

Biography: Writer and journalist Pauls Bankovskis (1973) was born in Līgatne, Latvia. He studied glass art at the Riga School for Applied Arts and philosophy at the University of Latvia (1992–1996). His prose was first published in 1993, and a prolific author, he has now published novels, several collections of short stories, books and works of non-fiction and film scripts. His focus tends to shift from Latvian history, its myths, and legends to the realities of the recent Soviet past and the possibilities of the future.

Synopsis: *Reds, Rats and Rock’n’Roll* examines in retrospect the era of socialism in Latvia. The action takes place between the years 1978-89, the most severely tarnished phase of Soviet splendor. Various colorful characters live their lives in the pages of this book: the thoroughly drunk poet Harry Mikelson, who, for the consolidation of his career, becomes a spokesperson for the Cheka; the old Cheka official who commits suicide for unknown reasons; the swimmer and potential champion Eva Kallas and her romance with the somber Israeli spy Joren, who doesn’t quite know whom he works for and what he gains from his spying; the ruffian Zmejs and his comrades; Jozef, who has decided to join the army; as well as an endless number of other individuals. Each character has a separate storyline, and at first glance it seems they do not have and could not have anything in common.

Excerpt

AUTUMN

1

The garage door opened with a whine and the sickly sweet smell of gasoline filled the air. Cesar pulled desperately at his chain and barked like crazy. It was the dog that woke Harry Mikelson from his catnap, turning the poet’s attention to his neighbor’s yard. The car was roaring in the garage, which at any other time and in any other place wouldn’t be

anything out of the ordinary. Yet Harry Mikelson knew that his neighbor hadn’t moved the

thing in several years. Old age had dimmed the light in Gleb Ivanich's eyes and stiffened his joints –leaving him not much of a driver. A few times a week he could be seen in the grocery store nearby. Gleb Ivanich was famous for his frugality – he always bought a loaf of white bread, a can of conserved fish (in tomato sauce), and once in a while a bottle of vodka. He received the newspapers (*Pravda*, *Izvestiya*, and *Sovetskaya Latvija*) in the mail. Nobody wrote him letters anymore. Klara died last year on a damp November evening. The neighbors thought of the woman as a somewhat naïve, yet infinitely sympathetic creature; she was a distant relative of Gleb Ivanich's who provided the old man with moral, domestic, and perhaps also physical comforts.

Gleb Ivanich arrived in Riga on a sweltering June day in 1940. It seemed to this man born on the shores of the Caspian Sea and toughened at the front during the civil war that he had entered an irrational and phantasmagoric world. Gleb Ivanich had arrived to free these people embittered by social inequalities and sinking in poverty, yet soon realized that their condition resembled a polished exhibit of a nation's success. Of course, these were all lies, he decided, and set off in a hurry to unmask and punish the perpetrators of this huge conspiracy. He was later forced to abandon the project halfway – the war began and new tasks and victories were waiting for Gleb Ivanich. Thanks to his gift for simplifying everything down to the most elementary parts, he swiftly made his way up the ranks and earned his fair share of awards. He was able to spot the guilty party in any incident (it didn't matter if the incident was a military loss or the success of another country's scientists). Someone was always guilty, he often said, and this expression was later quoted in quite a few publications of the Central Press.

He returned to the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1953, a few months after Stalin's death. Gleb Ivanich's actions were not even mentioned in Khrushchev's public statements, and he soon became unwanted and shunned. It was he who had unmasked the Trotskyite-Zionist plot led by the actor Solomon Mikhoels a few years after the war. The enemy did not sleep, and like a careful gardener, Gleb Ivanich worked at weeding out the harmful plants before they spread their seeds. Rootless cosmopolitans were hiding in the Jewish anti-fascist committee and on the staff of the newspaper *Ainikait*. He took part in the full-scale eradication of the Zionist organizations in Czechoslovakia whose members secretly supplied the Israelis with arms (the documents for the shipment of arms and ammunition were signed by Gleb Ivanich himself, yet this fabrication, in his opinion, took place in the name of something holy). In 1953, Gleb Ivanich helped to uncover a conspiracy between nine doctors. Together with American, British, and Zionist special forces, they planned to poison Stalin. Unfortunately, Stalin died first (if this itself wasn't yet another plot) and his successors foiled the conspirators' plans. Gleb Ivanich moved to Riga and continued working for the State Security Committee up until his retirement. His neighbors gossiped that Klara moved from Leningrad only because she hoped to inherit the Chekist's house, yet her hopes were not destined to come true.

After Klara's death, Gleb Ivanich grew lonely as a tree trimmed in spring. On rainy days, he sat by the window and followed high school girls with his lingering gaze as they stepped between puddles and jumped away from the paths of approaching cars that splashed mud onto the sidewalk. In fairer weather, the old man ruthlessly waged war

against the snails, Colorado beetles, and other insects that had taken up residence in his garden, or lounged on a bench sunk deep into the sandy ground in front of his house.

The *Volga's* motor was desperately gasping for air, yet it wouldn't give up. The carburetor's whines and the cries of the ruined gears echoed between the walls of the garage. A cloud of nauseating blue fumes overcame the poet, and it took an effort to keep from vomiting. His head was ripped apart by unbearable pain, and all of his inner organs threatened to climb out of his mouth. He forgot all about the few verses he had succeeded in getting printed and the meager rubles he had received in return. Gleb Ivanich was sprawled out unmoving in the car. It looked like he was asleep. Harry pinched his nose and barreled his way into the partial darkness of the garage. Cesar wouldn't stop barking. The veteran wore striped blue pajamas, his hands rested upon the pale skeleton-bone wheel, and his head hung limp to one side. A rubber hose covered in spider webs was stuck into the cracked window like a giant catheter. A couple of years ago, when his health and strength were still holding, Gleb Ivanich had used the hose on sunny days to water his parched garden. The other end of the hose was now affixed to the exhaust pipe. Fumes curled inside the *Volga*. The half-opened window was covered by a damp terry cloth towel. Harry stumbled into the yard in a fit of coughing and inhaled the crisp forest air deep into his lungs. A woodpecker pecked morosely in the upper reaches of a pine tree.

The poet had no idea how to shut off the motor. He pinched his nose once more, charged into the garage, threw aside the stinking hose, pulled open the door of the *Volga*, and tried to get Gleb Ivanich out of there. The old man seemed incredibly heavy. *You motherfucker*, Harry hissed, *one hundred kilo, who would have thought?* Gleb Ivanich's feet

snagged behind the pedals and Harry couldn't make him budge any further, so he was forced to escape once again into the yard. The old man's feet were stuck inside the car, his heavy torso, arms, and head lay on the dirty, oil-stained concrete floor. Harry was able to pull the old man free only on the third try. Having spotted his master, Cesar was overcome with joy. Harry pulled up Gleb Ivanich's pants, put his ear to his hairy chest, and listened.

Silence, silence, silence. And the sound of poet Harry Mikelson's heartbeat.

The car continued to retch, and Cesar yelped. His barks became more drawn out, like sorrowful whining. *Does that animal really understand anything?*

The door to the house was half open. On the kitchen table, a tall glass and a half-drunk bottle of vodka stood next to a chessboard. Harry poured a drink with trembling hands. A strip of flypaper that resembled dried intestines swung at eye level – a few flies stuck to the strip were still alive and desperately trying to struggle free. The poet closed his eyes, counted to ten, and lurched over to the telephone. The monotonous plinking of a piano could be heard coming from a small white radio. He twisted the dial sharply, the transistor rattled and fell to the floor, spilling out rusty and leaking batteries. *I wonder what my own batteries look like right now*, the poet thought. Though Harry knew Gleb Ivanich's house like the back of his hand, he slid from one room to the next like a trembling sleepwalker and stared wide-eyed at the stained walls, furniture, the rug tacked to the wall (showing two swans, of course), a clock, the television, a chandelier with polished glass ornaments, the gum tree whose tips poked the yellowing ceiling, and other junk, which on this beautiful morning had been left without an owner. *When I die, everything will be yours*, Gleb Ivanich liked to mumble when he was drunk, *you saved my life, for fuck's sake*.

Several framed photographs on the shelf studied Harry with a faded gaze. In a few of them, he recognized Gleb Ivanich: as a youngster, in an army uniform, and later, in a suit and tie. Next to him posed a woman: either his mother in the blossom of youth, or some girlfriend in the early days of a budding love affair. Harry had seen Gleb Ivanich in full uniform before. A few times a year, he put on his general's uniform, polished his medals and went to shoot the bull with his old war buddies.

Harry sighed and opened one of the chest's drawers. Perhaps when Klara was living here the house was orderly, but now a primal chaos swept up from the drawer. Wrinkled dirty underwear was tossed in next to a little bottle with stomach drops, melted candies stuck to an empty cigarette pack; between the assorted odds and ends lay Gleb Ivanich's pistol, proudly basking in its own glory. Harry carefully raised the firearm and spelled out the ornately carved dedication. "For Protecting Our Homeland and for Selfless Service in the State Defense Committee". The old soldier had often bragged of his weapon, and the poet was always surprised by its weight. It seemed unusually heavy. Just like the weapon's owner. Harry carefully put the weapon to his forehead and looked at himself in the mirror: gray skin covered by a lacquered layer of dried sweat, dark, two-day-old stubble, blood-shot eyes, swollen eyelids and greasy hair. *Was Jesus really this old?* The metal felt cool pressed against his heated temples and it made his nerves tingle.

In the yard, Cesar was barking impatiently, and Harry reluctantly returned to the telephone. His fingers were still trembling and he fumbled the numbers, dialing the wrong number twice.

"Hello", a sleepy voice answered.

"Gunnar? Is that you?"

"Who is it?"

"Harry...don't recognize me? Listen..."

"The fuck you calling this early for? What do you want? I'm still..."

"Gleb Ivanich...You hear me?"

"Yeah, yeah," Gunnar mumbled a moment later. "Who's Gleb Ivanich?"

"Gleb Ivanich is dead."

"May he rest in peace. Good night. Amen."

"Listen, Gunnar, don't hang up..."

"What is it?"

"My neighbor, Gleb Ivanich...you hear me?"

"What am I, a doctor? I'm tired..."

"I think that he...uh, that he... Are you listening?"

"Yeah, yeah. I don't care. Go to sleep."

"He got whacked...are you there? A hose was stuck in the exhaust pipe, the other end stuck..."

"...Up your ass."

"Shut up...listen... I said..."

"Good night!"

Gunnar slammed the phone down. Harry had another drink.

The shakes weren't going away. He looked out the window.

*What made you turn your attention to the car's growling, decide to go into the yard,
and stick your nose into your neighbor's garage?*

The poet's house was just across the fence. If you looked closely enough, you could see the peeling plaster, the porch with the shattered multicolored windows, and the moss and pine needle-covered roof, which workers from the building administration had mended with rusty pieces of tin. The alarm clock rang and Harry gave a start. By the time he found it on the bedside table, the spring had wound out and the ringing had ceased.

*Seven; people began to move about in Harry's house; a line had formed by the
communal bathroom; the splashing of water and the buzzing of shavers could be heard
through the thin walls; bald-headed Igor scampered down the stairs in his underwear; Inga
said last week that she was moving; Mežaparks is too far from her job in the center of town;
Zhenya says that Igor is stealing again; he disappears at night; probably misses being in the
can.*

Harry rubbed his burning eyes and once again picked up the receiver.

*Exactly one year ago, on one of the last sunny and somewhat warm days of the year,
Gleb Ivanich strutted out into his yard, picked up Cesar's empty bowl, and went back inside;
the dog wagged its tail and looked with reverence at its owner; a moment later, the tin bowl
was full; Cesar smelled the barley gruel and the loaf of dark bread broken into little pieces in
his bowl; unfortunately, the bowl slid out of Gleb Ivanich's grasp and fell to the granite path;
the hungry dog let out a sorrowful moan and tilted its gigantic head; something funny was*

happening to its owner; Gleb Ivanich's body was overcome by a strange pain and stinging fear, which stabbed into his shoulder blade, shot down his arm, and prevented him from moving his head; he felt paralyzed; the old man tried to bend down and pick up the bowl, but felt that he was falling; the smell of rotting leaves and the damp air settled on his face like a suffocating pillow; the world went black.

That same morning, Harry Mikelson returned from his nighttime adventures and was surprised to see his gray-haired neighbor's strange morning prayer – he slowly fell to his knees and collapsed face first into the autumn leaves; the poet thought at first that he was dreaming; or that he was seeing a hangover hallucination; an entire instrumental and vocal ensemble thundered, crashed, rumbled and roared in his aching head; Harry Mikelson's insides were hanging from a thin, weak thread.

The day before, he had gotten paid for three poems published in the newspaper Soviet Youth; they bought two bottles of vodka and went over to Maya's; there they met up with Ruth, Yanis, Elita, and someone else who Harry didn't know and whose name (which started or ended with the letter "R") he forgot right away; later they were joined by Gunnar, Velta, and a few others; the same as always; they found two plates of jellied pork and horseradish in Maya's refrigerator; a bottle of cheap wine gurgled in Gunnar's bag; later on, Yanis went to get two more half-liter bottles of vodka, but returned empty handed; then everybody went out, found some, borrowed some money, and ended up at Elita's, where Gunnar tried to tell Ruth something, Ruth shook her head, and Elita tried to come on to Harry (she was head over heels in love with the poet), but Harry remembered that her mouth smelled of rot; Maya tried to sing, and Yanis tried to dance, yet nobody was listening, and

they headed out once again for someplace; Velta whined that she wanted to go home, Gunnar offered to walk with her, Ruth pouted, somebody waved or clenched their fists, Yanis threw the electric Jatraņ typewriter and a few records out the kitchen window; Velta cried, everyone laughed, Yanis almost fell down the stairs; the neighbors called the militia; Gunnar went out to talk to the cops completely naked; and when they saw the pine cone stuck between his legs...

The next morning, Harry woke up in a room filled with cigarette smoke; next to him, wrapped in a red-and-black plaid bed sheet, Gunnar was snoring away; the room swayed like a sinking ship; half-chewed slices of sausage were scattered on the pillow; someone was puking in the bathroom.

Harry leaned against the damp, moss-covered fence post; wet newspapers were sticking out of the mailboxes; the dog was still wagging its tail, staring at its inert owner, and whimpering over the gruel spilt on the ground; Harry kicked open the gate, Cesar turned his head and barked.

When he was a child, a neighbor's mutt bit him in the ass; it was a mix of black German shepherd, Siberian husky, hunting hound, and possibly another breed; the dog would lie on the side of the road and stare languidly at passerby; Harry always hoped that the animal wouldn't notice him and would leave him alone, so whenever he approached the danger zone, he would hold his breath, creep along on tiptoe, and clutch his school bag, where pencils locked in their case rattled treacherously; nevertheless, the beast always

anticipated Harry's sneakiness; it would pretend not to notice the boy and then, having waited for the right moment, the dog would jump to its feet, bare its teeth and dash towards him; usually the beast was held back by its chain; it was left standing, bucking up on its hind legs, angry growls emanating from its collar-choked throat, strings of saliva dripping from its mouth, and nails clawing at the ground; but one morning the animal reared up so quickly that Harry didn't have a chance to jump aside or cry out; the chain broke, and the animal's powerful paws almost knocked him to the ground; the boy tried to fight back, but nevertheless felt the dog's yellow teeth bite through the seat of his pants and clamp down on his flesh.

Harry carefully circled around the dog and crouched down next to Gleb Ivanich.

His nausea and headache returned only later, when the doors of the ambulance slammed shut and Harry met Cesar's gaze; the dog was no longer barking; it wagged its tail foolishly and showed the whites of its eyes; exhaustion only allowed him to stumble a few feet forward; Harry pitched into the leaves raked into a pile in the corner of the yard, curled up, and fell asleep...

"You saved my life," Gleb Ivanich would often mention from then on; once in a while Harry visited the retired general's house and was always a welcome guest; they both had a drink or played chess; Harry was no longer scared of Cesar; when he saw him, the black German shepherd rolled over onto his back and let him scratch his dirty belly; Gleb Ivanich

had found himself a new conversation partner and now only checked out the high school girls once a week.

"You'll be a classic," he told Harry, slapping him on the back. "You'll write a collected works; like Pushkin, or what's-his-name...Tolstoy."

"Let's hope that I don't turn into a drooling, shaky old man like you," Harry thought and wondered what his wife would say about his prolonged absence and all the bottles of booze he had put away.

2

Her head was filled with the echo of screams, the slamming of doors, and the jingling of keys; threatening footsteps approached in the dark; on one of the first nights, a group of drunken guards stumbled into the cell; they grabbed the first one in their path and dragged her away; the woman's cries for help and the men's laughter evaporated deep in the depths of the hallways; at dawn, the unlucky woman was thrown back into the cell; her broken body fell to the cold floor like a dead fish.

Sometimes they were herded into the shower chambers, forced to strip and jump up and down; the guards made them raise their arms, spread their legs, get down on their hands and knees, balance on one leg, lay down, stand up – to the point of complete exhaustion; the cries of the guards resounded between the concrete walls; those who didn't cooperate were beaten.

Aina sat up with a start. *Next time, the guards in her dream would be coming for her.*

As she fell asleep, Aina returned to the interrogation room. *You'll be marked for life*, they had told her in prison.

The gray-haired woman fished her slippers out from under the bed, turned on the table lamp, put on her bathrobe and glasses and opened her magazine. The radio on the bedside table hummed softly. Aina didn't care if the radio played music or the sound of someone's voice. *It helps you hold on to the illusion of life, that you aren't alone; you tell yourself that there is someone next to you who you don't have to fear.*

The crossword puzzle in the November issue of *The Star* was situated next to the chessboard and the artist's palette. Aina read a few questions and shivered. The only one she was able to guess was "the opposite of the word strong". It seemed like the questions were thought up by a maniac.

Across: 1. painter and artist of the Latvian SSR. 5. painting by V. Purvītis. 7. a work by P. Postazs dedicated to the Latvian Red Riflemen. 10. The author of the vignette in Pushkin's story entitled "The Captain's Daughter"...

Aina put aside her guesswork and turned to the "Trivia" section: "Mount Everest, the tallest mountain in the world, is in danger, though it is not threatened by..."

At three a.m., screams, laughter, and music could be heard coming from the other side of the wall. As usual, her neighbor Rudolf's shouts were the loudest in the chorus of voices. Tossing and turning in the squeaky bed and trying to fall back to her shallow sleep, Aina had no trouble imagining the dark-skinned Ukrainian's broad smile. And his shiny metal teeth.

Rudolf had arrived in Riga twenty years ago; in the beginning, he lived in a shack that resembled something between a barracks and a train car; who can remember all of one's life stories; both his wife and children remained in the Carpathians; he sent home money and letters; later he met Lena and decided never to go back; they had a baby; now Viktor is all grown up; all he does is tool around on his moped together with the other lazy good-for-nothings wasting their days away.

Rudolf's accordion chimed in among the laughter and shouting. Someone cheered, and Rudolf began to sing. Among the Ukrainian's repertoire were passionately romantic Russian songs, tunes from old Soviet films, and prison ballads by unknown authors.

He played the song about the blue marble three times in a row. Now everyone wanted to hear *The Black Crow*.

The alarm clock went off at six. A new day had begun.

After putting on her brown autumn coat (*how many years had she had it? Twenty years, maybe more...*), glancing in the hallway mirror, and smoothing down her hair, which had been dyed with henna and permed a few months ago, Aina made her way to the Cultural Center. She planned on going to the market after work, so she took her brightly colored fake-leather market bag off the hook and tucked it under her arm.

The crisp air smelt of decay, coal smoke, and eternity.

It was a short two-minute walk from the bus stop to the Center.

If there was a dance after last night's movie, then there should be cigarette butts and trash scattered all over the floor; there will probably be puke in the toilet, the sides of the bowls and the floor will be covered in piss; yet there was some good that came from these

dances; empty bottles could be found in the trashcans, under the chairs, behind the stage curtain, and hidden in the corners; of course, some of them will be smashed; that's the natural casualty rate.

Aina's current record was fifty bottles left intact. They were for the most part beer bottles, a couple of long-necked bottles of vodka, and a dozen wine bottles. On the morning of the record, she actually found forty-seven. The three that would round the number out to fifty were only slightly cracked. But they didn't notice that at the collection station. And, if you divide forty kopeks by fifty, you get ten rubles. *A hell of a lot of money.*

I doubt I'll break the record this morning, thought Aina the skeptic. *But you never know,* replied the eternal optimist. And so they argued up to the very doors of the Cultural Center, where a faded advertisement for *The Lake Sonata* could be seen behind the cracked, dirty glass of the display case under the words "Coming Soon". Aina sighed (she had seen the film three or maybe four times already), stopped short and almost dropped the empty bag. Her thoughts about the bottle record shattered in a million tiny and useless pieces.

I'VE GOT TO CALL HUBA, both Aina the skeptic and the eternal optimist shouted in unison. *OLEGS WAS THE GUARD YESTERDAY, SO THAT MEANS HUBERT WAS ON DUTY LAST NIGHT; I'VE GOT TO CALL HIM; HE'LL KNOW WHAT TO DO.*

Her cracked palms choked the handle of her bag as she stumbled over to the door of the Cultural Center. Hubert was probably watching her from the guard's window, secretly surprised that he had never noticed Aina was fond of the drink. Hubert shrugged his shoulders and, whistling the melody that played during the *Sportloto* lottery spots on TV, went over to unlock the door.

Aina was pointing at something, her mouth hanging open in shock. *That crazy old hag*; Hubert smiled, stretched, and came out onto the damp steps, inhaling the air rich in salt and the smell of pine needles. He barely heard the roar of automobiles and the clatter of the trams. The forest choked all the noises that came from the outside world. *Almost like out in the countryside*. Hubert yawned, idly fingered the pack of cigarettes in his pocket, and looked at the place Aina was pointing to.

Holy Mother of God, where're my Validol pills, he practically shouted out loud and instinctively started to rub his pounding chest. Scenes from childhood appeared before his eyes: his parents' faces, Russian tanks, the dark red cloth with a narrow white stripe down the middle, train wagons, Siberia, Novosibirska – an infinite number of fragments of life and suffering raced through the old man's mind. *They say that this happens to people when they're drowning*.

The words were plastered on the brick wall right under the first-story windows and ran across the entire length of the Cultural Center. White letters on a red background. Red, white, red: "GOD BLESS LATVIA!"

Aina's watery eyes concentrated on the gray clock above the door to the hall. Once in a while it clicked and the hands moved forward. A radio played in the guard's room. Someone spoke in a monotonous voice about the hijacking of an airplane in the Middle East. The dial on the phone rattled as Hubert turned the number of the director or the head janitor.

"The militia?" he repeated in a trembling voice. "Okay, I'll wait... right...right..."