

**Biography:** Inga Gaile (1976) is a Latvian poet, prose writer, playwright, performance artist, and theater director. With her unique brand of humor, she explores inner states of being, her own experiences, the everyday lives of women and stigmatized groups of society, while promoting equal rights. Gaile uses the genre of the confessional poem as a means of self-identification, looking retrospectively at her own life and the trauma of repeated sexual violence, thus facing and coming to terms with this experience so that she could re-imagine herself as a person. She has won several awards, including the Annual Latvian Literature Award 2015 and 2020 for *Can the Back Row Hear Me* and *The Beautiful Ones*. Inga Gaile is an active participant in the feminist movement in Latvia and is a founder of stand-up comedy group Women's Stand-up.

**Synopsis:** In this novel, events evolve during the late 1930s at the time of president Kārlis Ulmanis' authoritarian regime. This period in Latvia is often associated with images of a burgeoning economy, social stability, and the swelling of national pride; at the same time, these are the years when concepts such as "reduced value individuals" – individuals who are perceived to be a threat to the future happiness of the nation – were also disseminated. Popular in Europe, the concept of eugenics has also infiltrated Latvia, creating negative attitudes toward mental health patients. Magdalēna, the novel's protagonist, has been raped and is subsequently diagnosed as mentally ill in a psychiatric clinic. There, she meets Kārlis, a young, progressive psychiatrist whose views on the treatment of mental illness have been influenced by Freud's psychoanalytical teachings.

### Excerpt

Well, and? Well? Is this what you wanted, hmm? Where are you rushing off to? Stay calm!  
Put one foot in front of the other, one, two, one, two. You want to run back? You can't.  
Keep going. Sun. Hot. Want to take you coat off? You can't. Find your island and keep going.  
Find that island, your escape, your salvation. You're my only salvation, Father says. I'm

you're only salvation. Speak Latvian, Mother shouts. I am, Mom. If only one of you were here to talk to. Don't think about that now, Magdalēna, Kārlis says. You can handle it on your own, Kārlis says. If things get really crazy, I've put a list of mantras in your coat pocket, Kārlis says. A wrinkled note, a rose petal, wrinkled. You can handle it, Kārlis says.

And how are you handling it, hmm? How are you handling it? You're not; everyone, everyone can see that, every blade of grass, every street sweeper along the way to the station can see that you're not handling it, and any second they'll come and arrest you, hit you in the stomach and put you in your place.

No. Quiet. Quiet, you. Quiet me? Well, it is you who's talking to herself. You're not normal. Kārlis said I was. There aren't any street sweepers in Strenči, but there are in Riga and in Rēzekne. There aren't any sweepers here at all. But you don't know that—and why, hmm? Why is that? Because they kept you locked in a cage, like they're supposed to do with crazy women like you. Stop. Quiet. Have to get to the station. Have to find salvation.

The station is up ahead. Ahead and behind. Magda, for shame. For shame, Magda. Why are you laughing like a lunatic?

The station building is made of wood, it's pretty, and in that building I'm the mistress. Beautiful and fat. Not fat like I am right now fat, but fat like the sun: breasts like two loaves of bread and a pretty dress, and I'm sitting on the balcony copying receipts under a white canopy.

There isn't a balcony though, see?

I'm sitting behind the station building in a garden, copying receipts. My husband is a doctor in Valmiera and he has side-whiskers. He loves me very much and takes care of me.

But I have my own money, too, because I own the shop at the station. But I don't run it. Osips does. We sell all kinds of delicious things: lollipops, sweet buns with raisins, flaky elephant ears with a sugar glaze, smoked fish, ice cream. We don't have any children. But then one day Osips comes and asks me:

"Miss, are you going to buy a ticket or not?"

Where's the money? That's the note with the mantras. In the other pocket. This is a problem, Magda. A real problem. Here, it's here. The money's in the pocket, bills folded. Magda, don't you have a wallet? I should've bought you a wallet. Yes—Magda doesn't have a wallet. Magda's lived for six years without a wallet, without money, without a friend. Well, no, Magda's had a friend for the last year. Or two. I don't know, I don't know, I don't understand anything about that time. It was March, he shook your hand. It was May, he spoke to you. It was July, he caressed your cheek. It was October, November, December, January, February, March again, April, May again, July again. How long has it been since your last period, Magda? How long?

"Do you have anything smaller?"

"No, sir."

It's a ma'am, Magda, it's a ma'am. And you don't need to shout like that, the woman with the basket of flowers is already looking at you suspiciously.

I'm the green leaf of a daisy, ridged, juices flow through me.

Hah, and how. Your juices really are flowing. You've bought a ticket, but will you be able to get on the right train? You can always ask. You, ask? You can't ask anyone anything.

You left the note with the mantras at the ticket counter. You have to go back. Look, there it is. No one took it. What if someone thinks I'm stealing it?

It's a piece of paper with mantras on it, I left it here. Magda, Kārlis told you not to talk to anyone, just buy your ticket and get on the train. You're not crazy.

Yes, I'm not crazy, I'm anxious, I'm flustered, I'm safe. So if you're safe, why can't you take off that men's autumn coat on this hot July day?

I'm safe, but I'll be even safer there, in Smilškalni. Well, Magda, in *smilšu kalni*, in the sand dunes, we'll all be safe.

Dear, dear Magdalēna. Dear times two. You're a good person, count to ten and find your island of salvation. Remember to breathe. Even if it hurts, breathe. You have nothing to be embarrassed about. Kārlis loves you. Dear times three. Two times dear, one times loved, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten.

I've been sick with tuberculosis for a long time; I was in a sanatorium for a while and am now on my way home to my dear relative's house, where I'll be tucked in at night and fed fresh milk. Once I'm a bit better, I'll want to help her around the farm; she won't let me, but I'll insist that I can, see how strong I am. And then I'll help her, and go from being a pale waif into a tan, healthy maiden. A farmhand will fall in love with me.

Is that it? Is that the one? Is it that the one to Rūjiena? Yes. Yes. Well done, Magdalēna. You did well. And how. If only you could take off this coat, you're drenched in sweat, and you don't even look like you had tuberculosis, whatever that's supposed to look like. Kārlis said I could take the coat off in the sun. The trip will be short. Let's do it again. Now? We can't now. You have to go. It's not safe for you here otherwise. What's going to

happen to me? Nothing. Then I won't go. Magda, we've been through this twice already. It'll be better for you this way. What's going to happen? There's a man coming, he . . . I like people. You know I like people! Want me to show you just how much I like certain people? Stop joking around, this is serious, Magda, stop, we can't make love here, we don't have time, Magda, let go of my shirt. No, I'm not angry. I want to take care of you. Then let's do it one more time. Come here, kiss me. No, not now.

You have to leave, Magdalēna. You have to leave, Magdalēna Cīrule. You have to save yourself. From what? What? From you? Why are you saying such stupid things? Because, I'm a crazy little stupid thing, sweet Kārlis. You're not. I'm not? Then what do I have to save myself from? See, there are all kinds of ideas in the world about how to improve on what nature has created, that we need to fix nature's mistakes. And I'm one of those mistakes? No, I don't think so at all, but there are people who do, and they—they think that people like you shouldn't have children. People like me? Don't start, Magda. You know that I don't think that, that I know you're completely normal, just a little jumpy, but the man who's coming here . . . Please, Magda, put your clothes back on. You don't like it? You know I do, but right now I need to concentrate. Look, this man. He may have objections to your being pregnant. You'll be safe in Smilskalni. What about you? Me? When will you come get me? Why aren't you answering? I'll come for you as soon as I can. Hold on, I get it—could you get in trouble for all this? Why won't you answer me? . . . You know that I love you and, if I could . . . Are you going to get in trouble because of me? What did I do wrong? Wait, Magda, get up, I'm going to be fine, nothing's going to happen to me. What's important now is to take care of you and the baby.

He's so good. My husband before God. He loves me and wants to take care of me and the baby.

Where's the note? The note with the mantras? Dig through the pocket with trembling fingers, among dust from foreign cigarettes, from your husband's normal life, where's my note of mantras, he's no husband of yours, what kind of nonsense are you thinking up about before God, better that it stay in your thoughts. Can you do before God what you did with him? There . . . the note . . . and a shadow falls over my heart . . . there's nothing in the note about him coming to get you. Nothing. But he'll probably come. Or not, Magda. Or not. Mother shakes her head, standing at the stove, her blouse crisply starched, she's hiding the vodka bottle from Father behind the stove. He'll find it anyway.

"Ma'am, come sit down and take off that coat, so the little one can breathe. Are you cold? The mornings have been cool, but it'll be quite hot soon. A blessing from God, this weather. Are you travelling far? Where's your husband? Why are you by yourself? It's not safe."

Kārlis said I can't take the coat off. The talkative woman looks at me like a crow eyeing a shiny bauble. Any second she'll get up, come over and grab me, put me in a black room. Move, run, Magda, go to a different car. Iron clanks and groans. I'll fall. It's been so long since I've been on a train. You'll fall into that opening, that rattling abyss. But the crowds of women behind you, they're suspiciously eyeing your right hand, where there's no ring. You don't have any rings on either hand, idiot.

My husband died in the war, he was called up right after our wedding.

What war, Magda? The war ended when you were five. A terrible war. Now things are great, the country is blossoming and flourishing, the women like ears of wheat, the men like steer.

Went to war and left me alone with you in my stomach. If it weren't for you, if it weren't for this awful war, then I . . . But the war is over, there is no war, why is Father crying? Why is he crying? Why is he crying? Think about it, you pitier. Who will pity me, who will save me from the horrors he doesn't want to hear about, but that I had to live through with a small child on my hip, at my breast? At the breast? Really, the breast? But I was big then. Aren't you ashamed to talk to your mother like that? You weren't big at all. You were two. And I still sucked on your nipple? How are you talking to your mother! Kārlis, what should I tell them, why don't I have a husband, why don't I have a ring? What should I tell them, these giant eyes watching me from everywhere.

Say it again, I'm going to be all right.

Say it again, I'm going to be all right.

Stop joking, Magda. I want to help you, but you're just playing around.

I'm sorry, forgive me. Help me, please.

You're going to be all right, my mother will meet you at the station. Martins will probably be with her. He's strange. Now, you have to get where you're safe. Odd how? Strange like me? No. Strange like Jurčiks? No, he . . . well, I don't know, maybe he's not that strange after all. He reads a lot and has lived with my mother for years as if they were brother and sister. Maybe he loves your mother? Maybe, but then he'd be able to talk to her and . . . well, my mother doesn't have anyone . . . at least not as far as I know. It's not

easy to talk about. Anyway, maybe you're right. Maybe he's not strange at all. But she doesn't pay him, either. Far as I know. But he's polite and quiet. And my mother—you'll be safe with her. You'll both be safe with her.

Am I not safe here, with you? You're the one who says I'm getting better, not by the day, but by the hour.

Yes, but that's all changed now that you're going to have a child.

You're going to have a child, too. Is it bad that I'm going to have a baby?

Please, don't start again. Of course it's a good thing.

So who thinks it's not? Nurse Karmēna?

No, what does she have to do with this?

She likes you, Kārlis. Maybe she's sad that we're having a baby together.

No, silly, that's different. Karmēna likes me in a totally different way. She thinks like I do. About what? We don't have time, sweetheart. But, well, about how to treat the ill. So then I'm ill? You're just a little bit ill, barely ill, you're just confused, but Magda, we don't have time—you have to catch the train, Alberts Krīvmanis will be here tomorrow, and I need you to be somewhere safe. It'll be good for you there, you won't have all these people, these wild and screaming people, you'll have a lot of room. There won't be any orderlies chasing after you with injections. But you said that I was better. Well, exactly. Then why did you say injections? You'll have plenty of food there.

Do you still love me? Do you still love me, fat like this? You're not fat, my dove. You have to go now, otherwise you'll miss the train.

"Next station—Rūjiena."

She stands there, thoughtfully chewing on a blade of grass. She quiet today. The talkative and quiet days differ by a sentence. The quiet days it's: good morning, pass the bridle, need a horse, have to feed the bees, plums, Zidala and Gaisma are calving, eat. On talkative days it's: come eat, help me feed the bees, see you tomorrow, did you get enough money.

Today is a quiet day. I haven't heard more than a "good morning," and that changed after she was on the phone during dinner. She answered the phone, said "yes," then "fine, put him through," then, with a smile, "hello." Then she asked: "Is she insane? What's wrong with her?" Then she became serious and listened. Then she asked "what time," then "I see," then "all right." Then she hung up and sat for a moment staring at her hands, which were resting on her knees, which were clad in blue pants. Then she sighed, looked at me to see if I was listening; I turned away and started to eat my vegetable soup. Then she said: the station tomorrow at five. The phone rang again; she picked up the receiver and just listened. Then said "all right," and hung up. And from that moment she's been quiet.

She steps forward and lifts her hand to say, stay by the cart. I stay. She didn't put a skirt on, she's come to the station dressed in her blue work pants, a checkered shirt, her gray hair in a braid down her back, like a child's. I open my book and read. *Hereditary Sin*.

She comes back with a young woman with short hair, wearing a man's coat.

"Mārtiņš."

"Magdalēna," she says. She always does the introductions. Whether it's a child or a drunk, always. But this isn't a child, or a drunk, although she's acting strange. Not even strange, but as if she herself feels like she's acting strange and should be embarrassed by it.

She's staring at the ground, hands jammed in the pockets of the oversized coat. She doesn't have a bag. I'm worried I'd scare her if I went to shake her hand. But I do, and she takes it, but doesn't look at me. Her palm is sweaty. She stands like that for a moment, staring at the ground, and says nothing.

"Get in the cart," Ilze says.

I help Magdalēna into the cart. Why is she wearing a coat in this July swelter?  
"Would you like to take your coat off?" I whisper, not wanting to upset her any more.

"The coat stays on." It's the first time in a very, very long time that I hear anger in Ilze's voice. I recognize it, that intonation. Behind these words, that rain down like hail, is a fire. Ilze is angry. But about what? I sit up on the box, nudge Izida, and we're off. Behind me I hear Ilze saying "medicine." Then the girl: "I'm not crazy, Kārlis's mom." "Medicine," Ilze repeats, and her voice breaks, maybe from the words "Kārlis's mom."

A moment later, during which Magdalēna apparently finds the medicine, the pills rattle against glass; she whispers "thank you," and we drive on.

The girl is nice. She's always staring at the ground; she never looks you in the eye and doesn't talk much. But sometimes the words will suddenly come pouring out. None of it makes sense, she just talks, talks, talks. Then a thought shines through, as if from a book. She's going to have a baby. I don't ask her about it yet. She doesn't know how to do any of the work around the farm, but she wants to help.

Now there are three of us eating. Magda stays in Kārlis's room and wears Ilze's old clothes. You can tell her stomach is bigger, but the rest of her is thin, and the clothes still fit her.

I ask if she cut her hair herself. She doesn't say anything, but then briskly nods her head. I ask where she lived before now. She says nothing and walks away. That night, when we're sitting at the table and Ilze goes back to the kitchen for some butter, she quickly whispers: Strenči. And I don't understand why someone would be embarrassed to live in Strenči.

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See, Magda, Kārlis took care of you. It's wonderful here. Everything's so green, and there are bees and cows. And Ilze. And Mārtiņš. And everyone is so nice to you. To you. They feed you. They don't lock the door to your room, don't give you injections, injections that make you convulse and cramp up or faint. Even though Kārlis said Mārtiņš was strange, he isn't strange at all. I don't know what Kārlis meant. After all, he would know what strange is. Kārlis, who sees hallucination, confusion, paralysis, schizophrenia, insanity every day in his patients, patients who touch each other and fight like animals, shrieking and wailing, who cry—not like how Magda cries, no—long and loud, sobbing, who tear at their own skin, scarring themselves, who eat bandages, feces, who think they're pregnant, who think they're cars, dogs, leaders, who want to have sex all the time—not like Magda and Kārlis, no—who always want to rub up against her and, their eyes gleaming, try to lift her dress or

grab her breasts, and those who, once calmed down, are freed from their straight-jackets and, because they haven't taken their downers yet, try to kill themselves by any means possible, even if they have to gnaw through their own veins.

Kārlis sees that every day, and then says that Mārtiņš is strange. Kārlis is strange. Magda knows that. She's known that since the beginning. But if he weren't strange, would any of this have even happened? If the hospital director had not arrived to examine her on March 15<sup>th</sup>, Nurse Karmena in tow, whom Magda can't stand at all, and with them a dark-haired man, his hands jammed into his coat pockets, if not for that, if not for that, would Magda have even gotten out of there? You didn't even want to get out anymore. At least, not since that day. Neither Mārtiņš nor Kārlis are the ones who are strange—life is.

"Magdalēna is one of our very special patients," the director laughs. He sits down breezily on the edge of Magda's bed and looks at what she's reading.

"She's not really a patient," Karmena grumbles. Karmena stands at the window, the light coming in through the intersecting panes creating the shadow of a cross around her own on the floor. Karmena, crucified. That's how she probably sees herself. The kind of work she has to do, while Magdalēna, who isn't sick, lives alone in this room paid for by her parents, and eats and reads, reads and eats. Meanwhile Karmena has to clean up people's shit and piss, has to tie on their straight-jackets, administer Cardiazol injections, has to strap the crazies into long hydrotherapy baths, which is maybe one of the few jobs she actually enjoys.

"Of course she is, Karmena, of course she is. She's just our favorite patient, aren't you, Magdalēna?"

Magdalēna doesn't like it when the director puts his hand on her shoulder. No one has touched her in two months and five days, since her last exam, which they did after the last time she fainted.

"And I think, doctor, that Magdalēna is your chance to prove that your fantastical German ideas actually work," the doctor laughs again.

"They're not German ideas. Freud isn't German. And neither am I," Kārlis says angrily, because Kārlis is the doctor.

"Don't be angry, I'm completely on your side. Why else do you think I showed up at your lovely mother's house to invite you to come work with us. Hmm?"

"Because you needed an amateur player."

"But that's not what you are, my friend, and do you think I actually had any hope you would agree? I'm a neurologist with years of experience, after all, so it's not as if I can't see the value beneath someone's skin, my dear man."

As they speak, they examine her. Magda can't stand it.

"You said I was fine. Why do you have to do another exam?" she blurts out.

"Yes, my dove, you're almost better. If you were completely healthy, we'd discharge you and move twenty other patients into your wonderful room," the director laughs.

"No, I don't know if I could go outside."

"There you have it," he says. "And now let me introduce you to our newest physician, Dr. Kārlis Vilks. He studied in Berline, and I think he'll be able to help you. And us," he then murmurs to himself. Then Kārlis shook her hand. His hand was warm; the back of his strong hand was covered with dark hairs. Maybe she's just imagining it, but Magda

thinks that even then she didn't mind him shaking her hand. Even though she couldn't stand being touched by anyone.

She fainted again that night. When she came to, Kārlis was shouting at one of the nurses to tell the director that, if they wanted him to be able to work here, for even a minute, they were not to come anywhere near his patients with their insulin injections. The nurse answered that that wouldn't happen, even if he begged them, because the hospital was full of people who actually needed help.

"And what's that?" Kārlis kept shouting.

"Opium," the nurse answered.

"Not even opium. Nothing. Not even water without my permission."

The nurse threw her arms up in frustration, shaking the prepared injection in his face, and left Magda's room.

Kārlis sat down next to her and asked: "How are you feeling?"

"I'm sad," Magda said.

"Over the next few days you're going to have a bit of a headache, but that's because I want to take you off the sedatives," he said and took her hand in his.

That's how it had happened, right Magda? But early this morning he came back with Veronal, which usually made Magda tired and lethargic.

"Where am I supposed to put that?" she asked. "I don't have a bag. And why do I even need it? I'm better now."

"You are better, but you'll be in a new environment there. There won't be anyone there to help you if you get depressed again, do you understand?"

"But you'll come soon."

He didn't answer, Magda, because it hadn't even been a question. Of course. Of course that's why. It's completely normal for someone not to answer a question that isn't asked. If only you'd finally learned to express yourself clearly, and say what you needed.

"I need a bag."

"Didn't you have one when you came here?"

"No, just this dress."

The dress is too small now. They told you to stop eating so much. Magda is going to have a baby; that's why she's fatter. Who knows, there are women who always look nice. The front of the dress has shrunk upward, the sleeves cut into her armpits, the bodice is stretched tight.

"You need a different dress, but I don't know where to get one right now. You just have to make it to Rūjiena. Ilze will take care of you."

"I don't feel well. Can I wear your coat?"

"No, that would look too strange. I know—I'll give you my jacket. It's a good jacket."

"But it's summer."

"Magdalēna, I know it's summer. I know. But what am I supposed to do? I don't have anything else. Put it on, let's see."

Magda put on the jacket. It smelled like Kārlis. That was nice. Now Magda never wanted to take off the jacket, it even had pockets for the Veronal, the note Kārlis had written for her, and a pair of scissors that Magda decided to steal from Nurse Karmena at the last minute. And then Kārlis walked her to the Strenči House door, turned to face her,

and shook her hand. Like the first time, when Director Gudsbergs had brought him to her room. To the ward, Magda. Stop, Magda wants to call it a room, so let her. Kārlis shakes her hand, his hand is warm, with dark hairs, she can see the muscles. A beautiful hand.

That's how it went. That's the best thing that ever happened to you, right Magda? Well, no, the best thing happened after that. Kārlis would come talk to her. They talked a lot, she had stopped taking medications, he'd take notes, she'd watch him; in the summer he took vacation, and when he came back Magdalēne didn't want him to take vacation ever again. She told him as much, and he caressed her cheek. They were always quiet, so no one would find out. But now Magda feels like the best parts stayed there, in Strenči—in that building where everything reeked and teemed with patients like so many insects, and which Magda had so badly wanted to get away from back then. Back then.

He'll definitely come for her. How do you figure. You think he doesn't have enough to do? He has patients. Other patients. He'll come visit on the weekends. He'll definitely come. You're not sick anymore. No fainting spells since February. Then I'd rather be sick. No, Magda, you're not sick anymore. You're better now, you're having a baby, and you both need to be somewhere where you'll be safe. With my mother, in Smilškalni. I'll give you some Veronal to take with you.

Ilze said not to take the medicine anymore. She just took the vial and said: no more. I didn't understand why, but later Mārtiņš told me it was because it might hurt the baby. Ilze doesn't talk much. But she understands everything. She must be a good person. She takes care of me. Just like Kārlis who, when he first arrived, understood that you, Magda, are not

crazy and that you don't need to take all those pills. There's only one medication left. And now Ilze says to not even take that one.

So see, he took care of you. You can't even appreciate what you have. Greenery all around and milk, butter, bread, honey. Ilze doesn't talk to me.

Maybe Ilze thinks I'm crazy.

You are crazy, Magda. So try to behave, so that no one here figures it out.