

**Biography:** Jānis Joņevs (1980) graduated from the Latvian Academy of Culture. Since 2002 he has been working as a copywriter, reviewer, and translator from French. His first novel, *Jelgava '94*, was published in 2013. The novel garnered acclaim from critics and readers alike, and received numerous awards: the Annual Latvian Literature Award for Best Debut; the 2014 European Union Prize for Literature; and the 2014 Kilogram of Culture Award presented by Latvian Television. It was also named among the 100 favorite Latvian books of all time on the television show *Great Reading*, and the Children's Jury (a project involving young readers from all over Latvia) chose the book as their favorite book in the 15+ age group. In 2020 Joņevs published his first collection of stories *Tīģeris* [Tiger].

**Synopsis:** *Jelgava '94* proved to be a real hit and bestseller in Latvia. The story takes place in the Latvian town of Jelgava and centers around the rather short-lived craze for heavy metal music in the 1990s. The reader is given a view into this world from the inside – the text is both an intimate diary of a youngster trying to find himself by joining a subculture, as well as a skillful, detailed, and almost documentary depiction of recent history, i.e. the beginnings of a Latvia that had just regained its independence. The story seems even more captivating to the generation that shares the same perception and experience of the world – Joņevs is the first among this generation who has managed to stir its memories by transforming these images and that period into a full-fledged work of literature.

## Excerpt

1

It's 1994. Men in plaid, flannel shirts walked down the street. Jelgava hummed silently. I stood in the library doorway, waiting for them to pass by.

I was a little afraid of them, like I was of everything. After waiting a moment I went out and saw that the sky was bright. It was April 5th, 1994.

I took two steps and looked over to see them stopped in front of the grocery store, taking up the entire sidewalk. No, I wasn't afraid – I just didn't want to offend them by overtly crossing to the opposite side of the street. So I decided to turn left and take the shortcut home, through several interconnected courtyards between apartment buildings. Usually I stick to the streets, leaving the obscured spaces to the footballers and other declassé elements. But today I strode confidently into the first courtyard.

There was a strange object in the courtyard directly behind the library – a smallish brick cube with an unknown purpose; maybe it was the ventilation shaft for hell's coatroom or something. And directly on top of this cube sat a second group of guys. The school bully – a kid a few years older than me named Ugo (that was just his nickname; every bully needs one) – and two others just like him who I didn't recognize. All three were smoking.

I tried to think about something else and get by them unnoticed. It didn't work. Ugo called to me:

– Nice glasses!

One of the others chimed in:

– Don't run away. Come talk to us.

I stopped and turned to face them, the books in my hands feeling pathetic and vulnerable, but provoking.

Ugo noticed them and asked:

– What're they about?

But the second guy barked:

– Spit it out, what're they about!

Several clever answers sprang into my mind, but I went with a quiet:

– All kinds of things.

My two interrogators turned to the third guy. He gave me a look which probably only I perceived as strangely nervous, and said:

– Give us your smokes.

At the same time, far away, thousands of kilometres across the ocean on another continent, a hand slid over a 20-calibre Remington pistol, pulled back the magazine, checked inside – yes, it was loaded.

But here, I shook my head, and not out of malice or because I didn't want to share; I just didn't have any cigarettes. The third guy didn't seem too upset and said:

– Then give us a lat.

I replied:

– I don't have one.

And to show my regret I spread my hands open wide, sending the books tumbling to the ground. He signalled to me to stop as I bent down to pick them up, leaving face-down on the Jelgava dirt the man who in his time believed that he would rule the world, and continued:

– Give us fifty santims.

I again showed them my empty hands. His tone turned modest:

– Twenty santims.

This time I lied with the same gesture, and he said:

– You've got some nerve. He got to his feet.

There, far away, at that exact moment, the 20-calibre Remington was cocked with a click, just like in the movies, ready to fire. The barrel was brought to a temple.

Here, the third guy took one step to close the gap between us. I saw his chin up close and a siren went off in my brain; I wanted to be anywhere but here.

There, far away, the bullet hit its mark, shattered the skull, tore through tissue. The shot barely, just barely rippled the surface of the water in a nearby pool, but neither the neighbours nor the people on the adjacent street heard a thing.

But I felt something. The siren went silent, and something like music took its place. It felt like something had happened, only I didn't know what. And it felt like something else would also happen, but I also didn't know what. I even had the sudden desire to get beat up, I mean, for someone to at least hit me, because maybe that would start this Something. I tilted my head to one side, looking past the group of guys and scratching my forehead, as if I was trying to remember something.

Ugo had jumped suddenly to his feet, and was gesturing frantically as if wanting to say something. Later he'd tell me that he had heard the shot loud and clear.

The second guy who had been sitting next to Ugo would later say he'd heard a strange three-chord combination and had felt happy, so happy that he'd almost started to cry. The cigarette he was holding fell from his fingers and burned his shirt, but he just sat there with a dumb grin on his face.

The third guy, who was standing in front of me, was the only one who didn't hear anything. That's what he'd say later, spitefully. He was thrown off by my sudden meditative expression, and turned to his friends to show them my stupid face, but found Ugo with his arms raised in a 'V' and the other giggling while his shirt smouldered. What pissed him off even more was when the first two helped me pick up the fallen books, while I picked up the still burning half-cigarette and slowly savoured my first ever drag. None of us understood any of it.

I went home feeling drunk, the books no longer seeming interesting. I put them on the table, didn't speak to my family, didn't watch *Saved by the Bell*, but instead stared out of

the window at Jelgava, and drummed a random beat on the glass with my knuckles. I knew that I no longer wanted or needed to do my homework, though I didn't yet know what I did want and need. That night, I sat at the desk in the dark for a long time. I didn't have my own room, so the only light I could choose to not turn on was the desk lamp.

A few days later Radio SWH announced that the lead singer of Nirvana, Kurt something or other, had been found dead. The first reports said, of course, that it was suicide. The radio DJ expressed his sympathy and respect, and immediately followed that up by saying he hoped that this tragic event wouldn't result in an unnatural increase in fans, as had happened when Freddie Mercury had died.

Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha.

Freddie Mercury nothing, mister DJ. A bottle of cheap Merkurs brandy is worth more.

The DJ's wish didn't come true. He could hang onto it until November 1997, when the INXS fan base didn't increase after the charmingly poignant death of Michael Hutchence. But back then, in April 1994, was a turning point in our lives.

It would take a few more days for me to understand it. For me to find vindication in the intuitively collected newspaper clippings on countless shady-looking musicians, the theoretical and self-deprecating interest in drugs, the intuition for depressing aesthetics and the mapping out of our stomping grounds. But for now I just felt strange. Different.

2

Up until then I'd been a good kid. I listened to my parents without question, to my teachers too, was a good student and dreamed of a good future career as a lawyer or president, where I'd bring order to the world and do away with all the negative people. I wanted to become smart, rich and famous. It was all part and parcel – if you were smart, you were generally good, and for that the world would, naturally, reward you with money, fame and happiness. Probably also with beautiful women, an area I currently had zero luck in. I didn't believe in being smart but poor, good but unhappy, and the lonely. The world had to be right, and I wanted to be right within a right world.

Then, suddenly, I found myself on the other side of a barricade. As if I had spent the past fourteen years not gathering knowledge about life, but gathering strength to grieve and long for something inexplicable and nonsensical. Why, why would anyone want to be Kurt, to spend a lifetime depressed, depressing others, to marry some ugly skank and then shoot yourself? Wouldn't it be better to be one of the guys from Take That, who smile, are adored by beautiful girls and even make some money? But suddenly there was a whole crowd of us (no, not a crowd, we were the handful outside the crowd) who hated those who succeeded and who idolized the damned.

I was sitting in the shrubs by the school, facing the Gypsy House – a long wooden building with fake windows painted on the sides (whole generations of gypsies really did live in there, and when I was little I was told you should never show a gypsy your teeth). Alunāns

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Park loomed a ways off, along with a colourful cluster of trees locally referred to as the Shittery. I was smoking with Ugo and a few other guys. There were a handful of thugs there too, all sullen and pretty well known. There was Ghost, one of the three or five brothers who lived an alternative lifestyle, and Nose, his brother, who didn't even go to our school but came to sit with us in the shrubs. DJ was there too, a handsome but scary guy. He tended to get up in my face. I was absolutely terrified of him, so I always acted indifferent and jumpy around him. There were three more guys there too, whose names I didn't know, all with longish hair (at that time no one had truly long hair yet); one with blond, one with brown and one with greasy hair.

Nose was talking. He was old, at least two years older than the rest of us, so when he spoke you could hear the life experience behind it, but his tone of voice conveyed light-hearted sorrow.

- Some idiot in America took a shotgun, stuck the barrel in his mouth and said 'I'm like Cobain'! And the gun shot itself off.
- What happened to him?
- Died.
- Shotguns are super sensitive.

Nose looked sadly at the guy who had offered this superfluous information.

- A ballistics expert, eh.

The guy scratched his greasy head.

- What about balls?!

Everyone grew thoughtful for a minute. I had a question too:

- How could he talk with a shotgun barrel in his mouth?

And I was immediately embarrassed. I couldn't silence the logic in my head. I had to stop it.

DJ sneered and said:

- Cobain spent his whole life singing with a barrel in his mouth. You wouldn't understand.

Then he pointed at the school:

- Fuck you!

Everyone was silent for a moment. I could hear the wind carrying 'Something in the Way' from the direction of the Shittery.

The blond guy (I'd seen him around outside school) lit half a cigarette and said:

- Cobain lived in a cardboard box. He had stomach-aches his entire life. That's why he did drugs.

This set off DJ again. He threw his hands up in the air and hissed:

- And he was right to! All of us should do that. Because they – and here he again pointed to the school – say that we shouldn't. But we're with Cobain. At least I am.

The greasy-haired one mused:

- Where do you get them?

DJ gestured dismissively and secretively to the Gypsy House. Nose added:

- You can drink too. Vodka.

DJ nodded in agreement, but then Nose's brother said in earnest:

- It's hard to drink vodka straight.

Here everyone perked up and offered his suggestions:

- You can chase it with a cigarette!
- You can mix it with Yuppi, the blond guy said.

I took mental note of these recipes. Yuppi, by the way, was a popular powdered drink mix in the early 90s; you'd mix it with water to get lemonade. I added:

- Vodka's real great if you drink it through a straw. You put the bottle in your inner jacket pocket, a straw in your mouth and drink up. It's wild, the best way to get lit.

I was talking in an unnaturally natural voice and about things I had never done. At that time my only contact with vodka was on my dad's breath when he drank it. The trick with the straw was something I'd gotten from my sister, who'd told me stories about the boys in her classes. As I was talking I thought to myself – what kind of straw is long enough to reach from an inner pocket to your mouth? I was lying, and my new, unfamiliar friends, haters of lies and hypocrisy, would unmask me and ship me off to the teachers' pets, and punch me in the glasses as a farewell.

– What kind of jacket? DJ shouted in challenge, lifting his arms to demonstrate his own tattered jean jacket, which was graffitied in ballpoint pen with 'Hate', 'Incesticide' and 'Fuck'.

My mother and father would never let me wear something like that. Ghost chimed in:

– I still think beer tastes better. I drank it once – something made him glance over to the Gypsy House, and he continued on, louder – I drank a lot of it once . . .

There was a girl standing there, looking in our direction; long hair, short skirt, heavy boots. DJ jumped to his feet and ran over to her. She kissed him deeply, and then they both left, just like that, hand in hand. She had a tiny backpack on her back; those were in style back then.

Ugo broke the silence, announcing suddenly that wine was also good. I remembered the lunch the old Duke of Richelieu had, where he had secretly served the king of Sweden tokaji; the beverage had glistened in the glass like liquid ruby.

– Wine is super expensive!

I just blurted it out. Ugo smirked once, twice and then pulled a bottle out of his pocket. He blew off the dust and showed us the label which clearly read: 'Riddle' Wine. Everyone said:

– Mmm! Ooh! Well, c'mon.

Ugo offered to pass the bottle around. We agreed. But my heart started to pound. Class was about to start. Students have to go to their classes. I'm a rebel in my soul and in appearance, and I smoke, so do I honestly have to do anything more? Let me go to class, dress nicely and

listen to my parents, because I'm there with you in my heart of hearts, which at the moment is pounding anxiously.

But there was alcohol in the bottle, and I'd always been secretly intrigued by it, as I'd been with stories about maniacs, despots, catastrophes. A few years ago some girls in my grade had copied out descriptions of torture from the history book and had read them aloud to the rest of us. The interest in pain and heightened emotions made sense to me – somewhere out there was life, the life that just had to get started. Alcohol was the same way; it glistened in the bottle like liquid pain.

And girls like guys who drink (so writer Rūdolfs Blaumanis said). At least, for sure, those girls with heavy boots and slender legs. Girls from Kurt's world. I reached out my hand. Ugo asked:

– Anyone got a corkscrew?

I, along with everyone else, felt around my pockets as if a corkscrew could magically appear in one of them. No one had one – well, that's too bad, stupid even, but nothing to do about it, so we might as well go back to school. Then Nose spoke up, saying you could open a bottle of wine by forcing the cork down, in the opposite direction. You just needed a good enough tool, even a key would work, a strong twig, a pen. We all turned immediately to the bushes to look for a pen, but the unfamiliar greasy-haired guy spoke up:

– Eureka! I'll run to the cafeteria. There should be one in the kitchen!

And he ran off to the school. I watched him go and thought how there might not be a corkscrew in the school kitchen, and even if there was, what were the chances that they'd let a suspicious student have it; he was just running away, running away from sin, from degeneration, from the "riddle" left among us. I was a bit jealous of him, but also felt somewhat light-hearted – he had executed the standard fear and betrayal that had been meant for me. He had just opened the heavy door to the building, we could hear the bell ring, then the clipped sound of the door closing – and then nothing more.

Years later, a lifetime later, not long after this book was published in France, I received a letter:

'I read your book, yes, and I remember that day we were drinking wine in the bushes by the school, and I'd like to make a correction to what you wrote. It went like this. I was the one who ran to get the corkscrew that day, but I didn't run away. I had a lot of connections with the cafeteria and kitchen staff; I was sleeping with all the cooks and monitors, and we all drank together regularly. Not everyone at school knew that, just the in-crowd. I'm writing you from Nance, where I work in a company that makes hair products, and drink two bottles of Bordeaux Champagne a day, if you know what I mean.'

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At some point I did go back to school. It smelled like floor wax and chalk-covered rags. And they told us how to act and live. Sometimes you'd get whacked upside the head.

Everyone just ran around yelling.

I did well in school, except for physical education. In short, I was a nerd.

Those distinctions were made clear in school. Nerds had the good grades, but were afraid of everything; the thugs were strong and athletic, but stupid. Girls were either pretty, or just non-existent.

Jurgis and I were in the nerd crowd. We lived in the same building, went to kindergarten together, and had shared a desk since first grade. At home we hung out all the time, built ships out of dining room chairs, set up toy-soldier battles on the rug and later, in school, just tried to get by.

And then something changed.

One day Jurgis and I were sitting in the front hall behind a palm tree, scheming something. We had a piece of paper in front of us and we were drawing out some kind of plan. Then, per usual, one of the thugs came up and snatched the paper from us and crumpled it up to throw it away.

Today the thug was Ugo.

When he saw it was me, he put the crumpled piece of paper back down and said:

– Hey!

– Hey!

That's what I said back. Then Ugo gave a half-wave and left, without even calling us dumbasses.

I swelled with pride. See, the mold could be broken! The world was changing! Long live Kurt!

He had protected us. We were saved by a perfect chord and a gunshot.

I looked to Jurgis to share in the moment. But he goes:

- You hanging with them now? His expression hurt, betrayed. I go:
- What? Everything turned out good!
- So you're good with them? You smoking and sneaking wine in the bushes with them, too?

Would he rather Ugo gave us each a Charley horse in the shoulder? Is he jealous of my victory? But he keeps going:

- You're crazy.

Then what did that make him? I say, casually:

- Alright, enough planning. It's time to start taking over the world for real. He goes:
- It was just a game.

But no – it was never a game for me. I ask:

- Don't you listen to Nirvana? He goes:
- I don't like them. It's just screaming.

And there it was. Life had split in two. And somehow I'd ended up on the other side.

It didn't sound too bad, though – me, crazy. Isn't that what everyone wants? To break out of the everyday, out of normality and get confirmation of your existence.

Hadn't Kurt been crazy? And I was, too. I could be like Cobain.

That's how I lost a friend. And a teacher.

I wrote 'Kurt Cobain 1967–1994' on my desk. Ms Raudupīte saw it and said:

– Jānis, not you, too? But you're a good student.

She wanted to keep me on that side. Up until then I'd been somewhat of a teacher's pet. I helped the class place commas. Meaning – Raudupīte would dictate a text for us to transcribe; she'd read the sentence once, then twice, so everyone could get it down. During her second read-through I'd tap my pen on my desk to mark where the commas should go. A quick, precise tap, like Dave Grohl – who I didn't know existed at the time. And everyone else would write in a comma at each tap. Then Raudupīte would read the entire text through once more, and I'd again tap my desk at each comma. They had to figure out the semicolons and ellipses on their own. It was exciting to be kind of a secret Judas right under her nose.

Teachers don't really need to be that good. I remember our first-grade teacher, Ms Lielkalne. She was almost famous for how kind and mothering she was. My parents said:

– You're so lucky! Now, if you kids aren't good for a teacher like her...

Damn. Lielkalne was like out of a children's book. Whenever we acted up, she just sat with her face in her hands. We felt awful. And based on the stories she told us, we were the most awful bunch there ever was.

A person has the right to be bad. Transgressions and their respective punishments should be calculated like prices in a store – one murder costs a death sentence, and a graffitied bathroom stall costs a grade percentage. A clean transaction and zero tears.

This prohibition on being bad wouldn't have been allowed in Kurt's day. And then the fates delivered us Mrs Burkova. Her husband was a public prosecutor. She had a sharp voice and a boyish figure. Best of all, she was cranky, unfair, and ridiculously easy to offend. We had regained our right to be bad.

No, I was done being a good student. But I couldn't give it up completely, either – I'd catch hell at home if I did.

Enough of Burkova. Right now Raudupīte was the one yelling at me. But I didn't hear her because I was busy with the Walkman traveling from desk to desk, and which was now in my hands. The cassette in it wasn't mine, either. I'd never heard it before.

Pearl Jam's Ten.

I had made it to the main song. I listened to it, stopped the cassette, then took the cassette out and rewound it using a pen cap. To not waste the batteries. I listened to the song again. It was about me. I, too, am quiet and sullen, and spend time 'at home drawing pictures', everything fell into place, except that I wasn't 15 yet. I could wait. If no one could understand me by then, I'd blow my brains out in front of all of them, then they'd see. It would also be a nice tribute to the song itself. Then they'd all see how important it had been to me. The whole class. Jeremy spoke in class today.

And I'd want the song to be playing quietly in the background. It was so good.

Though, maybe it was too good?

Someone tapped my shoulder, and without looking I knew someone wanted the Walkman back. Get lost, go learn where to place commas. But the tapping didn't stop, and I started to mutter to myself using some choice language. But muttering can turn out to be rather loud, especially if you're listening to 'Jeremy' at full volume.

Raudupīte, our teacher, was standing right there, right in front of my desk. Her expression sorrowful. She had been lecturing me for minutes, but I'd heard none of it. I'd only been saying words. The entire class was thrilled. Everyone except Jurgis.

I was kicked out, and told to come back with my parents. For something so stupid! As if the rest of the class hadn't done worse shit. But this was my first time.

I stood alone in the hallway. Then a little kid came careening down the hall and slipped—they didn't wax the floors here just for the smell—then scrambled back to his feet, looked to see if I was laughing and then disappeared into the bathroom.

I'd lost a friend and a teacher. But I wasn't at all sorry. There was a whole new group of friends and teachers right on the horizon, all crazy loners. That's what I stood there thinking while some little kid was taking a dump.