

PART I. THE SHOT

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It is 1994. Men in checkered flannel shirts are coming. Jelgava is quietly abuzz. Still standing in the library door, I wait for the men to pass.

I was slightly afraid of them, just like I was afraid of everything else. Having waited long enough, I walked out and saw that the sky was aglow.

It was exactly April 5, 1994.

Having taken two determined steps, I saw them standing by the store; they had occupied the entire sidewalk. I was not a coward, no, I just did not want to insult them by demonstratively crossing the street. So I decided to turn left and walk home taking a shortcut through several inter-connected courtyards. Normally, I chose streets, leaving the concealed courtyards for football players and like *déclassé* dawdlers. But this time I boldly turned into a courtyard.

Right behind the back of the library, on the edge of the courtyard, there was a strange object – a small brick cube that served an unknown function – perhaps the ventilation shaft of a hell's dressing room or something. And right on top of this object, there sat another group of *them*. There was the school thug Ugo (not his real name, but a

bandit's nickname) who was a couple of years older than me and two others I did not recognize, but certainly of his ilk. All three were smoking.

I tried to think of something else and to pass unnoticed by them. Not a chance.

Ugo opened the conversation with:

- My, what glasses we have!

He was seconded by a gentle:

- Don't just run. Let's talk.

I stopped, turned to them, and the books in my hands felt pitiful and vulnerable, even provocative.

Ugo sensed that and asked:

- What do they write?

And the other one switched to a command:

- Tell us quick, what do they write?

Many witty replies ran through my mind, but I chose a quiet:

- All kinds of things.

Both interrogators turned to the third. He gave me the kind of look that probably only I perceived as strangely excited and said:

- Give us cigs.

At that very moment, far away, thousands of kilometers, on the other side of the ocean, in another continent, a hand ran over a Remington 20 gauge, pulled back the magazine, and someone looked inside: yes, it was loaded.

But here I just shook my head – and not out of stinginess or hatred – I simply did not have any cigarettes. The third one was unperturbed and urged me:

- Let's have a lat.

I replied:

- I don't have one.

In confirming my regret, I spread out my arms in dismay, thereby dropping my books. With a gesture, he stopped me from leaning down, leaving him who once believed that he will rule the world face down on the Jelgava soil, and continued:

- Let's have fifty santims.

I spread out my free arms. He became even more modest in his demands:

- Let's have twenty.

This time my regrets were a lie, and the third one said:

- Now you are asking for it.

He stood up.

Over there, far away, at that very moment, the Remington 20 gauge clicked like in the movies, ready for shooting. The barrel was turned toward a head.

Here the third one took that one and only step that separated us; his chin was very near, in my head, a siren turned on, and I really wished to be elsewhere.

There, elsewhere, the bullet found its mark precisely, breaking a skull, tearing tissue. The noise from the shot sent a gentle ripple over the nearby pool, yet it was not heard by neighbors or people in the streets.

But I did feel something. The siren stopped and something resembling music came on. It seemed that something had happened, it was just not clear what. And that something else will happen, but that too is unknown. I even wished they would beat me up, well, at least sock me one, for that may introduce an Event. I straightened myself somewhat askew, looking somewhere past them and started scratching my forehead as if trying to remember something.

Ugo jumped to his feet and called attention to himself with desperate gestures, as if wanting to say something. Later, he said that he had clearly heard a shot.

The second one who was sitting next to Ugo, claimed that he had heard a strange combination of three chords and felt so happy, so very happy that he'd almost started crying. He dropped his cigarette, burning his shirt, and he was grinning like an idiot.

The third one, who was standing in front of me, was the only one who avowed not having heard anything. At least that's what he later insisted. He was stupefied by my suddenly meditative expression, he turned to his gangster colleagues to point out my idiocy, but saw Ugo with his hands up in a Y and the Second One laughing, his shirt smoldering. The Third one became totally frustrated by the other two helping me pick up the books, whereas I picked up the burning half-cigarette and inhaled for the first time.

No one understood anything.

I went home in a daze, even the books had lost their appeal. I set them on the table, did not talk to my family, did not watch *Saved By the Bell* but looked through the window at Jelgava, knuckling out some rhythm against the windowsill. It was clear to me that I no longer wanted to do homework, and that there was no need for it, but what I wanted and what was needed was not yet clear. In the evening, I sat at the table for a long time, without turning on the light. I did not have my own room, so I could not turn on only the table lamp.

A couple of days later, Radio SWH announced that the body of the leader of the group Nirvana, Kurt somebody or other had been found. The first version was of course suicide. The radio DJ expressed his sympathy and respects as well as his hope that this sad occasion would not attract an unnaturally large flocking of fans as it had been the case when Freddy Mercury died.

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

Forget about Mercury, Mr DJ. Why don't you have yourself a "Merkurs".

DJ's hopes were not fulfilled. He could save them for November 1997 when, following the death of Michael Hutchence's charmingly scintillating death, the number of INXS fans really did not increase. But then, in April 1994, our destinies were decided.

*Jelgava 94* by Jānis Jonevs  
Translated by Ieva Lešinska - Geibere

Another few days had to pass for me to understand it – for the intuitively collected newspaper clippings about unknown unkempt musicians; the theoretical and self-condemned interest in inebriating substances; inklings of depressed aestheticism and planning of routes for wandering to find their justification. For now, I simply felt strange. Stranger.

But I used to be a good kid. I listened to my parents, and to my teachers to, I was a good student and thought about a good future as a lawyer or president, in which capacity I would put the world in order and defeat negative people. The thought of becoming wise, rich and famous appealed to me. It was one and the same: if someone is wise, everyone benefits from it and the world, naturally, rewards him with money, fame and happiness. Probably also with beautiful girls, with whom I was not having much luck so far. I did not believe in these wise and poor, good and unhappy, and lonely ones. The world had to be right, and I wanted to be right in the right world.

Suddenly, I found myself on the other side of the barricades. As if for all these long fourteen years I had accumulated the power to long for something incomprehensible and senseless instead of knowledge about life. Why, why would one ever want to be Kurt, be sad all of one's life, make others sad, marry an ugly broad and then shoot oneself? Isn't it better to be someone from Take That who smiles, is liked by beautiful girls and tops it all off with cash? But suddenly there was a whole bunch of us (no, not a bunch, we were the rare ones outside any bunch or crowd) who hated the successful and admired the bad.

I sat in the bushes facing the Gypsy House, a long wooden building with fake, painted-on windows (Gypsies did in fact live there, whole families of Gypsies; when I was little, other small fry told me that Gypsies should not see your teeth). There was also the Alunāns Park and another spectacular thicket of trees, in local geography

known as Shitket. I sat together with Ugo and other gangsters, smoking. There were some other truculent folk sitting with us, sad and notorious. There was Spooky, one of the three or five brothers living an alternative kind of life; there was Nose, his brother, who did not even attend our school but just came to the bushes to sit with us. There was also DJ, a fine and dangerous person. He used to get in my face. I was very much afraid of him, so I always treated him indifferent-snappish. And some other three whose names I did not know – all with shoulder-length hair (almost no one had it really long then), one stranger's hair was light, another's was lighter and the third one's was greasy.

Nose spoke. He was old, at least two years older than the rest of us, so experience spoke in his texts and his intonation was full of light melancholy.

-- Some kid in America took a shotgun, put the barrel in his mouth and said: I can do the same as Cobain! And the piece went off.

-- And the kid?

-- Cashed in.

-- Guns are goddamn sensitive.

Nose cast a sad look at the author of the redundant comment.

-- You of course are an expert in heaters.

The latter scratched his greasy head.

-- What heaters?!

Everyone grew pensive for a moment. I too had something to ask:

-- How could he speak with a barrel in his mouth?

And I immediately felt ashamed. I just could not get over the logic inside me. But I had to. DJ gave a bitter smile and announced:

-- All his life, Cobain sang with a gun barrel in his mouth. But you wouldn't understand that.

He pointed to the school.

-- Fuck you!

Everyone was silent for a while. I heard Eolus play "Something in the Way" in the Shitket.

The one with the light hair (I had seen him somewhere outside of school) lit his half-cigarette and said:

-- Cobain lived in a cardboard box. He had a stomachache all his life. That's why he used drugs.

DJ got all hot and bothered again. He threw his arms up in the air and announced angrily:

-- And right he was! We should all do them. For they over there, -- and he once again pointed his finger in the direction of the school, -- say that we shouldn't. But we are with Cobain. At least I am.

The one with the greasy hair thought about it:

-- But where can we get them?

DJ waved his arm dismissively and mysteriously and pointed toward the Gypsy House.

Nose consoled:

-- We can drink. Vodka.

DJ nodded in agreement, but Nose's brother objected naively:

-- It's goddamn hard to get that stuff down.

At this, everyone livened up and started giving advice:

-- One can chase the vodka with a cig!

-- Or mix it with “Yuppi”, -- noted the stranger with the light hair.

I recorded these recipes in my head. “Yuppi”, by the way, was a powder, popular in the first half of the 1990s, which was used to color water making it into a soft drink. I also recommended something:

-- Vodka is very good if you drink it with a straw. You keep it in the inside pocket of your coat, put the straw in your mouth and have at it. You can get a wicked, I mean, a great high that way.

I was speaking in an unnaturally natural voice about things I had not experienced. I knew the smell of vodka only from my dad's breath. The business with the straw came from my sister who told me about the guys in her class. As I spoke, it occurred to me – what kind of a straw would reach from the inside pocket to your mouth? I was lying and my new, unfamiliar friends, haters of lies and hypocrisy, will unmask me and dispatch me to the A-students after breaking my glasses against my nose as a good-bye gesture.

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-- What coat? – DJ yelled defiantly, raising his arms and demonstrating his torn jean jacket, which was covered with inscriptions in ballpoint pen -- “Hate”, “Incesticide” and “Fuck”.

My mom and dad would never allow me to do something like that.

Spooky spoke:

-- I still think beer is better. One time, I drank, -- something had caught his attention on the side of the Gypsy House and he continued in a louder voice. – One time, I really drank beer...

A girl was standing there and looking in our direction – long hair, a short skirt, heavy boots. DJ jumped to his feet and ran over to the girl; she kissed him for real and both walked away, phew, holding hands. On her back she had a strapped on wallet – that kind of backpacks were the fashion then.

The silence was interrupted by Ugo, who suddenly announced that wine was good, too. I remembered the dinner at old marshal Richelieu’s where the King of Sweden was served a Tokay incognito, the drink glowing in his glass like liquid ruby.

-- But wine is so expensive!

That's what I blurted out. Ugo smirked, then smirked again, pulling a bottle out of his pocket. He blew off the dust and showed us the label that unmistakably read: "Wine 'Puzzle'". Everyone said:

-- Mmm! Ooo! Let's go.

Ugo offered to share the bottle with us. We all agreed. But my heart started pounding. After all, a class was about to begin. Students must attend classes. I am a rebel in spirit and in my looks, I also smoke but must I really do something in addition? Let me go to my classes, dress decently, listen to my parents – in truth, I am of course with all of you in my heart, which is pounding nervously at the moment.

But the bottle contained alcohol, which had always intrigued me secretly – just like stories about maniacs, despots, catastrophes. Just a few years ago, some girls in my class copied descriptions of torture from our history book and read them out loud. I understood any interest in pain and intense feeling – somewhere there was the life that had to start one day. Alcohol was a part of it; it glowed in the bottle like a liquid disaster.

And girls were supposed to like drunks (at least that's what Blaumanis said). At least girls with heavy boots at the end of long legs for sure. Girls from Kurt's world. I stretched out my hand. Ugo asked:

-- Anyone have a corkscrew?

Just like everyone else, I felt around in my pockets as if a corkscrew might have settled in there by magic. Everyone made gestures of dismay – oh no, what can we do, stupid, isn't it? almost looks like we have to go back to school. Nose interfered, explaining that wine can be opened with a reverse motion – just need a good cork-pusher, which function could be served by keys, a good size stick, a pen. We immediately set about looking through the bushes for pens, whereas the stranger with the greasy hair announced:

-- Eureka! I'll run to the cafeteria. There must be one!

And he quickly ran off to school. I looked after him thinking that there might not be any corkscrews at the school cafeteria and even if there were, such a rare find would hardly be turned over to a slovenly student; he simply took off, he ran away from the crime, from degeneration, from the puzzle that remained amongst us. I was slightly envious of the escapee, but had also good feelings toward him: he had taken on the burden of fear and betrayal that should have been my lot. He was already opening the heavy school door, we heard the bell ringing, and then the door closed with a bang and we no longer heard it.

After a long time, a whole eternity really, not long after this book was published in France, I received a letter:

“I read your book. Yes, I remember that occasion when we were drinking wine in the bushes by the school, and I would like to correct a little of what you have written. This is what really happened. I was the one who ran to get a corkscrew and I was not running away. I had good friends in the cafeteria, I had slept with all the cooks and monitors, and we often drank together. Not everyone at school knew about it, just the coolest people. Presently, I am writing to you from Nancy where I am working for a hair cosmetics company and drinking two bottles of Bordeaux Champagne every day, if you know what I mean.”