Annual Latvian Literature Award, as well as the Kilogram of Culture Award, and received the Children, Youth and Parents Jury Award. In 2018, Vīgante published her second collection of stories, *We Shall See*.

Synopsis: Psychologically nuanced and dense with detail, the stories in this debut collection *Ice Orange* are mostly about women whose lives were shaped by the 20th century, a time when people learned to understand each other more from what was unsaid, when each step seemed to be both more difficult and more meaningful than it is now. These sketches of lives, from childhood through adulthood – both the minor as well as significant dramas – are full of familiar emotions, nostalgic details, and unspoken secrets. The stories in this short collection offer quick reads that will nonetheless leave a tangible impression, allowing insight into life through the prism of Vīgante’s marvelous and delicate prose.

Excerpt

I would never have plucked up the courage to host summer guests, or *dacha tenants*, as my neighbour Nina - the one who patiently spread newspaper out on the pee-soaked elevator floor in our building - called them. On the rare occasions that we bumped into each other on the stairs, she always returned to the same subject - how come no-one ever got caught and how could anyone relieve themselves so quickly. It was the only topic we dealt with, if my shoulder shrugging can be counted as sufficient response to her remarks.

One morning, sighing heavily, she happened to open the main entrance door at exactly the moment my world was coming to an end, as I tried to unsnag my tights from where they had caught on a splinter on the door frame. I must have looked dreadful, as I replied to her query of "What happened?" by stating that I wanted to go and hang myself. Fancy saying something like that to a stranger! I must have gone into some kind of trance, not coming to my senses until after my monologue, to which Nina had obviously listened with indulgent patience. I heard my own jagged voice going on about the lack of any spare tights to change into and no time to mend the laddered ones. I voiced my doubts over my mother's post-war golden advice about there being no shame in old but clean, after all there wasn't a war on any longer. That on my budget, there was no allowance for snagged tights, that little Pauls was ill and I was struggling to make ends meet. And, even if I had had a bit of extra money, how would I ever make it to the shop in time, the bus was hardly going to wait for me. It would just be my tough luck. How was I meant to go out like that, with a ladder in my tights like a right slut.

I only snapped out of it when I caught sight of Nina's wide open, staring eyes. The gold sleepers in her ears swung rhythmically as her hand, a gold ring with a decent-sized claret-coloured stone on one finger, pushed the gleaming, greenish headscarf back from her slightly damp forehead.

"You should always carry clear nail varnish with you," she said.

"What?" I didn't get her.

"As soon as you get a ladder – ploof! – a lick of nail varnish on top of it, and it won't run any further," she explained, matter-of-factly.

I ran the palms of my hands over my cheeks. Black smudges of mascara came off on my fingers. I searched frantically for a tissue and apologized for my endless stream of words - most inappropriate. Must be nerves, you know. My neighbour, putting her shopping bag on the floor, gave me a friendly hug and called me a poor mite, crushing me against her ample bosom over which her cotton housecoat, decorated with blue tulips, strained tightly and barely closed. She kissed me on both cheeks and invited me down for tea that afternoon, saying she had a proposal to make. I missed my bus that morning all the same.

It turned out that a hug from a stranger was not that unpleasant, considering that no-one, except of course for little Paulītis, had hugged me in the last four years. However, I was in no mood for a home visit that evening. Besides, I was put off by the idea of a return to the topic of that damned elevator. Drat, I should have asked for her phone number so I could have called with an excuse. I took a deep breath, shrugged and went up anyway.

The smell of Nina's kitchen took me back to my childhood, memories of my granny's house – it smelt of bay leaves, onions, milk and freshly baked pies. A feeling that you were expected somehow. I let her put a plate of warm *vareniki* (doughnuts) in front of me, along with a square slice of rye bread topped with a generous slice of glossy, garlicky, smoked Russian lard and a cup of raspberry tea. All of a sudden, I wanted to stay there, in the warmth. While I was tucking eagerly into a pie, she asked me, all business-like, how many rooms I had. When I replied that I had two, she said that was exactly as she thought and went straight to the points – I should let the second room out to summer tenants. She told me she had connections at the local market who had promised her the relevant information. Gesticulating wildly like a TV weather forecaster, Nina let on to me that she

usually hosted good, decent people from fellow Soviet republics. Sometimes relatives or friends from the Ukraine would come for a visit, and one summer she had had Armenians - the table had almost given way beneath all those southern treats, they had brought so much authentic *shashlik* and kilos and kilos of sun dried *basturma* meat that she had even managed to make a saving on housekeeping. Every evening she had been entertained with free chamber choir concerts. The many-starred bottles of cognac on the kitchen table had been drained as if they were lemonade, she still didn't know how her liver had survived, although she couldn't say the same for her husband.

Last summer she had had a scientist from Moscow to stay. Not once had she walked down to the beach, she had just read all the time and tapped away on her typewriter for days and nights on end. They had had to plug their ears with cotton wool balls if they were to have any chance of sleeping. When she left, she had embraced Nina and, shedding tears of joy, thanked her for the invigorating rest, saying that thanks to the plentiful sea air she had drafted her entire dissertation.

All in all, quite normal people. In any case, she would be there to lend a guiding hand, just two floors below. When I left she winked at me, as if to say to call her if I ever wanted a chat. And just imagine, the elevator floor had been dry that morning. I thanked her and promised to think over her proposal and call her, even though I knew I wouldn't get too chummy with her anymore. I was no good at talking, even with my own mother. She thought she knew everything about me but, in actual fact, she didn't know a thing. She passed away quite convinced that she had been so unlucky with her daughter – having

raised me to always be top of the class and instead I ended up a failed artist with a child on my hands.

On Sunday, at seven o'clock in the morning when Pauls and I were catching up on our weekly sleep deficit or, in other words, just as I had finally fallen asleep after a sleepless night, I was woken by a sharp ring at the doorbell. It was Nina. While I was clumsily tying the belt on my dressing gown and smoothing down my unruly out-of-bed hair, Nina, with a face as grave as one about to announce, at the very least, the arrival of inhabitants from another planet, trilled, "A family from Yakutia , three people for three months. *Decent people*" (the last utterance being added in Russian). I gave a nervous laugh. She brushed away my query as to whether she knew them herself with a wave of her hand, saying that Lyda from the market wouldn't recommend unsavoury types. As she was leaving, she added that there would be no need for me to think about food, just remember her Armenians. Geography had never been my strong point, but I did know that Yakutia and Armenia weren't exactly in the same region – that I knew for sure. I felt myself getting more confused.

"Nina!..." my voice croaky from sleep. Stomping heavily back down the stairs, she called over her shoulder that there was no need to thank her, she'd done it from the goodness of her heart. I stood there, barefoot on the concrete floor, trying to make head or tail of the note in my hand. The amount was nearly half a year's salary. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Five years ago, in that other life money, didn't mean a thing to me. Now, as a mother, a lot of things have changed. The head of tailoring – an elderly Jewish lady – had

taught me this: when you get your wages, divide it up straight away – the set amount for rent and living expenses, the set amount for kindergarten, the same for housekeeping, but only ingredients, no pre-prepared stuff (as these last longer), put some aside in savings for something bigger like a TV, washing machine or an important birthday. And never, I repeat never, dip into the savings! As she told me this, she jabbed me in the chest with the pencil she used to write down the series numbers of overcoats, almost piercing me as if it were a nail. At times, when I think about my stored-away money, I actually get a physical sensation of stinging in my chest. In the autumn, Pauls will be needing things for school, stationary and so on, and I will have to violate the sanctuary and plunder some of my savings. Still, putting money aside or not – there's never enough for everything. I patched up my old winter coat, replacing the old, worn-out pockets with colourful new ones, I cut the patches from my mother's housecoat, a foreign import which I would never have worn anyhow. My workmates were ecstatic, you can see you're an artist, they said. The *partorg* even put me in charge of making a welcome notice, honouring heroes of the communist workforce. I tried to get out of it, saying that my drawing wasn't up to much – I hadn't even got into art school - but I was given a clear hint that by doing so, a bonus would certainly be within my grasp.

Thinking about it, it wasn't that long ago that I had tried to get into the School for Applied Arts. I was the first of their rejections. They had said that my drawings were better than those of most of the "protégées", but so what. Losers always look for some sort of consolation. The language of losers. You need to dream to create art, but I no longer can - I either don't feel like it or maybe just don't want to. Every single day, chained down to a production line like a slave, I sew coats for the Swedish market – all of them a cold shade of

grey with a double row of buttons. What a very responsible and, not forgetting, creative job.

Decorative trimming in silk thread - brrr, brrr, brrr - from eight to five.

It serves a purpose. I don't think about anything, I move neatly, mechanically beneath the bulbs of daylight like a hamster on its wheel. I nibble my sandwich at lunchtime, having found a spot on the boxes surrounded by dusty, half-finished coat samples – invisible, unnoticed, occasionally contributing a comment to the conversation going on amongst the other slaves, all wearing the same striped overalls, about their mothers-in-law, children's illnesses and back street abortions. Then a quick trip to the loo for a smoke then brr, brr, brr until the target is reached – the five-year plan fulfilled, the bonus achieved. I pick Pauls up from kindergarten every day then get to the shop just in time to buy some fresh bread. If I'm not falling over with tiredness and can endure the queue for surplus goods, we also buy some butter and a string of sausages, much to Pauls' delight. Let's be honest, as far as the art world goes, I'm dead. It is not mourning me, either.

When I told my son about the summer tenants, he asked if the guests would bring a yurt or a wigwam with them and, without waiting for a reply, ran out into the yard. On my way to the Housing Department, five-year-old Mārīte from my son's kindergarten class stopped me by pulling on my bag and asked if it was true that the Chukchi people would bring a yurt and reindeer with them.

"What have you been saying, Pauls! What yurt? What reindeers?" I scolded my son. I borrowed another camp bed from Nina for the Yakuts' room, as the yurt was unlikely to fit in there. Goodness, what yurt? I don't know myself what I'd been thinking.

In the spare room, the beds are all made up - white and clean. The best bed linen. Too white. Should I get some flowers as well? Marguerites or lilac? Do they have any flowers at all up there in the north? I put a new sheet on the double bed for the parents. After my mother's death, it had become a haven just for me. Now, it was to move into the public domain. Maybe it's all for the best, it might finally get to see a bit of action.

It was Pauls' idea – for us to sleep in the same room starting today. So we could get used to it. Me on the couch, my son on the camp bed. The springs squeak shrilly when he turns over. I don't dream, not even in my sleep. Isn't it said that he who drains his vat doesn't drink another drop. The same can be said of my dreams – reduced to rubble, shattered to debris along with my memories of Ents and my other life. It's all rubbish. Misunderstandings. A smouldering flame. Who wrote about that? Was it Ezera? So you see, I lie here and smoulder. I scatter ash on my head to bear witness to the fact that I acknowledge my insignificance, or rather my stupidity.

Only my child stood as an incontrovertible fact. You can't scatter ash on his head. He is a very real consequence of my dreams, to feel beneath my hands and cuddle. A direct reminder, he breathes right here behind the wall – pure, fair-haired and ignorant of so many things about his mummy who is as dear to him as life itself, the only person he has since his father is dead. Dead to us. I have no idea how many sleepless nights it will take for me to pay penance for these lies.

"Don't marry an artist! The butterflies in your stomach will freeze to death, he will go looking for a new muse, you will end up all alone, just like me!" my mother berated,

knowingly. Although my father had only been a house painter, my mother always referred to him as an artist, especially after he married a cabaret dancer ten years his junior.

Nevertheless, she always reminded me of how much I resembled my father and, whenever we were elbow to elbow in our small kitchen, an exchange of sharp words was always followed by her harking back to my shameful return home carrying beneath my heart the burden of my sinful "spree" - a child. I couldn't have cared less. What was I to say? That she just didn't get it? That that wasn't how it was? Maybe that was exactly what I wanted. The chance to bury myself behind my humiliation. It was easier than facing the truth. The truth was exactly what I was shielding my mother from.

Maybe she has turned in her grave by now. It is said that after dying, everything becomes much clearer. That the spirit suddenly sees everything as it truly is, then disintegrates into molecules or is led solemnly through the Gates of Heaven down to the rivers of milk, depending on what you believe. You see, Mum, you were right. There are no males in my life and neither are there going to be any, as a species. Exactly as it was for you. All my relationships are straightforward and well-defined, like the silk trimmings on the factory coats. I have neither the time nor the urge for a love affair. And I can't stand all that in-and-out business for the sake of your health. I don't need any of that mess. I've put away the rose-tinted glasses and romantic trembles. There was a folk song which went, "I live in a kennel on a mountainside, in a mud puddle in the valley, and I have no need for a man." They can all go to hell, to Siberia to build *BAM** or to Afghanistan to shoot Mojahedins, for all I care.

Damn, tomorrow morning I will have eyes as red as an albino rabbit again. Perpetual insomnia and an endless stream of thoughts dart constantly through my mind, never finding peace. I cope somehow with them during the day, when I can hide behind my chores and obligations, but at night they torment me -sliding in front of my eyes like a movie on the big screen. And there is nobody I can talk to, I can't afford to open up to anyone about this, least of all have a chat about it with Nina.

Early the next morning, all three of them are standing at my door as promised, loaded with suitcases. They are tired, with dull, pasty, almost translucent complexions and they reveal greyish teeth as they smile at me. The wife's face is half-covered by glasses, the pale eyes are small and dart about like a bird's. The husband's eyes are almond-shaped and dark. Unable to hide his disappointment, Paul shrieks, "Where are the reindeer?"

"We let the reindeer out to pasture," the husband doesn't miss a beat as he introduces himself and family. He laughs merrily and jauntily takes the bags inside. Their son, Kolya, a thin, light-haired boy, immediately dashes to make friends with Pauls.

"Have you ever gone hunting?" he asks. Pauls blinks his eyes and answers that he hasn't, however he says that he does own a tractor. "Show it to me!" Kolya races into our room.

Tanya has a loud voice. Kolya is reprimanded and ushered out of our room in a sonorous alto. Later, I learn that she teaches singing to kids. She must be a conductor as well - she moves her hands about like waving seaweed. When she removes her many layers of jackets and jumpers, she turns out to be quite petite, pale and warm-hearted. She talks nonstop, bubbling away like a kettle on the stove. My Baltic temperament can't keep pace

with her, I want to explain some things but I'm always cut off mid-sentence. Tanya seems to know it all anyway.

The milk and cream purchased on their journey here are put into the fridge. Although the milk gets pulled straight back out again and the three of them polish it off, and the pot of cream is finished greedily with a spoon, eyes half-closed dreamily. Catching me staring at her, Tanya turns to me and explains that they don't have any natural products whatsoever where they live, it's all in powder, which is why they all have such terrible teeth, and her laughter tinkles round the kitchen like glass bells. They have no need for a fridge there, either. A freezer comes for free if it's minus fifty outside. When they are given venison, she makes thousand of *pelmeni* straight away and hangs them out of the window to freeze. I listen to her, my mouth hanging open, and try to imagine what it must be like making such a vast quantity of *pelmeni*. Women sitting at the table, rolling out sheets of dough, filling them with minced meat and storing them in sacks. Maybe they sing something or maybe they talk. What do they talk about - snow, their husbands? What do they dream of?

All three of them swiftly make use of the bathroom and, having dressed their pale, bluish bodies in shorts and T-shirts, march outside. No time to waste, straight to the beach. I look at the thermometer outside the window: 15 ° C. A wodge of money rustles in my hand – school things, a new coat, books, a decent TV or a writing table at some point, just for starters. I need to sit down.

Over the following days, our kitchen smells like a ripe, fermenting garden – every available surface, shelf and storage space is filled with bags of plums, apricots and peaches,

bowls of berries, sacks of vegetable and bunches of herbs. Tanya is bubbling away, an octave higher than before, telling us about a purge in which people had to go from one house to the next by feeling along a length of rope or risk getting lost because they couldn't see a thing. She talks of gold and diamond mines, the cause of the most horrendous crimes – murder even. Of food supplies stock-piled in immense quantities - entire blocks of cheese and whole pieces of lard. Of how they would now consume enough vitamins and dairy products to last them through the whole winter, as much as they could physically fit in themselves. And their winters are so very long - seven months on end - with the rest of the year feeling like watered-down spring. Their salaries, now they were really quite huge but, on the other hand, the solitude – as sad as a polar night. Tanya lets her resounding laugh run free, explaining that she is talking so much because we all need to be able to unload our hearts. When there is no-one else to listen to her on those grey days, she tells me she talks to the reindeer.

"While riding on a sledge?" I ask. Tanya laughs, pointing out they live in a city, with buses driving around, I must know what she means. Others, however, who have nobody, either go nuts or drink themselves to death. When I ask why she doesn't move somewhere warmer, her eyes widen as if I had asked her something indecent and, without a moment's thought, replies that it is her homeland, where her parents had lived. Tanya's mother had lost no time in following her father, just like the wife of a Decembrist. A scientist, he was charged with holding anti-Soviet views and sentenced to hard labour in a gulag, building

highways. After Stalin's death when he was released, they had both decided to stay on there. It was in some way a kind of guarantee that they wouldn't be sent into exile again and, in the meantime, her enterprising mother had created a permanent nest for them – having earned enough money for an apartment. It was clear where Tanya got all her energy from. I ask if her dad had built *BAM*. No, highways. *BAM* is a railway, you could volunteer to work on that.

I listen in awe. So many words. At times, Tanya pauses for thought, but she is never intrusive, she never asks me anything. I bite into the peach offered to me and further the stereotypical image of restrained Latvian mentality. Baltic slowness. Only deep down, something is churning, grating, trembling. Must be because of the sleepless nights. Maybe I should take some Validol.

I'm saved by Tanya's husband Sasha, coming in bearing a box of strawberries. I am amazed as to what they are going to do with so many of them. Are they going to make jam? Tanya jumps to her feet and hurries to wash them. "We'll eat them, my dear, oh, how we'll eat! As much as we can! And you will eat, too! You might live by the sea, but your cheeks are pale. When was the last time you went to the beach?" I'm rather taken aback, but the kitchen is engulfed by Tanya's laughter, warm as summer rain.

I look towards the door. Everything is suspiciously silent in the other room. What are Kolya and Pauls up to?

We both run to check on them. Our playful admonishments that they are not to hide are replaced by nervous "uh-uhs" and anxious-sounding orders to come out immediately

unless they want a smack, issued in two languages. The silence is too eloquent, we get no response.

"Tanya, it's getting dark!" The words rain like a cold shower down my back. The memory of Pauls saying that they were getting ready to go to the forest so Kolya could show him how to hunt for bears flits across my mind. We are both in housecoats and slippers, Sasha in a checked pyjama top. He grabs an umbrella and we stumble down the never ending staircase, we should have taken the elevator instead, my slippers are falling off my feet, I leave them in the hallway. We hurry down the crunchy asphalt pavement, panting, making our way to the distant forest. Our straggling group of runners is overtaken at a sporty trot by my neighbour and his dog. Dark shadows from the edge of the forest stretch out unrelentingly, getting longer and longer. Salty tears are blurring my vision. I hear myself reciting out loud: "Paulīt, please, come back." Scenes involving the disemboweled corpses of children float before my eyes. Only recently, the "Soviet Youth" newspaper had discouraged any lone wandering in the forest as there was some kind of nutcase on the loose. I blamed myself, did I really need any of this? All of this was because of that bloody money. All because of my stupidity.

"Here, here, look, here they are." I pant like a dog while I try to get my breath back. Pauls, terrified, is trying to make excuses - they had just wanted to pick some blueberries, but neither of them could tell the time, and even if they could, they didn't have a watch. Kolya is armed with a toy pistol, Pauls has a meat hammer tucked in his trouser belt. Tanya is making heartfelt apologies and giving Kolya a telling off. Her voice, a striking solo, leaves a dull echo in the clearing, encircled as it is by housing blocks. Scared senseless, I scold Pauls, I

kiss and cuddle him even though I would like to tear his ears off. Isn't he a silly sausage! "I think I'll be needing that Validol after all! And a cane, too."

"A cane for what?"

"For you!"

In the kitchen, Tanya is muttering something repetitively about all of them going home immediately if Kolya is unable to behave himself, whilst pouring him some cold milk straight from the fridge. "Are you mad, Tanya, that icy milk will make him sick!" I say, interferingly. Tanya laughs me off, "And how else am I supposed to toughen him up for our climate? Cold sea and cold milk. It's the only way." His father cuffs him playfully over the head, adding in Russian, "Come on, Kolya, drink up! You've been a right pain in the arse!"

He then looks at me and his wife and pulls a dewy vodka bottle out of the fridge. Tanya gives an approving smile and asks me to fetch some glasses - after the adventure we had just been through, it was just what the doctor ordered. Sasha, smiling and clearing his throat, says that half a pint wouldn't be enough then, taking the bowl of strawberries Tanya hands to him lovingly, disappears off to his room.

When the two of us are alone, Tanya pours some of the chilled liquid into the crystal thimbles and we toast, clinking our glasses to our children's safe return and a happy ending.

I take a sip and it is like a warm fog, thick as porridge, coming in a wave over my fingertips, the back of my tongue, my eyelids; it slips under the roots of my hair, pushing deeper inside under my heart. The scent of the strawberries is intoxicating, as strong as lily-of-the-valley. The night air, flowing in through the open window, is soaked with the noises of the day and as heavy as perfume which slowly enfolds me in a thousand musical notes.

My lower lip is sweaty and trembles slightly. The dead weight in my chest is dissolving, quivering and slowly starting to rotate, like a maelstrom. I touch Tanya's hand and say, with some difficulty, "Please, I want to talk to a reindeer."

Tanya doesn't look in the least bit surprised. I look her straight in the eye and speak, freely and calmly. I tell her how once, myself and two guys had been an inseparable trio of friends. Both of them liked me. I had chosen Ents, despite often thinking about the wise, taciturn Reijs. We spat upon the world at large and read Montaigne. We prepared fervently for our own deaths, quoted Voltaire, French poetry and that freedom-loving girl, Françoise Sagan. We pored over French couture as much as our limited access to fashion magazines permitted, went to French movies, dreamt of climbing the tower of Notre Dame where Gina Lollobrigida's Esmeralda and Anthony Quinn's Hunchback had suffered so, and of creating a fashion collection together. We had planned our own revolution in Reijs' room, listening to the "Dzeltenie pastnieki" and "Pink Floyd", dancing and smoking pungent "Rīga" cigarettes as if they were joints. Ents and I lost our virginity together one night on a station platform. I told Tanya how we had been caught by the militia - Ents had dropped a library card in Reijs' name. How Reijs hadn't given us away. How he had been expelled from school because of us.

I wonder at myself and can't believe what I'm doing; words are streaming out as free-flowing as the sea at high tide, as unstoppable as mountain streams, gushing like a river breaking its banks. I tell her everything – how Ents got into the School for Applied Arts and I didn't. How I had gone to a professional college for dressmakers. How Reijs had started working as a driver. We were inseparable. As close as family. Happy. Ents and I rented a

shabby top-floor flat in Riga. I tell her about the years I spent helping Ents with his drawing, doing the sketches for his thesis and sometimes going over to Reijs' place and spilling my heart out to him. He was my best friend, after all.

Ents was running late that evening but I was dying to tell him my news. For some weeks, I had been suffering from heartburn and nausea. I knew what it meant.

The first thing I saw was Reijs' frightened eyes. That look, still clouded with passion. I stared at the crumpled sheets, at Reijs' hand sliding off Ents' naked back. Ents didn't even turn around. I didn't know who they were any more.

"You can't leave now!" Reijs said in a broken voice.

"Idiots!" I whispered. "It's a sentence! Prison!"

I ran away, erasing both them and their forbidden fruit from my life. Deleting myself from theirs. I went to my mother's, who took me in like a cross to be borne. Whenever my mother met someone she knew, she always apologized for me with a poorly disguised expression of martyrdom on her face. So there you go, nothing to be done about it, that's what she's got herself into.

At first, Ents looked for me. I forbade him to approach me, threatening to turn them in. Later, I learnt that the quiet pacifist Reijs, who could easily have got hold of an exemption from military service on psychiatric grounds, had flung himself at active service in Afghanistan. Ents, on the other hand, was building *BAM* somewhere in the Siberian wastelands. I can't imagine how I will go on, I'm terrified of what will happen when Pauls learns the truth.

I gulp down another thimble and mutter, "And it doesn't end there, Tanya. I am mentally unwell. I can't stop thinking about them. At night, the longing is killing me. I yearn for them madly, insanely."

I notice that Tanya's hands, usually so jittery, rest calmly on the table like water lilies that have been drained of sap. But in a while, they start conducting again – pouring water into the kettle, clanking cups around, swinging the fridge door open. Her voice chimes out, slightly less agitated and not as sing-song. I hear how one day I'll get over it no matter how strangely people may behave. That's life. Love, too. And that I shouldn't be afraid of my feelings, and that nobody really was to blame, and that nothing stays the same forever and perhaps everything would one day right itself, turn out better than I imagined, and would I like some more vodka? Milk? Some tea, maybe?

I nod in agreement.

"No," she concludes, raising her finger. "We will eat strawberries." She pushes a plate in front of me, throws a berry into her own mouth and, frowning, munches it energetically, looking thoughtfully into the distance.

I laugh out loud. The laugh rings from the very bottom of my heart. Tanya is at a loss for words.

I press my cheek against the warm glass. The June night air flows into the kitchen through the open window – the tang of tarmac, tired from the day's sun, and the city's dusty greenery. Added to the mix, the softly rotting warm earth, the sharp stench of cats' pee, cigarette smoke from my next door neighbour's and the drunk monologue of the man a couple of floors below – haltingly trying to explain to someone, most likely a woman, that

he can't live without her but he gets nothing in return, which is why he drinks. I think I recognise it as Nina's voice, saying that he has ruined it all with his drinking, that she deserves more. "What exactly?" the man wants to know. "A normal life", Nina hisses.

The man's roar ricochets up to us, as he bellows in Russian, "You are such a fool, Nina!" The sound hits the wall of the opposite building and echoes hollowly back to us.

Someone upstairs bangs on their windowsill, "Shut up, you sick old man, people are trying to sleep!"

The sea laps softly at the end of the street. The clattering wheels of the last night train reverberate from the other side. The black velvet of wordlessness spreads over the city.

Tonight, I'm going to sleep deeply. I'm going to read something beautiful before I go to sleep. Some French poetry, maybe.