

Biography: Alberts Bels (born Jānis Cīrulis, 1938) is a Latvian author, writer of psychological novels and stories, prominent intellectual figure, honorary member of the Academy of Sciences. Bels has studied electrical engineering in Riga, from 1955 until 1956 he attended the Moscow Circus Art School, and after serving in military, graduated from high school in Riga and attended the High Courses of Scriptwriters and Film Directors in Moscow. Many of Bels' novels have been adapted for cinema. He has been awarded many important honours and prizes.

Synopsis: The novel *Insomnia* takes place in a block of flats in 1960s Soviet Latvia, revolving around the main character Eduards Dārziņš and a woman named Dina whom he spots running outside his building one night. She is visibly shaken so he invites her into his flat, where she promptly falls asleep and remains as such for some time. When she wakes up, they begin to talk and he finds out more about her, leading him on a journey through her often difficult life, which only raises more questions for Dārziņš. The story then switches to the 13th century, at a time when the Teutonic Knights were vying for control of the Baltic. Soldiers and ordinary people who can be understood to be the beginnings of the Latvian nation are forced to decide on their fate: whether to fight for their freedom against the knights, or to assimilate with their aggressors. The novel continues to oscillate between these two parallel plots, weaving a tale of humanity in the face of almost impossible odds, about the desire to control one's destiny amidst the most oppressive of regimes.

Excerpt

Sitting in a deep, worn-out lounge chair, in which Mr. Darzins had so gladly sprawled out back in the old days, I was reading a book and smoking a pipe with pleasant-smelling tobacco. Although a low temperature had persisted for a few nights, the window facing the street was open, and my legs were pleasantly warmed by my soft camel-hair blanket. The

hands of the enormous clock, the first a short, fat man just like Sancho Panza, the second a tall, slender, man exactly the same as Don Quixote, were approaching midnight.

Having put down the book on my lap and suddenly having forgotten the sentence I had just read, I listened to the sharp, nervous steps on the street. The pointy clapping heels clicking closer and closer, the knocking on the asphalt reminding one of the rhythm of telegraph keys, I clearly heard fear and bewilderment. The clock rang out slowly and spookily.

Having gone to the window, I saw a woman running from the direction of the lake. After a few steps she looked back. Turning her head and shoulders, the slender figure in a grey, nylon raincoat froze for a moment, then ran on ahead once again. It looked like she wanted to hide herself in a building or courtyard. It wasn't hard to understand that, as her entire behavior bore witness to this, besides insomnia had sharpened my senses.

She pulled on the gates. They were closed. She ran further on again and then was next to Jauniks's building. It was there that she also stopped for a moment.

She couldn't hide in Jauniks's courtyard. First and foremost because the courtyard was surrounded by a fence made of high boards, with two lines of barbed wire two and a half meters off the ground surrounding it like a defense battalion of prickly hedgehogs. The gates were closed shut, and a terrifying dog called Koba lay in the yard. An angry and uncontrollable beast. People would witness as Jauniks walked around, hit his dog with a six-tailed whip, and only then did Koba give in, yelping and howling pitifully, and two or three beads of sweat would drip from his master's brow onto the dog's shiny combed back, you could then understand, that hitting his own dog after it ran after a bitch passing by, was a difficult job, an unpleasant job.

Jauniks was a strange and secretive man. I didn't know where he had come from, where he

had arrived from, what he occupied himself with. He was retired, and, upon seeing him the first time, an inexplicable disquiet inhabited my soul, as if I had met a person, who possessed a great secret inside himself. Jauniks was a handsome, stocky sixty-five year-old or so gentleman of average height, yes, really, a true gentleman (the only thing that didn't fit with his appearance was perhaps the dog whip), impeccably dressed, with perfect manners, a smooth gait, this quiet and taciturn man disappeared behind the high fence of his private home. The cultivated garden, apple trees, plum trees, gooseberry bushes, and lilacs were very much visible from my window. No one knew anything at all about Jauniks. Even Mrs. Grīzkalniete would throw up her hands if asked, saying she didn't want to talk about it, and that meant something. They said that he had a bad liver, a dismal past, a hopeless future; to tell the truth it didn't interest me much at all, what interest are all these rumors, gossip, and tittle-tattle of women?

The woman stood near to Jauniks' house for a moment. One could understand she was thinking of whether to run on further or try to pull the gates open. Having looked over the fence with barbed wire, she ran further, and I was very surprised as to why I didn't hear the barking and growling of the dog. This time the dog was nowhere to be seen. I quickly looked to the far end of the street, however I didn't see her pursuers. When the woman was more or less opposite my window, I yelled:

"Hello!"

She jumped, rushed to the side of the street, stopped and looked up.

"What happened?" I asked. "Was there an accident?"

"Yes," she replied.

"Can I help you?"

She didn't reply, but opened the gate, went through the small garden and stopped at the front door. It was locked. I threw the key down, clinking a few times as it skipped to a halt on the footpath. A minute later the woman entered the house. I stepped out into the corridor, I opened the door to the stairwell. She was standing right in front of me.

She was approximately twenty-five years old, the corners of her mouth had settled into a characteristic expression of pessimism, and had dark bags under her eyes, most likely smeared eyeliner. Her clothes were wrinkled.

It was dark in the corridor, which is why I couldn't see anything more. From the opened door of my room, a little path of light stretched over the carpet. Without saying a word, the woman went along this path into the room and at once went over to the window. Leaning a little over the windowsill, she looked towards the lake, then turned around and leaned with her back against the windowsill as if waiting for me to say something. The glass of the open window threw a reflection from the lamp on her cheek, a sliver of light fell on her temples, and at that first moment I thought that the lamp had moved, but then I understood that the woman was clinging to her last ounce of strength so she wouldn't collapse on the floor. Her eyes closed, but I was already there, and caught her in my arms, and took her to the couch.

Though my knowledge of medical matters is rather weak, I could say with certainty that she had not fainted, the deep, regular breathing, the expression of extreme peace on her face, and the strong, normal pulse bore witness to the fact that the woman was in a deep sleep. I found a pillow for her, put it under her head and puffed it up, and after thinking about it for a moment, removed the woman's coat. She didn't wake up. She didn't wake up as well a moment later when the entire building was jarred by a chilling scream.

Midnight

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The more I looked at the unknown sleeper, the clearer it was to me that she hadn't seen warm water for at least a week. Her neck and forehead were grey, a rather dirty layer of powder covered her cheeks, and her dark hair hung in greasy tufts. I bent down and took her shoes off, and I saw that the shoes were black from sweat and that her pantyhose was torn in numerous places. Her facial features were symmetrical and even beautiful, however they didn't make up for the overall impression, and I understood how poor my judgment had been about this woman.

I decided to heat up the metal stove in the bath with some wood, warm up the water and tell her she should take a bath. Who cares if she is easy, why should she be dirty on top of all of it? I put on my leather jacket, took the keys and also my slippers without putting on my shoes and went downstairs to the cellar. The firewood had been chopped long ago. I collected a good armful, and returned to the apartment. Ten minutes later the fire was going at full blast, the crackling flames raced in the air vent, with a yellow flame that could be seen blowing about in a crack in the stove. The water heated up in the basin, I turned off the tap, mixed twenty or so grams of bath liquid in the water, and hung up my robe on the hook next to the bathtub. Since the time I had bought a new one, this one had been kept in the wardrobe unused. Afterwards, I went to wake the unknown woman. I thought that it would take at least an hour before she would come around from her deep sleep, however it was enough to grip her firmly by the shoulder, say "get up" in a stern voice, and she opened her eyes right away.

"Go to the bathroom," I said, "wash up well, I will just make the bed, and you can go back to

sleep."

She didn't ask anything, didn't protest one bit, but obediently got up and followed me. Like some sort of sleepwalker! At one moment I became uneasy, I began to have doubts, whether I'd be able to figure out this woman correctly, but it was already too late to go back.

"You can lock the door with the hook," I said, "it's a communal apartment, someone could walk in on you. Look, here's the soap, there's a towel there. When you're done, put on that robe."

She quickly began to undress. I closed the door, she put the hook in place, and I listened for a moment. Water splashed in the tub and then the woman made a sound like a big cat purring.

She was in the bath for a long time, but I didn't dare to return to the room. I was afraid that she might fall asleep in the tub and drown. I paced in my soft slippers from one end of the corridor to the other. Finally the water stopped splashing, the shower was turned on, and then I was certain that she would not fall asleep. I returned to my room, and put sheets and blankets on the couch.

When I went to the corridor, Asters, my neighbor, damn him, was trying to get the bathroom door open.

"Oh!" he said surprised, "I thought that it was you taking a bath there."

The unfortunate thing was, was that one could only get to the toilet room through the bathroom, and Aster suddenly had the need to sit there quickly and immediately after the horrible screaming.

The little hook clicked in the bathroom, the door popped open, and as I took a few steps

back I was breathless. Asters in turn gaped, and a broad smile slid across his face. The unknown woman stood totally naked in front of us, her clothes swung above my striped robe on the hook. With the expression of a sleepwalker on her face, she went past us, and went into my room so surely like it was her own, and I heard the creaky springs of the couch and rustling of the blanket. I would have never believed that a woman could walk so shamelessly naked through a stranger's apartment, but I had to experience that with my own eyes.

"And I thought it was Ulrika in there! But you already got another beauty!" said Asters. He burst out laughing so hard, that his eyes narrowed in their narrow holes and his mouth stretched almost up to his ears. There was no doubt as to what he was thinking upon seeing this woman in her suit from the Garden of Eden coming out of the bath. It must be said from what I managed to see in that short moment while she stood on the threshold, she had totally transformed after taking a bath. I have to admit, I had been mistaken in determining her age, this unknown girl could not have been more than nineteen or twenty years old. In turn, Asters had not been mistaken in calling her a beauty, as her body truly was worthy of admiration.

I didn't even think to explain anything to Asters, let the man fantasize what he wants to fantasize. I returned to the room. The unknown girl was laying down, fast asleep. She could get up and fall asleep quickly, like an animal. Or do a marvelous acting job of looking like it. A person knows very well what he needs most at the present moment, which is why I decided not to disturb her sleep, or ask her anything until she had slept. You shouldn't ever force events, I kept this fact in mind. All I could help her with was to let her sleep, even a child would have understood that. But then I had to think about her, about her nakedness

under the blanket, she was so beautiful and so well-shaped, and so young, and blindly obedient, and all kinds of thoughts thrust themselves upon me, that I could take her without any effort, in her half-sleep state she would give herself up to me anyway, I already wanted to undress and lie down beside her, however I didn't do that, but instead looked out the window.

An unknown girl was sleeping on my couch, I didn't know who she was, why she had entered my room, how long she was going to sleep, why she ran from the direction of the lake at night, who she was running from, why she so obediently fulfilled my orders, and another thousand and one whys. Why? In the end, why did I care? Perhaps she wasn't running? Perhaps she was walking in the late evening, struggling with herself, with her illusions? So why was I imagining all this, I know very well why I called to her, why I invited her up, why I told her to bathe, made the bed with clean sheets, what all of those unnecessary ponderings were for, some sort of phlegm of the conscience. Screw all of that!

Midnight

4

The time comes and a person finds out everything. I also found out.

She had spent several nights in a row at the station, in the waiting area for the shuttle buses, where a crosswind blew, where people walked non-stop, where the militia would check documents every hour, asking the traditional question "Where are you travelling?" the slow-witted officers not understanding that she wasn't travelling anywhere, that she didn't have anywhere to travel to, where was she going to go, it didn't matter where, but she said a station, named some place in the province very far from Riga, where the train left

for only in the morning, and she was allowed to stay on a bench in the crosswind and hubbub, but under a roof and in some sort of warmth. She dozed off and her head jerked back up periodically, as if she was praying to God, but her god was sleep, she dozed off and dreamed of sleep, she didn't dream anything big, no, only little things, she wanted little things, sleep at night in a waiting area meant for passengers travelling long distances, where it was warm, instead of more or less warm, and the benches were soft, upholstered with fake leather, and each evening she tried to sneak into this area and stay the night, she almost managed to sneak in, however the railway gods and militia gods came at midnight, checking the documents of each that found themselves in this paradise, where it reeked of sausages, rye bread and foreign people, checking documents, found that she shouldn't be there and chased her downstairs to a cold bench in an unheated area in a crosswind (it was also more or less warm), where the militia let her sleep, just she could only doze off sitting up. If she risked lying down on the bench, then the blue uniform would pull her on her feet during his next round because she was weak, but the militia was as vain as a peacock in his sense of power, in his sense of stupidity. There were also good militia, civilized blue uniformed officers, a large majority of them world-wise men, who allowed her to sleep in the crosswind on the cold (more or less warm) bench the whole night, the whole night right until morning, right until morning.

In the spring she found a building in Riga's Old Town and snuck into it with a trembling heart in the middle of the night. There was a bench in the stairwell on the second floor, but the first night she didn't dare lay down there. She listened half-sitting, half-worried that someone might open the door downstairs, that someone might come to strangle her, to rape her, to ravage her, however nothing of the sort happened, just some tenant that was

coming back late went past her in a rush and intoxicated daze without even noticing the lonely creature on the bench. That was even scarier. He didn't even see her. No one, no one, one, one, but that entire big city was snoring away on their couches, in their beds, on their seaweed and spring beds, but she, Dina, had gotten very cold early in the morning, her clothes frozen through and through climbed up the stairs, and the gust of warm air coming from one of the apartments through a crack in the door, reminded her like a painful lash of the people sleeping in warmth, comfort, and slumber at night.

In the morning she went to the station, washed up in the bathroom, did her hair, had breakfast in the buffet of the station and went to work. She worked in a printing house as an assistant. Now and then in the evenings after work she would visit friends, and tried to stay long enough that they would offer her to stay the night, so then for one night she would feel happy. But it always happened that around three nights a week she didn't have a place to sleep. However she was proud, didn't ask for help, thought it over, would hold it out another month or so while she looked for a house for herself. She had been living like that for a couple months already since two overweight, good-hearted Latvians, a husband and wife, had kicked her out.

Late one night she was walking past the restaurant Rīga and to a building in the old town, and a woman stopped her.

"Help me, help me get that animal home," she asked.

The animal was standing on the sidewalk, slightly swaying, his legs spread out wide, stocky, content with himself and the whole world. The animal had the face of an honest and happy Average Joe. The animal appeared to be benevolently satisfied like a well-fed pig and didn't move from his spot.

"I am a robot," he said, "Tick, tock, tick, tock"

The woman prodded him, pushed him, swore at him, pulled him along, almost spit on him, but the animal just carried on with his new role

"I am a robot," he said, "Tick, tock, tick, tock!"

He appeared to be so immovable, that Dina understood that strength would not be of any use in this case. To be honest, she didn't want to interfere in the least, she wanted to go past them, also like the many that had gone past her, but curiosity took the upper hand. What would happen if she tried to turn the robot on, tick, tock, tick, tock, you Latvian, overweight guy, you slave to your stomach, move, you dear man, tick, tock, tick, tock, you Latvian, maybe it will work, let's see what he does.

"Click!" Dina touched the man's shoulder, a shoulder dressed in a good coat. Under that good coat was, tick, tock, a jacket that was just as good, tick, tock, and a button-down shirt that was just as good.

"What?"

"Click! I turned you on. You are a robot, aren't you?"

"I'm a robot! Tick, tock, tick, tock!"

"Then you have to go! You're turned on."

The humane, endlessly good-natured, honest, happy Joe, that overweight animal, swung around and unexpectedly came flying with a right hook, trying to hit the woman that had asked Dina for help.

"Go away," the man said to the woman, "go away!"

The woman shrieked and jumped to the side a step.

"You can't do that," Dina said.

"Pardon me! You probably pressed the wrong button. But I like you. You're not afraid of me?"

"No."

"Well, then you are an honest person. I need an honest friend, I don't have one honest friend. Come with me, I will show you my boy, you see, I have a little tick, tock, robot!"

And it was there Dina realized what she had only felt when she stopped, she was infinitely exhausted, endlessly tired, she had had enough, her pride powerless against the iron shaft of life, she'll go with this stocky, good-natured, honest Joe, she had had men thrust themselves on her with such offers both at the station and on the street, but they were just men, their appearance alone raised suspicion but this man was an honest, good-natured tick-tock little robot, she'll go with him, she'll go just so she won't have to go back and spend the night on a bench in a building in the old town, she'll go along, she had already felt that when she stopped, this woman, this nightwalker from the restaurant, she wasn't Dina's competition, and Dina saw that the fat, good-natured Joe understood that. One fat Latvian, two fat Latvians, three fat Latvians, long live the good-natured Latvians, long live those good-natured Latvians, long live the good-natured Latvians of all sorts, the short Latvians, the tall Latvians, the tick-tock little robots, the Latvians, and Dina sat in the taxi together with that good-natured Joe, but the unhappy nightwalker, that stupid fool, who called her misfortune to the rescue, remained on the street, clenching her fists and elegantly expressing her opinion about dishonest competition.

At home he had a lovely, small, sleepy little tick-tock robot, a little boy, a velvety nose, he was all alone, their villainous mother had left them both.

For you, pretty girl, you shouldn't have to waste away in some shitty printing house. Or do

you think that sixty rubles that enough? You have a cute butt, and tits, and a small waist and a pretty face, and I, the little tick-tock robot, like you! What more do you want, stay here with me, live here as long as you want. Look, I'll kiss your little legs!

Dina stayed. Within a few months her character softened, relaxed, became so lazy that she didn't even protest when the fat, good-natured Joe said, blinking his eyes guiltily: - you understand, you can't live at my place anymore, just some things have come up, don't get angry, but I got you a place at one person's place. So goodbye I guess!

And he gave her fifty rubles. He was a good man. Dina went to live at the place of that "one person," she already knew him a bit. While visiting the tick-tock little robot, that "one person" had often thrown eager glances at Dina. She lived there about a month, then she took her rubles, this time just thirty, and moved to the next "one person." Then she slid ever lower, she changed hands more and more often, and finally she happened upon a good girlfriend, who taught her the tricks of the trade, who took care of the clients, also this evening she happened upon a perfectly acceptable client, she went with him, however the client turned out to be a sadist, a monster, a scumbag, and Dina was barely able to escape, the client had taken her to a small shed on a pier near the shore of the lake. Dina had ditched her bag and went into shock. "Some would crap their pants at times like that," she told me, "but I fall dead asleep. I can sleep anywhere, even on the street, if I am frightened." "It was so crazy" she added.

I found all of this out in the morning, when Revolver Mike came and as I was leaving to accompany her downstairs to the front door, and Mike said that Dina changed men like hats, and then Dina also told me everything in a vindictive frankness, but for the time being I stood at the window, and an unknown girl slept on my couch, and all I knew was that I had

let her in because my Ulrika could right now be far away in a foreign city somewhere at night on the street looking for help, it could happen to all kinds, fate is not blind then, fate sees, and that is why I needed to call out to that woman, warm up water in the bathtub, put on clean sheets, let her sleep, let her sleep, let her sleep, and not give a damn as to what my neighbors thought, what that unhappy nightmare-ridden Asters thought.

Midnight

5

To live means to enjoy. After all, why not? Even in such small matters as walking across the street, I enjoy the roundness of the cobblestones under my feet, the earth's cheek, though masked, nestled up to my soles.

I believe that a person should take everything from life that comes to them, and even more, you need to rob life like a rich miser on a highway. A person comes into the world naked, but life dresses itself up in expensive furs, which is why rich misers need to rob and plunder as much as possible and the most beautiful things possible, in the end everything will be taken away anyway. Robbing will turn out to be either a hilarious vaudeville act, or a bloody drama, and, as the curtain falls, the bills will have to be paid and you will have to return to ashes and dust, not as naked as you arrived in this world (some sort of decent rags to be buried in were ensured after so many years of looting and plunder), though in reality you return in nothing more than a narrow and uncomfortable mode of transport.

I succeeded in happily combining the perception of a material life with successful studies, a happy marriage, a fulfilling daily life, and, almost naturally, I began to wonder whether fate

was preparing a trap for me, as had already happened seven hundred years ago or seven hundred and fifty years ago, indeed, I can't remember exactly, although my memory, as I have mentioned before, is otherwise faultless and to my knowledge even phenomenal.

Upon waking, I rejoiced in the day, I did the same about the night while falling asleep, going to work, I rejoiced in my work, and going home I did the same about my leisure time, and it was in that encompassing joy my life passed until the age of thirty. When I was young, everyone expected great things from me, they expected that when I was older I would become a part of their faction, camp, or what you could call a current, which formed in the community of every city, which is why it's no surprise that in this incubation period of one's personality, I didn't have enemies. I have to confess, I began to worry about it and, upon acquiring my first enemies, I was no less happy as one's first ice cream in the sweltering heat of summer, as one's first swim in the sea, one's first slalom skis, one's first flight in a metal whale – an airplane. Like one's first long separation.

"I will write you a letter every day," Ulrika said.

"Ulrika, dear, you won't have time."

"At least a postcard. Two lovely words."

"I don't expect you to write. You won't have time. During the day there will be rehearsals, meetings, guided tours, foreign cities. Shops as well. In the evening you'll have to perform, dance, you know yourself there won't be time."

"I will write as much as I possibly can."

"Alright."

"Oh. We'll be going soon."

I kissed Ulrika four times, five times, six times and then a seventh time, because it's said in

that one song "you kiss seven times," seven in general is a magical number, I am not really superstitious, which is why I kissed her for the eighth time, and then the group leader couldn't stand it anymore, and literally pulled Ulrika from my embrace and pushed her into the wagon. The train wheels clanged, the tracks groaned, the train shook and went forward.

Where else if not forward?

Love is a complicated primer, we turn page after page, learning to recognize new letter upon new letter. It may happen that as you are turning a new page, the brilliance of your impressions will smother all those that came before. I turn to the page about distances. The packing of your luggage, the ache of departure on the platform, of course, carefully concealed, the varnished sides of the wagon, the red cap and disdainful face of the station master, because he can't go anywhere.