

Chapter 1

23 August, 1939

*Live well, dear Schmidt, live well!*

Mariss Vētra

They sat there on the wide sofa, propped up by the pillows Madam herself had sewn based on the patterns featured in *Zeltene*. It had been hard work, but maybe it was these carefree hobbies that helped her move past it? Rather, past them? Those nine years that in an instant had been thrown to the dogs? As if they'd never existed, those nine years, three months and – Madam counted on her fingers – three, no, four days.

The cats slept as if they were paid to do so. “Little ignorant angels,” said the parrot, rolling its black, glassy eyes before repeating: “Ignorant!” The cats – Inka, a grey angora with cornflower-blue eyes, the other a grey-striped cat named, for some reason, Brisis – lie purring, their eyes closed; but when Madam was away they turned into real beasts, tearing through the apartment, hiding, galloped through all four rooms, the kitchen, the bathroom, and, if the doors were left open, all over the furniture – no shelf was too high, and it was a wonder nothing had been broken yet. At least the parrot didn't interest those monsters anymore – not since the time Madam had come home and found him yanked from his perch, lying on the floor. Then the cats had had a reason to run! Now, after an unfair fight against both of those fanged and taloned demons – thanks to

God and Madam – the parrot had lost only one of its tail-feathers, and was now left alone.

The cats gave his perch a wide and terrified berth when walking past.

“Maybe one more?” Ami gestured to the empty coffee cups.

“Ami! You temptress,” Madam said, playfully darting the tip of her tongue past her lips, licking them. “All right, double up.”

While Ami was in the kitchen making more coffee, Madam went into the bathroom.

There was a note stuck to the edge of the large, floor-to-ceiling mirror, on which Ami had written in her calligraphic hand: “Yes, yes, the fairest of them all!” Madam smirked; yes, it was nice to read, but . . .

“Mirror, mirror, on the wall,” she whispered, but the glass was silent, leaving her to look for herself.

A pleasant roundness typical of women in their thirties, well, a bit past their thirties, to be honest. Today is her anniversary; no, anniversaries are what you called milestone birthdays – thirty, thirty-five, forty, Madam shivered. Lord, forty was old! She at least had seven whole years until then.

A bit thick in the hips, though her breasts were fine for now, but that double-chin; well, not a real double-chin, but it was a little chin, and yet – a double-chin! Her teeth – Madam opened her mouth wide – straight and white like in the Chlorodont commercials; you couldn’t even see the filling in the back, yes, her dentist Dr Stege was good at her job.

Madam didn't bother inspecting her legs, she had both and that was enough. Ami went on and on about how men always stared at women's legs. Was she some horse at a racetrack?

"Men . . ." Madam hissed.

She twisted open an elegant metal tube and applied the cyclamen-red pomade to her lips; ah, Guerlain would always be Guerlain! Ami had taste, and she was a true friend. Just this morning she had brought her coffee and caraway cakes in bed. Cakes that were almost as good as the ones from her own shop. Madam grimaced; what used to be her shop. And the gifts! Where on earth had Ami found such a fancy and certainly expensive – Madam scolded herself for thinking it – toiletry kit? Soir de Paris perfume in a slanted crystal vial, Houbigant powder, soap from Marseille that made your skin as soft and scented as the Venus de Milo's. Roses, pale pink, definitely from the Erdmanis Flower Shop, because you couldn't find flowers like that anywhere else. She wondered how these French words were pronounced. She'd have to ask the Captain – he knows French.

"Madam!" Ami interrupted her thoughts.

"How many times do I have to tell you: enough with 'Madam'! And enough with the formalities! We're friends, aren't we? Olga, just call me Olga," Olga Timms scolded Ami, standing in the doorway, breathing in the coffee aroma. Yes, still Timms, since she'd been given the surname at her wedding nine years ago in Ventspils. It was like a name you'd give a children's toy, or that little bridge by the high school.

"All right! Understood," Ami raised her hand to her forehead in salute, and stamped her slippered foot against the thick carpet.

They finished the coffee, so what now? Evening was still so far away.

“Ami!”

“Yes?”

“How long are we going to sit here? Like two old mushrooms. Let’s go for a walk! To the movies, to a café.”

“I don’t know . . .”

Madam’s eyes flashed.

“Ami, you’re hiding something! Tell me what you've got up your sleeve.”

“Me?” Ami's voice was the epitome of innocence – you could almost say it was ignorant.

“You! Look me in the eyes!” Madam pushed Inka off her lap; the cat’s eyes widened in surprise – what was that for? What did it do wrong? Inka, the beloved, the cherished, now so abused? The cat stretched out and jumped up onto the club chair and settled into Ami's lap, hissing at Brisis, who pattered off, offended, to stretch out on the red rug in the bedroom.

Ami was silent.

“Don’t play dumb with me! Get up and get dressed! We’re going for a walk.”

“For a walk?” It was as if Ami had been afflicted with a cat-like laziness. Getting up, now, to get dressed – and then going for a walk?

“For a walk,” Madam said sternly. “We’ll rot otherwise.”

“Well, I’m not sure. It’s so hot outside and . . .” Ami struggled to form a solid argument, searched and failed. “But this is what we decided. To celebrate your birthday with just the two of us. At home.”

“We decided . . .” Madam said, bewildered. Yes, that’s what they’d decided on last night, and then again this morning, when Ami came to wake her, singing – off-key, truthfully – “Happy Birthday” and handing her the bouquet of roses and beautifully wrapped present.

“We discussed and decided it. But now I’m changing my mind. It’s my birthday, isn’t it?”

Ami looked down and said nothing.

“Listen! I have a plan! First we’ll go to the movies. To Splendid Palace! Then to the shops. And then, to a café. To “the Turk”. Otto Schwartz! Bizet, Alexander cake, eclairs, apple tarts, cremeschnittes, petits fours . . .”

The temptations came one after the other, but Ami stood her ground: what was decided was decided.

*Time for the heavy artillery*, Madam thought to herself, and lay her final card on the table

“Fine! We’ll take a cab to the zoo. Well? What do you say? Show the monkeys our new outfits?”

Ami shook her head like a stubborn horse – no!

Ami must be ill, seriously ill. To say no to such fun things, no, she was definitely up to something. But what?

“Olga . . .” Ami said it as if she’d committed the worst of crimes.

“Out with it! Tell me everything! You’re pregnant. You’re going to Africa to become a missionary. Kalle has left you. You’re having an affair with Clark Gable.

“I didn’t mean to do it . . . I blabbed about your birthday. We’re having guests over tonight,” as she’d said it, Ami slumped in the chair.

“You . . . You’re insane! Guests,” Madam breathed and sunk deeper in to the sofa, almost crushing poor Brisis.

“It was supposed to be a surprise,” Ami said.

“A surprise? Fine, you surprised me, well done. But what do you plan on feeding these guests?”

“Madam, don’t worry about it! Everything will be taken care of,” Ami finally lifted her gaze. The storm was past if Olga was already thinking about what to serve.

“Taken care of,” Madam said, her voice an echo. “Right! How many guests will there be? Who did you blab to?”

“Well, Dag asked about it himself. And Miss Stege, and maybe some friends of mine. I also got a call from your sister, Elvira.”

Dag is what they called Harald Timmermanis, after reading *Beyond Sing the Woods*; to others he was and remained the Captain.

“She called you?”

“Of course, yesterday was my name day,” Ami stuttered.

“Yesterday?” Madam ran to the kitchen and returned with a calendar.

“So you’re . . . you’re . . .” she turned the pages and drew her finger across the dates. “You’re either a Benjamin or Spriditis? Wait, that’s today. Yesterday was Saulstare and Rudite. You’re a Saulstare?”

“Rudite,” Ami whispered. My name’s Rudite, and my middle name’s Amalija. That’s where Ami comes from. But my passport says Rudite. Rudite Liberts. And you don’t really invite anyone over on your own name day,” she kept explaining.

“But how does Dag, I mean, the Captain, know about my birthday?” Madam asked.

“From Mr. Timms.”

“Well, *moins!*” Madam spat through clenched teeth, sounding not unlike the men down by the Daugava riverside. “All right, but how did he know where we live? Did you tell him?”

“No. The Captain said you gave him the address yourself, and the phone number, too,” Ami answered.

*My tongue is my enemy*, Madam thought.

“But what can we do about it now? Unplug the phone? Barricade the door? Set the cats on them? Let’s hear it, genius!”

“No one is coming before six. And now it’s . . .” Ami studied her watch, “only two-thirty. Dag said he’d take care of food and drinks. We just have to set the table and make some lemonade. We have cherry jam, we have cranberries. I can go buy some lemons, and Brunis is brining the ice.”

“Ami, AmI, you’re going to make make my hair go grey,” Madam sighed. “Do you want me to start calling you Rudite? Should I?” Then, remembering, added: “But I don’t have a present for you. What do you want?”

Ami sighed; thank God that was over! It was done, everything was back to being *ganz ruhig*, as Zarah Leander sang in that movie where she escapes with that young, handsome officer . . . but from what? A storm? Fire? Getting shot? It doesn’t matter, but they escape, and she sings like an angel.

“No, Ami is fine. And don’t even worry about gifts! Let’s go to Italiija and stuff ourselves with ice cream. Just the two of us!”

“But what will we wear? Did you think about that, too?”

“*Keine Sorgen. Alles in Ordnung,*” Ami assured her. “You’ll wear the light-blue crocheted jacket, and dark blue skirt. I picked them up from Dancigers yesterday. I’ll wear the white embroidered blouse, the linen one, and the beige skirt. No, wait, the blue knit dress. Kalle says I look like a mermaid in it.”

*A mermaid. But what about me? Proper ladies who go out for afternoon tea – and it will be afternoon tea – dress elegantly, but simply. And Ami with her dark hair in no way looks like a mermaid. Kalle said she does. What does a Swede know about mermaids anyway?*, Madam thought to herself.

“I hope Kalle can make it.”

“He can’t. He’s at some conference in Tallinn. He’s always coming and going. I see him so rarely. But he sent me flowers and a present. For you, too. It was meant to be a surprise, but . . .” and Ami got up to go to her room, leaving her slippers on the floor by the club chair.

A moment later she reappeared in the living room, hiding something behind her back.

“I haven’t opened them yet. Close your eyes!” Ami ordered.

Madam obediently closed her eyes.

“Now open them,” Ami was holding two packages in her hands. “Guess which one is yours, and which one’s mine!”



“Well,” Madam hesitated, “the bigger one could be perfume, maybe a silk scarf, but the small one . . .”

Courtesy demanded that she choose the smaller one, but what if . . .

“Maybe there’s . . .” she closed her eyes again and put an index finger on each package. She saw concentric, glimmering circles, a ring – she saw that clearly – but that one wasn’t meant for her.

“Here, I’ll take the bigger one, and you take the smaller one. You know why? Because there’s a ring in it. For you!”

“You think?” Ami whispered, handing the package to Madam. “You open it, please!”

In her excitement she didn’t even notice she’d switched to informal address.

The fancy wrapping paper tore away, and a rounded leather box was placed in Ami’s hand.

“A ring!” Ami blushed. “Gold, with a gemstone. Kalle is insane.”

“Ami, it’s an emerald. It’s an engagement ring. Congratulations!”

“Kalle’s insane, insane! A gift like that for a name day! Is he a millionaire or something? He’s second secretary at the Swedish embassy. True, he’s not frugal. But . . .” Ami blushed even harder. “You say it’s an engagement ring? He has proposed a few times already.”

“And?”

“I thought he was just joking around.”

Madam calculated how long Ami and Kalle had known each other. Since last Christmas. They had gone to the Latvian Association as a trio: she, Don – Madam

grimaced – and Ami. The Swede who had asked Ami to dance had stuck to her like a burr. And now this engagement ring.

The second package was a box containing a wide bracelet, definitely of silver. It was engraved with all kinds of animals, birds and designs. The bracelet slipped over her hand and secured with a clasp; she held it out to her arm to Ami.

“It’s a masterpiece!” Ami exclaimed. “Where did he find it?”

They inspect both boxes – the outside and silk lining are both stamped with “Swen Birger, Uggleviksgäten, 7, Stockholm, Sweden”.

“Are things that serious between you and Kalle?” Madam studied Ami.

“I don’t really know. He likes me, that’s all. Nothing more,” Ami answers, flustered, then adds, “I’m teaching him Latvian.”

“Well, well,” Madam grins. “Learning languages isn’t a bad thing. Well! Stop playing dumb and marry the man! And be happy!”

“Thank you,” Ami curtsied. “Your wish is my command. You know, I like him quite a lot.”

“Then grab him with both hands and hold tight!” Madam’s tone became commanding. Her own life had gone the way it had gone, but let this orphan have her piece of happiness.

However . . . Could she afford to accept such an expensive gift from a stranger? Fine, he was Ami's boyfriend, and the three of them – this was after things with Don were through – had gone a few times to Otto Schwartz, had once been to Alhambra, and another time to O.U.K. And yes, a few times she had let them have the apartment to themselves – for Latvian lessons, hah! – and had gone to Cēsis to visit her parents. But a bracelet like this,

it had to have cost a fortune. The value of clothing and money was something she knew well.

“Ami,” she whispered, “No, it’s too much . . . Here, you have it, I can’t.”

“You can! Don’t be silly,” she dropped the formality again. “Kalle can afford it. See?” She pulled back the sleeve of her robe and lifted her hand. The bracelets were similar, except the one Ami wore was narrower, and had a golden watch-face embedded in the centre.

Gold was gold, but hers was more elegant. And Madam already had a gold watch, a gift from her parents on her thirtieth birthday.

“Thank you!” she hugged Ami and kissed her on both cheeks, then caught her around the waist; the women twirled a few times across the sunlit parquette floor.

“*Ach*, don’t mention it,” Ami lisped, and rolled her eyes, sounding like a German grandmother.

They laughed and fell onto the sofa. The cats ran to them as if summoned, and settled among them. They spent a good half-hour leafing through and studying the German and French fashion magazines, which Kalle had brought from Paris – this would look nice, or that. They prodded the pages – but that one would look absolutely atrocious. It’s a saint’s job, because should we, the women of Riga, have to look like sheperdesses? Of course not!

“Goodness!” Ami glanced at the clock. “It’s already four-thirty.”

They stood. Inka and Brisis, the guilty innocent, were carried to the bedroom. The parrot croaked vengefully: lock those trouble-makers away! The leaves were lifted down from the shelf, wiped clean – where had the dust come from? – and set into the table;

now is could seat at least twelve. From the armoire they took the tablecloth – which they stretched out by the corners, it would do without being ironed – and lay it on the table, followed by a stack of napkins embroidered at the corners by Madam’s mother. Then it was time to make the lemonade.

Ceramic pots of cherry an cranberry preserves were taken down from the high shelf in the kitchen; large and small glasses brought over from the armoire, glass pitchers and trays; the drops of scented spirits added to the dishwater made them shine brightly.

What else? The coffee set – it was still carefully wrapped in paper from the move six months ago – which finally got to see the light of day.

“The *entr’acte*,” Ami announced, wiping tiny beads of sweat from her forehead. She pulled a cigarette case out of the pocket of her robe. The faint aroma of tobacco floated into the air.

Madam took the case.

“Memphis. I knew you smoked in secret. But such an expensive brand!”

“Not me,” Ami looked away, like a schoolgirl caught redhanded. “Kalle forgot them. I just, well, you know . . .”

“So, give me one, too!”

The women sat on the kitchen stools and smoked. Swirling shyly, the cigarette smoke escaped through the ventilation pane, across Antonijas Street and as far as the fourth building on Alberta Street – where the sphynxes standing guard breathed in deeply the smell of their native Egypt, and sneezed, though the sound was drowned out by the squeal of braking tires below.

A young woman lept out of the car and waved in parting: "See you at eight, wait, eighty-three is better!" She ran up the steps and to the third floor, where she rang the doorbell.

"Sister," Madam said happily.

They embraced.

"This is for you from Mother," the girl handed her a basket and bouquet of gladiolas. "I kept them wrapped in a wet newspaper on the way here. Did they wilt? Olgerts gave me a lift, you know, the Eglitis' son. You met him at our confirmation."

The flowers were placed in a tall, green glass vase; the basket Madam's little sister, Elvira, had brought was unpacked: a homemade cake, paper bags of king bolete mushrooms and blueberries that still smelled of the forest, and yellow plums. Then they had to quickly change and apply makeup – ladies must always look perfect.

Right at six, when the cuckoo clock in the kitchen had finished its song, Harald Timmermanis rang the doorbell.

"Ladies, it's my pleasure," he clicked his heels together and bent over their hands. *A violinist*, thought Elvira.

Harald presented the hostesses with flowers and two packages, probably books. The next to arrive – truly, Ami had told the entire world – was Arnold Zvirgzds. Flowers, gifts. Madam had only met Arnold this Easter. The whole scene had been rather amusing. After mass she had left St. John's Church, only to find herself flat on her back on the thin layer of ice covering the Konventa Sēta's cobblestone courtyard.

"Allow me, madam!" Arnold had helped her to her feet.

"I could've killed him then," Olga had told Ami later. "My tailbone hurt so badly I thought I'd die, but he just said: Madam, should I call you a cab? I'd snarled: No, I

don't need one, I'll walk. But he insisted, no, no, he'd walk me home. I leaned on his arm, down all those boulevards and past all those parks, until we got here. How I struggled up those steps, I don't know how I managed, and then you opened the door: Miss Amalija! Arnold!" Madam laughs at the memory. "There was nothing to do but invite him in."

Ami just laughed and, narrowing her eyes like the cats, said that Arnold wasn't here on her account, and that the new summer suit and tie that he'd bought at the Jockey Club for twenty-nine lats – Ami knew what everything cost – wasn't something he wore without good reason.

"Ami, you're teasing! He's still just a boy," Madam shrugged.

"A boy? He's thirty. In his prime."

"Then you have him! Oh, right, you already have Kalle."

And that was that. Once a week, sometimes twice, the three of them went to the movies; sometimes just the two of them went for a coffee. Arnold wasn't rich; he worked as a cobbler, which made Madam laugh – A cobbler! – and she'd taken his hand to inspect it. Yes, you could see that he did manual labour, of course, but his nails were clean and trimmed, and didn't cobblers work with tar? Hadn't she seen enough cobblers? Drunk good-for-nothings! No, something here didn't add up, it was all like something from a Vilis Lacis novel.

"Keep each other entertained for a bit longer, we still have to finish in the kitchen," Madam said after introducing the men, and returned to the kitchen, where the food Harald had brought was being set out and arranged in bowls and plates. He'd brought lamprey, smoked salmon, ham, cheese, sprats, and herring rolls.

“Goodness! Bread!” Ami shrieked, and ran off to the corner store, already in her mermaid dress.

“Don’t forget sourdough!” Madam called after her, sticking her head out the window. “And seltzer for Dag, but you know.”

“Dag is what we call Mr Timmermanis,” Olga explained to Elvira.

“I think he looks more like Rett Butler from *Gone with the Wind*. Or like a Hungarian violinist,” Elvira shrugged.

“You’re silly!”

The doorbell rang. It was Helga Stege, their friend and dentist. She shook hands with Elvira, then with Olga. “Happy birthday!” Helga gave her a bouquet of yellow lilies and a tin of Kuze candies.

“I need to catch my breath. One of my patients today, good Lord! He weighed at least six poods, and had a cheek as swollen as a guinea pig’s, and God how he screamed! It was his molar. It took me an hour. But he did bring me two plucked turkeys from his farm out in Zemgale. Come to my place Sunday. We’ll have a girls’ night. With stuffed pastries and red wine. The dinner of musketeers. I won’t take no for an answer,” Miss Stega rattled off, sitting down and propping up her slender legs on the Vienna stool. “A glass of water, please!”

Both men stood leaning against the fireplace. Ami had handed them both a glass filled to the brim with cranberry lemonade, while the tray with the vodka bottle and slanted shot glasses was set at the end of the mantle, next to the Kuznecovs vase with the roses from Harald.

“Mr Zvirgzdis, allow me to ask,” Harald began, pouring Arnold a vodka, but raising his own lemonade glass, explaining he’d already emptied his shot glass. “What company did you serve in?”

“Arnold, please. I’m not one for ‘mistering’ and ‘gentlemaning’ . . . When he returned from the war, my father would say: ‘We Zvirgzdi are no gentlemen!’” Arnold laughed. I served in the artillery unit. Corporal.”

“I know it, under Colonel Zāgners, the old devil. I’ll bend you like a ram’s horn, you devils . . .” Harald laughed too, sipping his lemonade.

“. . . and then I’ll set you straight again,” Arnold finished the Colonel’s saying. “And you, Mr Timmermanis?”

“Harald. I feel the same about formalities . . .” he drew his finger across his throat. “I was in the army from ’19 to ’34, then I got out of there! I’m a bit – hah! – red. Ah, the past is the past. Let’s drink!” Harald refilled Arnold’s shot glass, but poured himself more lemonade.

Ami returned, her arms piled with loaves of bread and a giant bouquet of lillies.

“I ran into Ida in the stairwell. These are for you,” she pushed the flowers into Madam’s hands.

“Mmm . . .” Olga sighed, burying her nose in the flowers. Mr Dubins, Ida’s father, the attorney for a large trade company, had sent her flowers just like these on her birthday last year; he and Don had a lot of common job interests. “Did you invite Ida?” she turned to Ami.

“Of course. But she has piano lessons.”

“A shame. She’s a good girl, Ida.”



They sat at the table. The doorbell rang again.

“That’ll be Nanny,” Ami whispered. “My cousin.”

A dark-blue dress with long sleeves. Round glasses like those of a Baltic Linguistics student, Harald thought; curly hair like Shirley Temple, was Elvira’s thought; she’s wearing at least ten silver bangles, like a gypsie, Madam sneered to herself. Helga Stege glanced only briefly at the newcomer – just another person, her teeth healthy and white, maybe a bit too big for her narrow face.

Nanny was handed a plate piled with food, and given a glass of wine.

“So, what’s new with you?” Ami turned to Nanny, and explained to the others: “Nanny works at the *Latest News* and is always the first to know about everything.”

“Nothing usually happens in summer. Since the old boss passed away, Junior has changed everything, is always getting in the way, making everyone nervous. But,” Nanny raised her pinky, “yesterday Lacis came to the office!” She looked around triumphantly.

“Lacis? As in *lacis*, a *real live bear*?” Elvira exclaimed.

Everyone laughed – Nanny the loudest, of course. Elvira blushed, to fail this miserably! Like an old fence.

“I thought she meant a live bear, too,” Ami said, coming to the girl’s rescue. That was her cousin, Nanny, insterting herself everywhere with talk of her office, and what did she do there? She was just a typist. “I thought it went like this. Some gypsies brought a bear into the office, a real bear! It goes into Benjamin's office, where Junior, Emilija herself, an Vilis Lacis are sitting. The bear looks at Vilis, sways its head and says: “Well, brother, you’re living it up here with these gentlemen, but your *Fisherman’s Son* is soaking in the sea.”

Now everyone laughed, even Elvira. Nanny grinned crookedly, let them laugh, but she liked Vilis Lacis, and so did the citizens.

“To our hostesses!” Harald announced, standing up and clinking a fork against his glass.

“A feast fit for kings.”

“Thank you,” Olga tilted her head. “But it’s nothing special. Ami took care of everything.”

“From you, Olga, even if it were a bar of soap,” Harald continued jovially.

Well, well, Nanny laughed, he must be trying to flirt with her. True, Olga was recently separated, so strike the iron while it’s hot. Fine, then she’d turn her own attentions to, what was his name, ah, Arnold.

The bedroom door opened a crack and Inka darted out, headed for the front door. She was halfway to it when the doorbell rang. Madam went to answer it.

What she found fidgeting in the landing was a familiar, very familiar figure. Don. With a bouquet of roses.

“You?”

“Me. You weren’t expecting me?”

Olga was silent.

Don laughed.

“Here,” he pointed to the doorbell, “it says ‘Please Ring’. And I rang it.”

Inka rubbed against Donalds’ legs, her master was finally back!

The large bouquet was placed in Olga’s arms – Golden Sutter roses, she knew Don’s tastes, always and forever Golden Sutter. And always a massive bunch of them, you needed both hands to hold them.

“Are you going to invite me it?” Don’s voice lost its usual irony.

What could she do? Yell at him, to go back to wherever he came from? Throw the roses at him and slam the door in his face? No, she wasn’t going to behave like that, don’t count on it, she was “Keep Calm and Carry On” personified, even though her person was boiling.

“Come in, since you’re already here. And thank you for the flowers,” Olga stepped back into the foyer to let Donald pass.

“You look good, kid,” Donald leaned in to kiss Olga’s flushed cheek.

“I’m sorry, Donald! Let’s not pretend with the niceties this time. Here, hold the roses while I go find a vase.”

Olga hurried to the kitchen to find a vase. She better grab two – they wouldn’t all fit in one – and scissors to trim the ends of the flowers, they’re so long-legged, no, long-stemmed. In the bathroom, Olga put the flowers in a wash basin and gave Don the vases and – snip, snip – trimmed the stems.

Glancing in the misty mirror next to Don, she saw Vallija’s face. Vallija, their salesgirl, rolling around in bed with her beloved husband. What was she doing here?

Olga dropped the scissors, bent over, and turned on the faucet to splash her face with cold water.

“Are you all right?”

Don!

She turned, but Vallija wasn’t there. Just Don, as he had been, standing with the vases in his hands. The scissors lay on the tile floor.

“I’m perfectly fine. I feel wonderful. Simply won-der-ful!”

“Olga . . .” Don hesitated. “Enough with the theatrics. I’ve thought about this for days and days. Vallija and I are through. Believe me!”

“And Vallija’s baby? Are you done with it as well?”

“Well, we could adopt her baby.”

“Her? I meant your baby, together.”

And here Donald made a grave mistake, continuing: “But if you can’t have children . . .”

How dense men can be! Having stuffed the roses into the vases, she turned to rinse her hands – she had a drop of blood on her index finger.

The wedding band she pulled from her finger ricocheted off the edge of the tub, and clattered into the hole. Nine years, three months and three – no, now four – days down the drain. Period, *schluss!*

“It’s over, done, Don. Let’s join the others.”

Harald drew up a chair for Donald between himself and Elvira, then poured a glass of cognac and pressed it into Donald’s hand. “Your punishment, for making the townspeople wait.” Then, whispering so only Donald could hear, “Drink! You look like you’ve been through a thresher.”

Donald drank, then topped off his glass; right now he needed it.

To break the awkward silence, Harald raised his glass of water and loudly launched into an anecdote.

“Ulmanis and his entourage take a trip to Heaven. They wander around, look about. Then Ulmanis spots our Lord God’s throne and – whomp – sits down in it.

Everyone tries to convince him to step down, and so there won’t be any trouble, but he sits

there like a scoop in a barrel and refuses to move. Then Bērziņš leans over and whispers something in his ear. Ulmanis jumps up as if he's been stung, and runs off. 'What did you, Mr Bērziņš, say to the president?' the others ask. 'I told him there'd be a photo-op in the other room.'"

Everyone doubled over with laughter; only Nanny turned red and, almost hissing, said: "I like our president just fine." Then, after a moment, she found the right words and added: "He's a true farmer of our great land."

The party continued, they ate and drank; then Ami announced: "It's time for some dancing."

The radio was switched on. Donald leaned over a map of Europe and looks for Königsberg; they always had dance music on the radio. A man's voice happily reports the news.

"Listen, listen!" Donald calls out, sounding like a member of the British parliament. "We missed it! But they'll repeat it in a minute."

Miss Stege stood closer to the radio and translated.

"German Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop and USSR Foreign Minister Molotov signed a non-aggression treaty in Moscow today. Von Ribbentrop announced to foreign journalists that this will ensure lasting peace for Europe."

"There goes the lid to Hell," Harald whispered.

"Find some music instead! We want to dance," Ami insisted.

Manned by Donald, the radio dial wandered the map of Europe. Various languages through static – Helga looked out the window to where lightning flashed over the linden

trees. Raindrops pattered against the window panes accompanied by the excited voices of the announcers.

The finally found music: a station from Stockholm broadcasting the singer Zarah Leander.

“It’s not worth crying over love, because there’s so much of it to give, and so tonight I will be yours,” Helga translated, trying to contain her laughter.

The men asked the women to dance, and shoes squeaked across the parquet floor.

Elvira hid in Madam’s bedroom; she knew how to dance, but with if Mr Timmermanis asked her? No, she’d rather hide! The cats lifted their heads from the rosy sateen bedspread. Who dared bother them? Ah, Madam’s little sister. Rummaging through the bookshelves – that’s just fine!

The great northerners, books with reindeer heads on the covers; Hamsun’s collected works, Lagerlöf’s collected works, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, bah! Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, oho! Elvira pulled out a volume, and yes, the beginning of the book was marked up with a pencil here and there, but later on the pages appeared unread. She herself didn’t get past the introduction. The tiny, elegant editions of Golden Apple books. Sudrabkalns’ *The Swallow Flies*, Caks’ *My Paradise*, Raudive, her own beloved Zenta Mauriņa, Dauge’s *Big Personalities*. Only the familiar black-and-gold volumes of the *Conversational Dictionary* were missing; Olga must’ve left those with Donald.

What was the word she’d wanted to show off with tonight? Elvira furrowed her brow; the word shivered and floated back into memory. Contemplation. And this was the perfect moment!

Elvira took out both volumes of *Gone with the Wind* and paged through them. Suddenly, *Marriage Techniques* toppled down from the back of the shelf, startling the cats. Blushing, Elvira put the book back in its place, shoved the well-worn copies of *Gone with the Wind* in front of it, and returned to the dining room. Weaving among the dancers, Elvira retreated to the kitchen, where Amalija was setting out dishes for coffee. Elvira inhaled the scent of genuine Mokka – yes, at her house they just drank some malt beverage, because it was healthier. Obviously!

"Can I help with anything?"

"Carry the cake, please!"

The music was turned down, the dancers gathered around the table. The aroma of coffee and the men's cigarettes filled the air.

The telephone rang, and Madam hurried to answer it.

"Hello?"

"It's Eduard Volguts. Harald told me he'd be at your place, and happy birthday, by the way!"

"Thank you! I'll get him."

Harald picked up the receiver.

"Ed?"

"The same! Listen, meet me tomorrow at five at Arija's, I mean the café. I've got some ideas. See you then?"

"Of course. But . . ."

"I can't talk about it over the phone. Yes, and say hello again to the lovely lady!

And keep in mind, a treasure like that doesn't lie around unclaimed for long."

"Idiot! What do you . . ."

Ed hung up before the sentence was finished.

"Again with the crazy schemes. He always acts like a kid . . . He wants something, he gets it," Harald shook his head and returned to the living room.

Just as she finished eating her slice of cake, Elvira heard the sound of a car pulling up out on the street.

"Goodness," she glanced at her wristwatch, "it's already nine!"

She kissed her sister's cheek, bade the others farewell, and grabbed her purse. Then she stopped in the bathroom to run a comb through her hair and wipe the stray cake crumbs from her lips before running out the door.

She leapt down the steps two or three at a time, calling out: "Contemplation! Contemplation!", scaring half to death an older German woman coming up the stairs, who clutched her dachshund to her chest and pressed her back against the wall.

The rain had stopped. Through the open window of the apartment, Elvira could still hear Zarah Leander's voice. The party continued on.