

Synopsis: Worried about the increasingly tense relationship of their parents, little sister Krista calls her brother Ritvars in Birmingham, where he has been working for several years and asks him to come home. When Ritvars arrives to his native Riga, he finds out the painful truth: their father has been unable to cover their bank loan, and the Leidums family is on the brink of losing their mortgaged flat. Ritvars understands that he needs to do something to help ... This novel abounds in everything to capture readers' attention – an engaging plot, exciting chases, the criminal underworld, bankers and entrepreneurs, friendship and love, lies and betrayal, greed and honour. The action takes the reader to Spain, the UK and Latvia in a fast-paced thriller that is sure to keep up the suspense until the very end.

Excerpt

The bus drove into his childhood neighborhood. The grey multistory tower blocks hadn't changed. He managed to squeeze through the crowd and jump on the bus, an instant before its doors closed. This wasn't the right stop, but he didn't want to show up at home empty-handed. Right there not too far away, just past the parking lot, was the glowing reddish supermarket sign.

"Ritvars?!" someone exclaimed in surprise behind his back just at the moment when he had only a few steps left to the entrance. Ritvars jumped and turned around cautiously. Looking at him was a smiling face right around his same age. The face seemed familiar, but the name connected with it didn't come to him right away. He had a little girl clenching his hand and she couldn't have been older than about three years. The man noticed that Ritvars didn't remember his name and looked a bit surprised.

"Hey, Reinis!" Luckily, the discomfort didn't last long.

Reinis smiled really broadly, almost as if Ritvars had just saved his life.

They shook hands. Reinis had joined Ritvars' class from some little rural school in Aizkraukle District. They had even sat at the same desk for some classes. During the intervening years, his former classmate had become even rounder than he had already been in school, still you couldn't exactly call him fat.

"I haven't seen you in forever! How are you doing? Are you living in Latvia?" Reinis shot a glance at the backpack tossed over Ritvars' shoulder.

"No, no, in England. I came back for a few weeks of rest." Ritvars said with a reserved smile.

"How are things with you?"

"Well, you know, work, home, work, home, like in that Gustavo song, but all in all it would be a sin to complain. Hey, meet, Līze!" Reinis pointed at the little girl who was watching Ritvars with curiosity. Back in school, most of their classmates had thought Reinis was a loser, the sort of guy you make fun of. Ritvars didn't join them in making fun of Reinis, but he also didn't exactly become his friend. Deep down he too considered Reinis to be a dud and a momma's boy. And yet suddenly it turns out that this nobody had managed to start a family before him. In all honesty, Ritvars hadn't really thought about it seriously until then; only twenty-five years old, but it still felt a bit uncomfortable even so.

"And what are you doing?"

"Well, uh... I'm working at a bank." Reinis looked down. These days no one bragged too much about a job at a bank.

"Uh huh. At which one?"

"At the Rīga Central. But why don't you tell me all about how you're doing! I haven't seen you around in years. I thought you had to be in the army. Which one are you in – the Latvian or the UK army?" He giggled at his own joke.

"I'm not in any one of them. I left," Ritvars snapped back. Why did every conversation have to end up at his military service!?

"Ah..."

"And where do you live now? In Pļavnieki?" Knowing that Reinis still lived in his mother's apartment not far from Ritvars' parents would help him feel a little better.

"No, no, we just came here to visit mom. Earlier we were at Ziepniekkalns, but we just moved. It took too long to drive to the center of town. You know how it goes with all the traffic jams on the bridges. Not as bad as a few years ago, but still almost an hour in the car. We bought an apartment on Artilērija Street. Not too far from the former Sports Palace. Ritvars felt uncomfortable. He wasn't given to envy, but still sometimes a pained sorrow managed to break through.

"Yes..." he continued slowly, "and how are things with our other classmates? Have you met up with anybody? Do you go out much?"

"Well, I rarely get to meet up with them...you know, there's no time and some of them have disappeared." Going out and friends were painful topics for Reinis. Already during school, he had problems with these and it looked like not much had changed during the years. It was just surprising that he had had a child at all. It didn't take long to get an answer. A woman came up holding an infant in her arms. It would have been hard to call her a beauty. A careful look showed that what she lacked in looks, she made up for in stubbornness and a domineering manner.

"Well?" she addressed Reinis, simultaneously giving Ritvars a piercing glance. The kind that drills down to even the most out of the way corner of your soul. He wasn't used to that. Usually, women looked at him with interest or even desire. Just not this one.

"Ah, yes, here's my wife Sabīne. And that little one is Kate."

Responding to Ritvars greeting, Sabīne squeezed out something resembling a smile and once again turned to Reinis. "Go to the store, the little one is starting to fuss."

"OK," he nodded in agreement and turned to Ritvars. "Are you also going into the store?"

"No, no," Ritvars shook his head.

"OK, well, I guess..." It wasn't possible to tell whether Reinis was saying goodbye or still wanted to talk a bit. "Maybe some day we could go and sit somewhere for a bit..."

"Yeah, well...I'll have to take a look. If there's time, then we could..."

"Listen, maybe give me your phone number, after all we are classmates..." Reinis said

hesitatingly. It was impossible not to feel that Reinis knew more than he let on. Ritvars had had these types of feelings quite a bit in the last years.

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Just a week ago, he had hoped to spend the money he had paid for the ticket in a different way. Also for a ticket, but to the other end of Europe instead. Sanita had invited him for a visit to Barcelona. To the question of what her boyfriend would say about it, she had just laughed that Harijs didn't need to know about it. That wasn't especially honest, maybe that's why he hadn't bought the tickets yet. Maybe that was also for the best. Being part of this kind of cheating, even if he wasn't the one who was cheating on anybody and wasn't being cheated on, didn't seem tempting.

He had wanted to fly out to Rīga already for a long time. A couple of months ago, he had even scheduled vacation time and bought his ticket. Thank God for low-fare airlines.

Celebrating the holidays back then ended with a brawl at the closest English pub in Birmingham. It just happened to be that his black eye didn't go away for a whole week and a half.

The next morning, looking at himself in the mirror, he had decided that there was no reason to upset his mother and so ended up not flying to Rīga after all.

Ritvars counted his remaining money in his head. The tickets to Rīga he had bought in such a rush had emptied out his already thin wallet even further.

He got on the bus again. It didn't seem like any of the passengers were crying bitter tears about the ever-present crisis, unemployment, debts, or any of the other equally awful things the news sites would write about online. It wasn't even all that easy to tell apart the residents of Rīga and Birmingham. Of course, the bouquet of face colors was more diverse in Birmingham – there were more, a hundred times more, niqabs and burqas, more pitch black faces. But everyone's state of mind? It wasn't even all that sad here, but, possibly, that was the case only today. The spring weather had made people more hopeful. Even though it was the end of March and outside, here and there, larger or smaller piles of snow still glistened, it was impossible not to notice the approach of spring.

It looked like there were fewer cars in the courtyard outside of his childhood home. Only two years ago, on weekday nights you could find an open space here only with difficulty. Tonight there was no need to even spend time looking for one. His parents hadn't been warned about his unannounced visit. Only his sister knew. A surprise. Yes, that's exactly how he would explain it – a nice surprise. Hanging around for a moment by the iron door, he pressed the doorbell. He could hear the light approach of footsteps. Krista, certain that it was her big brother, hurried to open the door. She didn't even look through the peephole!

The door swung open widely and behind it appeared his little sister. Though not so little! In

the space of a year she'd stretched out quite a lot. Now twelve-year old Krista looked more like a teenager instead of the child he had said goodbye to when he left.

His parents' surprise was completely authentic. For a brief moment, his mother was at a loss for words. At last she tightly hugged her son whom she hadn't seen in so long. An outpouring of emotion not characteristic of the Leidums family, but his homecoming was exactly as he had dreamed it would be. That's exactly how it should have been almost three years ago, on November 12, 2007. But it was his own fault that things had turned out differently back then.

"But why so suddenly? Without any warning? Has something bad happened to you?"

"No, no. Everything's fine. I took a vacation. I wanted to give you all a surprise." It would be silly to already start with questions and explanations. Nothing suggested that there was any sense of gloom hanging over the house or any need to act quickly.

His father didn't offer up any question that would have been difficult to answer. Especially about how during this entire time, Ritvars had sent his family, or more specifically his mother, only a few hundred British pounds. No one had even asked for it, but the fact that he had acted selfishly couldn't be avoided. He didn't have any arguments for defending himself. It was just that there was never anything left over. That wasn't especially upsetting in England, because it seemed like a short-term lack of money was an integral part of life for people his age. It only made him feel uncomfortable at moments like these.

He returned to his childhood bedroom after about an hour. Kitchen chit-chat and questions

about life in England had dried up. In his room, not taking into account a couple of new pop music posters on the walls, nothing had changed. His bed stood where it always had, just like his sister's desk. Ritvars opened the door to the balcony, which had become a storage space for unneeded items during the last years.

All sorts of boxes and bric-a-brac took up at least half the space.

As he expected, his sister was hot on his heels. Hesitating for a moment, with a loud pop Ritvars opened up a beer bottle that he happened to have brought along from England. Krista stopped next to him and pressed her elbows against the balcony handrail. Her chestnut brown hair tied into a ponytail shone in the last rays of the setting sun.

"Thanks for coming."

Ritvars glanced at his sister again. She smiled shyly.

"Sure," Ritvars paused. It seemed strange that a sister was thanking her brother for coming to visit. "I should have come long ago already... But it doesn't look like they're having as hard of a time as you told me over the phone. In the past they used to argue sometimes too."

"Yes, but recently something has changed."

"What is it?"

"I don't know, they won't tell me," Krista's voice cracked. "Maybe one of them is sick...you know, with something serious." She said the last words sounding like she was scared of just the thought alone. However, this explanation didn't seem believable to Ritvars. "But something has happened. Often they won't talk with each other for days. In the past, when they'd argue, then soon after that they'd be chatting away again, just like nothing had happened, but now..." tears welled up in Krista's eyes. "Now they weren't even arguing, at least not loudly, only sort of quietly. Mom sometimes cries and doesn't tell me why, but more and more often, dad just sits at home drinking or comes home already drunk."

"Where's he coming from?" Ritvars thought of another reason for their disagreements. The thought, which suddenly shot into his head – that his dad had found a girlfriend – seemed unspeakably disgusting.

"From friends or from the garage, that's what he says."

"He's not looking for a job anymore?"

"I don't know. I guess he's looking. Mom often asks him about how it had gone today, but he just mutters something about how he doesn't have a job. Nobody wants to remodel their apartment or build a house right now. There's no money."

It was hard to accept the idea of cheating, but, knowing what his mother had said, it couldn't be that the reason for the arguments was a lack of work. Maybe his salary. Dad distinguished himself with his obstinacy. It was probably hard for him to accept that things weren't going as well as they had been in the past.

"Maybe they miss you and that's why they're arguing?" Krista interrupted Ritvars' thoughts.

"Dad still can't get over you not being in the army." She said this last sentence cautiously looking in the direction of the door to the room. It was closed.

Ritvars sipped his beer. He really wanted to smoke, but didn't let himself do it while he was standing next to his sister. Still not over it. What's there to not get over?! What happened to him in Afghanistan would sound absurd if it hadn't actually happened to him.

"I don't know. He just has to accept it. I'm not there anymore," he said sternly. "And it's good for me in England." Actually, he often thought about his return from service. He'd only been thrown out of his mission, not from the army itself. Ritvars had chosen to leave the armed forces himself. It's possible that they might even take him back. If only he would want that. During the last year in England, ever since he had gotten a job at a warehouse, he had been doing well. There was no shame here about mistakes he had made, no self-rebuke about missed goals. He could just make money and enjoy.

"I'll figure it out. I'll talk to them tomorrow." He motioned in the direction of the room.

"OK," his sister smiled. "Will you let me have a taste of the beer?"

Ritvars, hesitating for a moment, passed her the bottle. His sister carefully took a swallow and shyly gave it back to him.

"And what exactly do you like about England so much?"

"It's not that I like it. I work there." Right now he couldn't name a halfway decent reason.

The only things that came to mind were parties, girls, and knowing that you're living in one of the world's megalopolises. Well, OK, very close to the megalopolis. A blue-collar worker near the megalopolis. "On Friday I won the forklift race."

"Where?"

"Well, I already told you about how in the warehouse we work with these small trucks with a lifting mechanism on the front. Those are called forklifts." Ritvars started to tell the story about how he had bested his co-workers in an improvised race. Very early in the morning when there was less work at the warehouse, the forklift operators had organized something like a car race. Three loops along the inside of the warehouse, snaking between what resembled different-sized mountains and mountain ranges all made up of boxes. Five whole drivers and several dozen fans – Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish, Pakistani, Romanian, Moldovan, and Indian guest workers. Ritvars had always enjoyed driving. He even thought he had the abilities of a race car driver. And on Friday he proved it. Andžs claimed that some fans had lost impressive sums at the improvised tote board. A silly thing to do and even sillier to brag about it, but that's exactly what he liked about England.