

Zara Forever

My name is Anda. If you spit it out carelessly, with slight contempt, it sounds a bit like “undo” – *annda*. To erase the last operation, take a step back, pretend that there has been no mistake at all. It would be super cool if I were able to live up to my name like that as I have an awful habit of doing first and only reflecting afterwards. It is the reason why I always end up in trouble and then wish I hadn't gone over the top. Although usually it is too late, and there is nothing left to do but bite my tongue firmly so as not to choke or spray snot on the shoulder of whoever I'm at the table with.

Every second day I go to the supermarket with a canvas bag over my shoulder. That shitty bag is way too small for my and my daughter's needs, so I end up stuffing cartons of cream and cheese in my pockets, but canvas is ecological and, God knows why, I am of the deepest conviction that doing my bit will save the world. Which is why I am rambling on now. Having the idea that my chattering will change something. Even though...nothing particular has happened. If the world didn't come to an end back then, it never will.

I've always wanted to go to Paris, ever since I was small. As a child, I read somewhere that there were girls who, without ever having been to Paris, knew all about it – every curve of a street, every cafe, every bench along the river banks. It was Sagan, wasn't it? Fantastic. Those girls. High class. I wanted to be like that as well. A refined Parisian chick! I still don't know what a “chick” means, but it sounds rather glamorous and condescending enough to make me feel more upbeat.

When I was still in high school we went on an excursion to Tallinn, where, in the shop window of a dressmaker's atelier, I saw a red dress and black hat. It was at that point that I went completely nuts. I simply had to get to Paris in a red dress and black hat. What I would then do there I would have to decide later. After all, it was too early to think of anything along those lines –

back then no-one had so much as a pair of jeans, never mind the chance of going anywhere. For several years after my trip to Tallinn I regularly visited all the fabrics shops, searching for that “red in my mind’s eye”. It was nowhere to be found. The best on offer was pale pink flannel with yellow moons and stars. I bought it anyhow and stored it in the wardrobe – what if I had a daughter at some point and there was nothing but brown furniture fabric in the shops?

But the university trip did reap its rewards – in one of the shops in Vilnius I spotted a red dress with white polka dots. Almost like the one in Tallinn. It turned out to be at least two sizes too big, my chest fell out of it not only at the neckline but through the armholes too, but I hoped to alter it or at least knit a cardigan to hide the flaws of the dress and my own bosom. Besides, one might take a different perspective of it –sexy, maybe?

So, I had a dress. I just needed a hat and Paris. I decided to give up on the hat because it was impossible to find anything other than something in shapeless brown felt. My parents used to say that you have to give up one thing to gain something else. Sacrificing a hat had a certain style. And Paris in its turn had decided to give up on me. The instant the borders were opened and we suddenly had a chance to go wherever we wanted, round the world if you chose, my family ran out of money. No money for the supermarket, or freedom, or opportunities. In unison, they simply raised their paws and announced they could no longer help me financially and sank into a mire of utter hopelessness. I was left having to both survive on my own and prevent them from fading away. Working at night and continuing my studies during the day, I somehow managed not to turn to skin and bone, but I had to forget about Paris. At least for the foreseeable future.

If I was to say now how exactly it was that I got to know him, I would have to tell a lie. I simply don’t remember. Just as I often forget what I erase when performing the “undo” function. Maybe he was the guy who spilled mashed potato and gravy over me in the canteen in the old town? Or maybe the one that slipped on the fruit jelly that I had spilled in the eatery across from the

hospital Number 1 . It was certainly something to do with food and a mess. And the fact that I was able to apologize or be furious in decent English. Good English was such a rare thing in our country back then.

He was Swedish and his name was Jurgen, if I'm not mistaken. He offered me a job. A well-paid job. At first I translated his letters, then wrote them myself. I went with him to meetings with local entrepreneurs unable to speak anything other than Latvian and Russian. Jurgen was one of the foreign *businessman vulgaris* of which there were many at that time. Of the very common sort. He kept himself busy with investments, small shops, dreaming of the moment when foreigners would be allowed to buy real estate and dealing rather arrogantly with his local employees. We were good for nothing, he was king - *Roi!* To me he seemed a boring, obnoxious type but, for all their arrogance, foreign fortune hunters actually paid a bit more.

One day, he came up with an “exceptional” idea. Jurgen decided to open a fashion shop. Not just any ordinary sales point, but a serious store selling whatever was in at the time. To keep costs down, it was decided that the clothes would be sewn by local lasses , but the cuts and fabrics would be provided by Jurgen. Jurgen himself had no understanding whatsoever of fashion, but the impresario found a solution – apparently he greatly admired my polka dot dress, so he declared that from that moment on I would be his consultant and was to accompany him to Paris to choose what the Riga chicks were to wear the following year.

At first, this plump, bald guy's announcement seemed terribly funny – I didn't see myself as a connoisseur of style and clothing in general. But something stopped me from shouting too loud about it. The word Paris and the fact that I would get there without spending a penny of my salary literally froze me to the spot. I honestly did try mentioning something of my incompetence to Jurgen, but he just took it for polite shyness, coquetry. Or, maybe he didn't care at all. Yes, that's more likely.

Afterwards, I sometimes asked myself if I'd had an inkling of what might follow. Perhaps I was haunted by some kind of uneasiness or premonition? No, not in the least. Besides, I wouldn't want to write it off as the mistaken belief of a dumb ingénue that everyone out there is nice. I simply wanted to go to Paris. And Jurgen, even if he didn't look or talk like Prince Charming, turned out to be a boss all right, whose hints on something more I either didn't notice or pretended not to. Actually, it's far easier not to delve too deeply into such matters and, rather than admitting I had cried into my pillow, tell myself that "yesterday I munched the corner off my pillow, swallowed duck feathers and now swim well and lay eggs". It's highly likely that the fans of "undo" lost their sense of guilt and morals as some kind of throwback during childhood, just like the foetus loses its tail in the mother's womb. But what am I gabbling on about here – guilt, not guilt...I wanted to go to Paris and I wasn't prepared to give up an opportunity like that even if I had to give up myself. At least for a while. Afterwards you can always get yourself back, can't you?

We were to spend two days in Paris– the first was to be spent scouring shops for a style, the second – for walks. Jurgen promised to pay my wages at the end of the working day. At the airport, at passport control, he whipped my passport from my hands, pushed it under the nose of the customs official and equally swiftly slipped it into his jacket pocket. "So many pickpockets in Paris, it will be safer this way," he gave me an encouraging smile. I smiled. It was so nice to have someone take care of me, really....

How did I get on with the job? Haha! ...it makes me roar with laughter now, but back then it seemed – oh, oh, oh! Well, we didn't go to *haute couture* fashion shows, nor to Boss, Armani or Carmani stores and I didn't get so much as a whiff of private saloons. But I did get to touch, smell and try on everything, until I couldn't take any more, in this incredibly huge store, stuffed floor to ceiling with fabulous clothing and amazing footwear the likes of which I'd never seen before. We spent the better part of the day in the store, the name of which sounded quite exotic to me back then.

ZARA. Jurgen assured me that all the latest fashion trends combined were there, the top avant-garde and prêt-a-porter styles, and it was to be the source of our ideas. My jaw dropped, so anything could be poured straight down my throat – no need for sugar-coating. My task was to say what I liked, what I hated, my opinion on the quality of the seams and choice of fabrics. Needless to say, I adored everything about everything. Absolutely everything. Even the strange cotton panties. Absolutely everything there was a hundred times better than my polka dot dress, every single fabric superseded the starred flannel I had at home. Not to mention the seamwork - oh, those heavenly, industrially executed seams! Something else entirely! A zillion times better than the ones I did, all curvy, with my own hands, pricking my fingers with needles until they bled. A hundred times better than the loose overlock stitching on marketplace jeans. And what a noble name – ZARA!

It's curious really, is naiveté a genetic defect or an opportunity to learn? To go out naked into a snow-covered field and then realize it's freezing instead of listening to your mum telling you "it's cold outside". Or is it more stylish to plunge face first into the mud, your gullible eyes wide open, rather than spend your life in front of the TV, mulling over the theories of Stephen Hawking?

Jurgen told me that I could choose one pair of shoes. My jaw dropped for the second time. Shoes? For me? From Zara??? I was so nervous I picked out the first pair I saw. What if Jurgen changed his mind? It was only when we got back to Riga that I realised they were two sizes too small. But I didn't sell them. They had to carry their name alongside the other pairs lined up in the hall. The name that was engraved on the leather of the inner soles, fragrant, colourless and still very visible. The pride of my wardrobe. ZARA.

All very swish. After dinner, I tumbled into my hotel room almost unconscious. Despite being tired, my plan was to get my wages from Jurgen for all that excitement and go for a wander around Paris by night. Cafes, taverns, red lights, the Seine in the morning mist... I forgot all about my blistered feet, flew into the shower, got all dressed up and then waited. There was a knock on

the door. Having thrown my coat over my shoulders, I raced to open the door and, as soon as Jurgen stepped over the threshold, I stretched out my hand. But he was in no hurry. He clicked the lock on the door and invited me to sit on the bed. We should talk.

We sit down. The conversation is short, to the point, no words wasted. I have no money, no passport. Not to mention the airplane ticket (At least... I had had a hunch about that). If I wanted to get home, we had to be off to beddy-byes, quickly quickly, all warm and cosy, under the covers. Afterwards I would get everything. That bit, not all that I desired, but the same that I was owed. Owed in theory, of course. In actual fact we are owed nothing, apart from our bare lives - everything else has to be earned. I was able to detect a certain logic in all of it. There was no way for me to oppose such ironclad logic with my empty pockets and surprised, wide-open eyes.

Most likely it was one of those rare times in my life when I reflected before doing. I loathed Jurgen as a man. To tell the truth – until then, my attitude towards him had been complete indifference, but now I loathed him. Nevertheless...the panic that overwhelmed me, imagining him without his clothes, was less terrifying than being left all alone in a city with an address “four metro stations from ZARA”. That was all I knew about Paris. Probably reading Sagan I had got too carried away with the distress of the main characters to dedicate too much attention to the geography. Today? Well, today ... I would have kicked that son of a bitch in the mouth and found a way out. In Paris. But in Timbuktu, that I know nothing about, maybe I would have acted the same way as before. Even though I don't believe that lightning strikes twice in the same spot. If anyone ever tried to rape me again, there would be some smarter or more brutal plan of action. Fate doesn't like to repeat itself. Especially when the exam has already been passed.

Now I could burst into tears and tell stories about the trauma I'd been through for life. About my immense suffering, damaged self respect as a woman, broken pride and inability to reach orgasm for the rest of my life. I could describe, in elaborate detail, his saliva and sweat, bulging

eyes and squeaking. And how, afterwards, he snored and scratched himself. This way, by all means, I would earn the sympathy and tenderness of people around me. I would gain pity and a pat on the head. Embarrassed, they would avoid looking at me directly and laughter would die out in my presence. The ones I trusted with it wouldn't be able to look me in the eye for long and would start conversations with a silly joke or "isn't it nice weather today". And not forgetting the uneasy laughter – hee, hee, hee ... Like when I was a child and my best friend ended up under a car, but I, having run to my parents, could only giggle awkwardly: "Hee hee – Mara got run over ...". I would be like a leper who hit you and yet was dear to you at the same time – you want to hug me, but you know it's dangerous. The victim of a car crash that can't be moved before the ambulance arrives – so as not to break their backbone. But there again, I would get a discount at the shrink's, or better still, be put on some state-funded group therapy chat session. And I would easily gain the compassion of those men who see their mission in life as saving women. Zillions of raped women do exactly that and I don't judge them for it. I really sympathize with them. And cry when I hear their stories. Only thing is – I look them straight in the eye.

I need forgiveness, but I'm sorry to say I didn't actually experience it as a trauma. Yes, it was absolutely foul. But it happened more on a theoretical level. I wasn't there. Every time I have a difficult choice to make, I remember tales of war and exile. About how mothers were forced to choose between two of their own children – which one to keep with them, which one to be given up and shot down. It refreshes me and makes me realize that all other choices are chicken shit. Like peeing on your finger.

I spent the rest of the night wandering the streets of Paris. A strong wind was blowing and it was cold. None of the taxis stopped at my raised hand. I didn't find any bistros – they were all closed. I asked a late night passer-by how to get to the red light district. I wanted to see the whores. I was ready to cross the whole town on foot. But of course probably the man I asked didn't

understand me. I had heard that Parisians don't speak English and don't listen as a matter of principle. Ah, they can go fuck themselves ...it would be much better to forget all about this damned, dead, cruel and unkind city...

But there is one thing about Jurgen that I remember really well. His blue, Swedish eyes. I've looked into them every morning for fourteen years. Immensely loving and doting. Yes, I got over this trauma too. Not once after the birth of my and Jurgen's daughter did it ever cross my mind that I could hate him. My daughter and I have talked about why her father is not named on her birth certificate. I have told her that it was a one-night stand, that I knew him for six months and that, after getting pregnant, I never saw him again. We haven't talked about how it happened. She simply hasn't asked. When she does, I will think of something to say. I feel she will do so when she knows, inside, that the past can't change my love for her.

When, two years ago, my daughter revealed to me that she dreamt of going to Paris, it was like being hit with a sledgehammer. Where did she get that idea from? But I didn't ask why. I just borrowed the money, bought tickets and we left. We did it in grand style. Went by plane and stayed in a hotel just two blocks from ZARA. Even if I still haven't paid back the money I borrowed, it doesn't matter. I was able to love Paris again just as I had when I was a little girl – knowing almost nothing about it, but truly loving it. Doesn't matter what anyone says, forgiving is bloody great. It makes you so free.

I still shop in Zara on Tērbatas Street in Riga. I pick up things for my daughter. They may just last a season, but that's fine. Well, I do sometimes buy something for myself there, too. Last year I even bought a brown wrap around dress with exactly the same polka dots as the one I had in my youth. But the cut! The seams! Whatever you buy, your chest falls out of it. I don't know why, but now it doesn't seem sexy in the least. Must be because of the trauma.

He Doesn't Talk

Early morning – the sun outside the window hasn't woken up yet, but Kristīne has jumped to a sitting position in bed. Stunned, she reaches for a cigarette on her night table. Yesterday's half-finished glass with its deep red liquid – a somewhat repulsive sweet wine – is also there. She gulps it down first, then lights a cigarette. He is making a hissing noise warmly in the bed next to her. The sweaty, wrinkled sheets retain the odours, scents, words and fantasies of the night before. All the other mornings after, Kristīne has always slept longer – like a lazy cat he usually rolls out of the sheets a good half an hour after cooling down on opposite sides of the bed. But not today ...not this morning.

His moves making love, his turn of the head, his tight words. It has never been like this before. Kristīne's fingers are trembling, and the cigarette dies out much earlier than she'd like for a lazy Saturday morning routine. Something has happened. Such a big SOMETHING that her mind refuses to take it in, but the feelings are hopping around inside her like something imprisoned in a restrictive cage.

Luckily, there are still three untouched bottles of wine. She uncorks the next one, pours herself a glass full almost to the rim and swallows it down in spite of a slight feeling of sickness, a leftover from the day before. At last she feels a kick from the alcohol and greedily smokes down her next cigarette without trembling.

He still isn't awake. Wrapped up so sweetly in the blanket, mumbling something quietly in the folds of the pillow. Kristīne opens the window. The freshness of the late spring air sucks out the bluish fog and instils her with courage. The courage to continue the half-pronounced words, the unfinished gestures. Only she has nobody to turn to. He is still sleeping.

Kristīne goes out into the hall and looks at her reflection in the cracked mirror of the old-fashioned, narrow sideboard. Dishevelled hair, slightly swollen eyes, mascara smudged under them. Her lipstick certainly left behind on the pillows and covers. She licks her finger and scrubs away the black smear. No point in cleaning her teeth. He will wake up, evaporate the remains of yesterday's wine: if her mouth is all fresh, she might make him gag.

Kristīne slaps her cheeks until they are unhealthily pink, paints her lips bright red and draws lines around her eyes after carefully wetting the eyeliner with saliva. The drama queen is ready to make her entrance. Just a touch of lipstick across the cheekbones so the blush is more resistant. She returns to the room, pours wine and lights a cigarette. The third one today. Then she shoves him over accidentally on purpose and sits down on the bed.

Blue eyes. Amazingly blue eyes, edged with black lashes, open. She shivers. The wine splashes onto the bed. Even if those eyes are still sleepy, they scare her. For the first time since they met six months ago, he helped Kristīne with her bags getting off the train. Such a cliché. So sweet. Then she got seriously scared. A look of crystal clarity directed at her. Transparency imprisoned in a painting's frame.

Today she gets scared for a second time. She doesn't have to wait long. His first cigarette, legs over the bed, stooping figure. And the very first words. So expected, so piercing and sudden.

"I don't love you".

So as not to start crying she gulps down her third glass, but it only serves to unleash her emotions in a flood of tears which rush over the lines of makeup put on just a moment before, leaving black streaks on the "blushed" cheeks. Unexpected nausea appears much stronger than when it is anticipated. Her preparatory work is of no help. She wants nothing more than to grab the

bottle and gulp it all down from the bottle's neck without stopping to draw breath and to stick the whole packet of cigarettes between her bright red lips.

She is no fool. She knows well enough how to react on such occasions. You either have to pretend that you are a heartless bitch, or beg. You have to chuck him out in disgrace or humiliate yourself. Not too many other possible scenarios. Instead, Kristīne bends over him and abruptly throws up all the wine she has drunk early that morning. Turns out to be quite a stream. "Thankfully without bits. Thankfully I didn't eat anything yesterday," she has time to think before collapsing over his sleepy body, plunging face down into the red puddle that hasn't sunk into the mattress yet.

She wakes up. A stinging headache, the corner of the pillow sticking to her lips. Twilight prowls the room, she can hear a distant dog barking through the half-open window, the shriek of tyres from the odd car. Church bells ringing somewhere.

Where am I? What time is it? What on earth happened here?

Bit by bit, the memory slips out of her sleepy brain. Kristīne puts a thumb in her mouth and bites it. It hurts. Must be real. Only something doesn't quite stick. She is lying completely naked, well covered, on clean sheets. Not a smudged glass nor overflowing ashtray in sight - everything has been cleaned up. Next to the bed - a bottle of mineral water, the white mug with the portrait of a puppy on it, a packet of ibuprofen. The air smells of damp asphalt and rain-soaked dust.

She slowly gets up into a sitting position, rips the water open and drinks straight from the bottle. After having thrown a couple of pills in her mouth and washed them down with a good quantity of water, she stays sitting a while longer. A pigeon squats down on the windowsill. Scraping its claws against the metallic frame of the windowsill, it tiptoes back and forth from one side to the other, every so often turning its head apprehensively to look at Kristīne.

What day is it today? I must be in time to finish studying for the test on Monday. Hell, what was it all about? Where is my notebook? And where is the telephone, and what time is it? Wasn't it my shift in the hospital today? What time?

The pigeon with a loud flap of wings takes flight. Kristīne startles, raises her hand to her temple. Suddenly all the morning's madness tears through her mind like a bullet. She curls up into a ball, pushes her head between her knees and starts crying desperately.

He doesn't love me! Why doesn't he love me? Mummy, he doesn't love me! He doesn't! What a terrible thing...What I am to do now? No, please, no, don't do that, don't be like that with me.

Darkness is creeping in through the window, increasingly overbearing, swampy and oppressive. For a second, having stopped sobbing, Kristīne switches on the night light. The darkness recedes into the corners and under the table. She stands up abruptly, but her head spins and she is forced to sit down again. Then she tries again –more slowly, massaging her neck. This time she manages it. She drags herself up to the light switch and clicks it on – the room is as bright as a circus ring. And the sad clown in the middle. He frowns, rubs his eyes, the corners of his mouth are sagging, the whites of his eye all rosy pink.

What has happened? And why? After a year of peaceful life together, he makes an announcement like that out of the blue. Has he got somebody else? Is it because a week ago she mentioned that it wouldn't hurt to get married and have children? What on earth is going on here? Who has cleaned up her room, her vomit, put fresh sheets on her bed? He doesn't love her – that means splitting up, that makes sense. What else? It's over. Why care anymore. Clean up, rinse off.

Exactly – the sheets in the washing machine have long finished spinning, ready to be hung out to dry.

The headache gradually eases off. No energy left for sobbing. She splashes her face with cold water, pushing her whole head under the tap. There is some thinking to do. She must think now. There is something that really doesn't fit the picture here, that she forgets her pain. He could at least have left a note. She deserved that much after a year. Over the long, long year that stretched out like a slimy snail when he wasn't there, and galloped like a panicky horse at the times they spent together.

Let's switch on the light in the kitchen and in the hall. Now she needs light everywhere. As much light as possible. All the details embracing her very being should be as well defined as possible.

She would be ready to give up anything if he would only come to the door now and say something. Anything at all. That it was all a dream. That he didn't mean it really. That she had misunderstood. But it can even be the exact opposite. I really don't love you – let's split up. Or – sorry, I forgot my tooth brush. You will never see me again. I will never come back here. I will not kiss you. I will not love you.

Whatever. The tiniest of explanations would do. Anything more than those four words that had pushed her into this limbo of unconsciousness, wasting the whole day in the embrace of a deep sleep and nightmarish dreams.

Kristīne puts on some water for tea and hangs out the sheets. He really has forgotten his toothbrush – it is standing next to hers in its usual place. No, they never have talked much, it was more of an understanding without words. She didn't even tell him where to find fresh bed linen – it was enough that he saw where she was getting it from. Would you like milk with your tea? White bread or brown? Meat sauce with potatoes or rice? What kind of tickets should I get? Everything quite normal. Big deal. Great love doesn't need many words, does it? Glances, caresses, panting,

coordinated moves, understanding from a single word or even without opening one's mouth are enough. It's written everywhere. Where? Oh, it doesn't matter, she has read it somewhere.

But it's only now, smoothing the wrinkles out of the sheets, that Kristīne starts to realize that she doesn't know anything about him at all. He has never shown her photos from his childhood, nor said a word about his mum or dad. No, of course, Kristīne knows his friends – they have been out to restaurants loads of times, ridden bicycles together, met them at parties. Only...She doesn't even know the names of these friends. He never introduces her. Leads her there by the hand, taking her by the fingertips like a stranger, as if he is afraid to get a burn or blisters if he took her by the whole hand, not to mention putting his arm over her shoulders. My girlfriend. That is what he says. That's all. Then things simply run their usual course. No-one wonders anything. No-one asks anything.

Kristīne takes a pack of bagels strung on a string from the cupboard, pours some tea and sits down at the table. She bites one bagel to detach it from the green string that ties the bunch together, and slowly starts chewing, staring at the same spot.

Who is she as a person? Who is she in this relationship? Why doesn't she remember anything? Or doesn't she know anything at all? What was the name of that weird guy that so often came to watch the ice hockey in the evenings? Kristaps? Andrejs? Kārlis? Her mind is blank.

The bagels disappear one by one into Kristīne's stomach, the table and her lap both full of crumbs.

Kristīne is already drifting off to sleep, but the last dregs of consciousness are still defying and hindering her; trying to maintain a link with the shock of the day that's been. But the body is stronger—it shuts her eyelids and, one by one, tears away her chain of thoughts, allowing her to take a breath and get some rest.

Suddenly, there is the sound of a key turning at the front door. Sleep, like a frightened partridge races out of the window and Kristīne sits up in bed, her eyes wide open, staring into the darkness diluted by the street lights outside.

He comes into the room, puts his bag on the floor and slowly starts to undress.

- You? – Kristīne utters in a hoarse whisper, then repeats the question in a clearer voice.

He doesn't answer, just continues to undress. Kristīne knows those movements by heart. He tugs his arms out of the sleeves of his jumper first, then takes it by the collar and pulls it over his head. So he doesn't have to turn it right way out afterwards. The first time it had seemed so strange to her, so unusual.

- Why did you come back? – she wouldn't let him be.

- Sleep, I didn't want to wake you up,- he says quietly and, leaving his pants on, crawls under the blanket.

Kristīne's sleep is blown to pieces. Cut to bits and not likely to return. In no time he is breathing sweetly, his hands under his head, his knees pulled up to his chest just like a tiny, satisfied foetus in its mother's womb.

After tossing and turning, eyes wide open, for an hour, Kristīne gets up and goes into the kitchen, grabbing a notebook and pen on her way. She rips a couple of pages from the middle of the notebook and, with a pair of kitchen scissors, cuts the jagged edges. She will write. She will write him a letter. About everything. About all they haven't talked over, all the hurt, all that hasn't been understood. The questions she never asked, the answers never given. About how she longs to hear his explanations, to have conversations, to be together with shared words.

Two pages, filled on both sides, are not enough. She rips off a third one, then a fourth, and only when she gets a cramp in her hand and her jumping thoughts start repeating themselves from exhaustion, does she put a full stop.

Kristīne numbers the pages, puts them in order in a pile and heads back to bed. She puts the letter between them both and tries to fall asleep. The most important thing is not to change her mind. The most important thing is to leave the message just where it is now, there, where it has erupted to make itself heard. She shuffles to the very edge of the bed - she feels as if the paper is on fire and, if she touches it, she will certainly get a blister. Gradually, exhaustion takes over and brings her sleep.

In the morning, she is the first to wake. The letter is still between them. Right under his nose – the uppermost sheet quivers slightly when he breathes out. Kristīne quietly slips out of bed, afraid of waking him, and goes into the kitchen. She doesn't want to be there when he reads it. She can picture his contorted face, the annoyance at the corners of his eyes, the peevishly bitten lip. She doesn't want to see that. Any of it. Or will it be totally different? Having realized how much he has hurt Kristīne, will he, preoccupied, run to the kitchen and beg for forgiveness, drop to his knees with tears in his eyes? No, no tears. No, neither will he drop to his knees. But he might ask for forgiveness, mightn't he? She deserves that. Or a conversation at least, a long, profound conversation, setting out all the pros and cons, bringing some clarity to what happened yesterday and what has been happening over the last year.

Kristīne can't wait any longer. She stomps around the kitchen, going from one side to the other, moving the crockery around, wiping a wet cloth over the shelves, lighting a cigarette next to the window. How can he sleep so long? How can he?

At long last, Kristīne hears footsteps. First they shuffle to the bathroom, stay there quiet a long time, too long, then go back to the bedroom, the bed springs squeak, another ten minutes go by, then the sound of steps again. It was enough to make you pass out, waiting like this. Her heart leaps in her chest and she has to swallow big gulps of air so as not to lose it altogether, this heart of hers which is raging and driving her blood to insanity.

He finally makes it into the kitchen, wearing just his underpants and a cotton t-shirt. He scratches up his side from hip to armpit, scratches behind his ear, rumples his hair and sits down across the table from Kristīne.

- Is there any coffee left?
- I'll make some in a minute.

After six minutes of silence, during which time only the humming of the boiler can be heard, Kristīne returns with a cup of coffee in her hand. She pushes it towards him and sits down, looking him straight in the eyes. No, not the eyes. His eyes can't be seen. He is staring at the whirling coffee grounds. Kristīne gazes at his forehead.

- Are you not going to say anything?
- What should I say?
- What do you mean by what? Didn't you read it?
- Yes, I did. Everything's fine.
- What's fine?
- Ok, let's get married.
- What?!
- I'm saying, ok, let's get married. Let's make babies and just get on with it.
- But...

- I think it would be good. For you, for me. We can go and fill out the papers for the registry office next week. You don't want to get married in church, do you?
- Listen...
- I think we've covered everything. It's all quite clear. You said it all here. Now I'm answering you.
- But you don't love me! You said so yourself!
- We-ell, yes... But so what? Do you really need to love somebody to get married? It's even better this way. We plainly know what we want from each other, no words wasted, no argy-bargy, no pain, no hysterics. What for? Marriage is something completely different from love.
- But...
- So that's all settled. I've got to go now, I'm meeting my friends – got to I help a guy fix his car somewhere in Baldone or Bauska, I don't remember. Probably won't make it in time to get home tonight. But tomorrow after work by all means. And then on Tuesday, during your lunch break, we can go to the registry office. Can't we, rosebud?

Monday morning. Kristīne is all dressed up like never before. Her lips bright red, her eyes full of light, a smile up to her ears. She is practically dancing along the street, flapping her light coat and trying to suppress the laughter that is bubbling out of her. But half way to university she gives up and starts laughing. She feels happier than she has at any point over the last year. Even happier than the moment she realized that she was deeply in love.

The door of Kristīne's apartment is closed. There is a shiny, brand new lock on it, changed just shortly before. Hanging from the doorknob, tied with bagel string, is his tooth brush. And a very short note – “Don't come round anymore. Rosebud.” Kristīne will stay with her brother tonight. Far more peaceful.