

**Biography:** Osvalds Zebris (1975) is a Latvian prose writer and publicist. Zebris' first book – a collection of short stories, *Freedom in Nets* (2010), brought him instant popularity among readers and won him the 2010 Annual Latvian Literature Award for Best Debut. *In the Shadow of Rooster Hill* (2014) is his third book. His novel, *People of the Wooden House* (2013), was shortlisted for the 2013 Annual Latvian Literature Award 2013. In 2020 Zebris published novel *Māra*.

**Synopsis:** Winner of the 2017 European Union Prize for Literature and a nominee for the 2014 Annual Latvian Literature Award, this novel is about the birth of the national consciousness of the Latvian nation, one generation of the nation's teachers, the courage to oppose the insanity of violence and the consequences of failing to prevail over personal fear. It is 1905 in Riga, a city rocked by workers' riots, violence, and pogroms during the waning days of the Russian Empire, when the Tsar is gradually losing his grip over his vast domain. Revolution is in the air – brother pitted against brother, social unrest and turmoil force people to choose sides. Amid this upheaval, a former schoolteacher becomes involved in the revolution, but soon realizes that the impending war is bound to require more of him than he is willing to give.

## Excerpt

### The First Day: Redemption

A stooping, thickset old man strode with wide steps from the side of the Dvinsk railway track<sup>1</sup>. His somewhat large head bent downwards, panting heavily and irregularly, he crossed the splendid square of the new station, then the street – the hard snow, packed

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<sup>1</sup> After the construction of the Riga-Dvinsk railroad line in 1860, the railroad line's end station was established in Riga. At the time, the small two-story brick building with two platforms was the forerunner to the Riga Central Railway Station.

down by the many passers-by, crunched under the soles of his brown boots. The man stopped, raised his tired and sunken eyes toward the windows of the Bellevue Hotel<sup>2</sup> glittering in the afternoon twilight and, drooping his head down, continued his hurried walk along Maria Street. A few spiteful locks of brown hair pushed out from under the edges of his hat, they rocked to the rhythm of his nervous step, his thick moustache frozen under his nose. People in groups thronged the area where Elizabeth Street and Suvarov Street<sup>3</sup> met, some laughing in a carefree manner, while others were tranquilly leaving Vērmanis Park; one could hear more men's voices, and there were ladies in furs and coat collars pulled up against the cold. The mood before Christmas could be felt in Riga this year as well, even though the gloomy thoughts still dwelled in many – a bitterness that was brought by the last days of 1906, like wine that has turned into vinegar, with peoples' hopes having turned into a deep feeling of disillusionment. Today's issue of the daily newspaper *The Voice* read: "So much hatred, misery and bleak, ominous clouds all around, that no one can ever believe in good news. And we have no ray of hope shining upon us from the future."

Crossing Alexander Boulevard, the old man stopped near a low-lying fence that encircled the impressive walls of the Orthodox cathedral and watched the bustle of the small Christmas market on Esplanades Square. His clothing was too thin, and as evening approached the cold became ever more severe, he was shivering and quickly scanning the crowds of people in the broad market square. After going through the gates that were slightly open, he looked to the right to the bell tower and, without making the sign of the cross, slid along the cathedral wall like a shadow. He wasn't seen from the side of the

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<sup>2</sup> Today the corner of Rainis Boulevard and Maria Street.

<sup>3</sup> Today Krišjānis Barons Street

brightly lit-up annual market – the man's dark figure had almost vanished in one of the cathedral's wall naves. Several carts had already stopped again, the gentlemen offer their gloved hands to the ladies, and lifted children of various ages from the sleigh. The children rushed off in the direction of the dolled-up Christmas tree and tables laden with candy. The little ones laughed cheerfully, and swarmed around the sweet-smelling waffles and huts decorated with shiny ribbons where the black eyes of teddy bears and dolls twinkled in the glow of the electric bulbs. The old man's stagnant gaze was also lit up for a moment, it closely followed those who had come to the shop that was farthest away, where they met at the well of happiness<sup>4</sup> to fish out prizes of with a few others. His observant eyes discerned well a shabby, once-red wooden horse and a man of short stature in charge of the carousel who began to walk slowly in a circle while waiting for the last two passengers. Afterwards he walked faster, a small girl burst out laughing, a small glove beckoned, the horses gathered speed, and the old man's felt boots broke into a light trot.

The observer counted the minutes, clenched and flexed his fingers frozen numb in the gray mittens, felt an envelope with money in his inside pocket and then noticed another child. The boy was six or seven years of age, his small hand pulling a man dressed in a long black coat to the carousel. The man's enlightened, pale face showed a restrained dislike of being in a square filled with the loud din of people. The light fog of breath rose up around his thin lips, and the lips of the old man repeated the movement of the elegant gentleman's lips: "But just for a short moment, Pauls."

A dark blue twilight continued to drag itself above Riga and the characteristic noise of the city in the silent clouds of December stood out so sharply, like the brightly lit Esplanade

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<sup>4</sup> A game in which children use a small fishing rod to fish for prizes

glowing in the cavity of the blind eye of the night. "Children. During Christmas... there are only but a few happy little ones," he whispered to himself, shrinking into the deep nave. A deep, dry cough shook him as he bent over slightly and once again checked his inside pocket – everything was in its place. Having calmed himself, the old man once again focused on the square glimmering in the light, his squinted eyes finding the carousel and the elegant gentleman, who at that moment was observing with interest a young woman who was dressed poorly but warmly with an utterly fidgety boy holding her hand. The woman pretended she did not notice the man, the small one broke away from her thin hand and bravely ran toward the laughter, bells, shouting, and flickering of waves of hands. The man standing in the twilight realized with pleasure that tonight he was very alert, his tired eyes almost gained the ability to zoom in, to reduce the scene to the finest details. He stroked his mouth, which had burst out in a smile, then up, past his long nose, the eyes, the brow, and raised his sheepskin cap higher and leaned against the stone wall of the church. The sudden relief, the long-awaited redemption – the guilt would stay right in the hard snow, it would be pressed into it until spring came and then disappear completely in the afternoon sun. Finally everything was cleared up, the protracted torment of uncertainty had receded, and he was once again sure of himself and now was ready to meet his tormenter. Suddenly, his eyes that were warmed by a smile, froze. The dark eyelashes quivering ever so slightly, he held his breath, grew paler, the broad shoulders of this country boy drooped.

"Mommy, is that you?" Observing the girl that has just come onto the square, the old man whispered and broke away from the wall. Emerging from the side gates, he approached the carousel as if moving against his own wishes.

"Hey, watch where you're going!" someone shouted at him. The old man could not care less and so carried on through the bustle, past the sides of large pretzels, steaming glasses and a rotund young woman with a high-pitched laugh who pointed a finger, red and swollen from the cold, at him. Someone lightly shrugged his shoulders, while another smiled in his gray beard, ah yes, a person is and remains an odd-ball, a fool that has come from a beast, but for another even that kind of jostling puts deep wrinkles on his narrow forehead – the shame, revelers right in the heart of Riga, at such a holy time. But while the city drew the cool air into its lungs, threw a playful glance up to the glimmering stars, and remembered cigarette butts or the caressing of the back of the coat of a newly acquired sweetheart, the old man approached the carousel with wide steps. He went around, waded into the small snowdrift toward the shadow of smiling horses and stretched out his strong arms. The carousel was turning slowly, and he carefully lifted the children off one by one. Starting with little Pauls, then the nimble troublemaker, and finally her. The old man's strong arms were shaking – the mother's warm eyes glanced at him in astonishment, but not a sound emanated from her lips. It was only the middle boy that made a high-pitched scream, however no one heard the screaming on the other side of the carousel. The woman was giving snappy answers to the smartly dressed man in the black overcoat, for whom this evening's walk suddenly appeared to be full of mystery, quite incomprehensible, and suddenly immensely promising.

"Pauls, we'll go over to Daddy's now, now I'll..." the old man ran out of breath, holding both boys with one hand, and the girl with the other. He hurriedly pulled the boys across Totleben Boulevard, turned to the right, and, at that moment when shouting,

uncharacteristic of the evening groaning, rang from the square, this peculiar group of four was already turning off onto Nikolaya Street, then once more turned to the left and went a good way along Crown Prince Boulevard in the opposite direction – all the way to Bastion Hill, which was sinking into the evening twilight. Little Pauls was whimpering, the other boy energetically trying to pull his arm away, while the girl kept turning her head back:

"Hey! Over here! Help!" she shouted ardently, however the thin voice died in the heartbeat of the city, in the voices, among the shouts of the cart drivers, in the muffled laughter. Before the holidays, the people hurried to pay off long-postponed bills and settle transactions, and meet for a brief chat so they could devote themselves to the bustle of Christmas with a certain peace of mind.

The odd stranger smiled nervously, dragged the little ones to the front, and once again to the left, onto Alexander Boulevard, and then they were already coming to the shiny, well-lit facade of the Imperial Hotel. The doorman in a dark blue uniform stood next to the high double door, the gilded buttons of the uniform reflecting the light bulbs' yellow light, which the luxurious building generously poured out through the broad windows of the lobby. To the little girl – whose name was Laimdota – it seemed that the door guard would take the bad old man by his collar at once, call for the police, and she would be rescued, but instead the doorman hurried to the sleighs that had just arrived in order to take packages wrapped in brown paper and offer a white glove to a lady deeply sunk into her foptail coat. The old man rushed inside through the wide double door and to the reception desk; to the right one could hear the pop of billiard balls, as the smell of cigars and hot food wafted in – there was a restaurant that was situated on the basement floor, one of Riga's most luxurious

entertainment spots. In the evenings it was the round gold 10 ruble coins that sparkled along with the 25 ruble notes. The first Latvians that had just gained the means favored this place, those who wanted to eagerly spend, and show off to the Germans and Russians to spite them.

"Good evening, I have number 402. It's reserved," the old man mumbled under his nose.

The small boy, Pauls, began crying loudly, and, as the receptionist, wrinkling his brow at the strange company while scrutinizing them, dragged his finger along in the guest book, the boldest – Imants – also started sniffing. "Can't you see that something's wrong?" Laimdota didn't understand how the receptionist hadn't noticed it.

"My wife stayed at home, right at the last minute before the trip...she had cramps in her stomach that made her cry out in pain," the dark-haired man murmured, laughing foolishly, but it was apparent that the receptionist did not care about the ailments of the wives of the new arrivals.

"Yes, you have a reservation. A suite," he said, studying the thin overcoat of the guest with suspicion, "at 12 rubles a day." The receptionist took a short break, looking at the peculiar evening guests questioningly with raised eyebrows. "At the moment we have many guests. The room rate is high at the hotels during the holidays."

"Of course, absolutely. I can pay in advance." The old man pulled out a thick envelope and gave him a pile of banknotes that had been crumpled in many hands and left a gold 5 ruble coin to the side. "And dinner, for all of us. Some sweets for the children as well. We are here in Riga for the celebration, but my wife came down with something right before the holidays..."

"Of course, sir, I will take care of it." The slicked-back hair of the receptionist glistened in the light of the brilliant lamp in the lobby. He, with a broad smile, bowed, and a key fastened to a heavy chain appeared on the table. "Fourth floor, on the right. Does Sir have luggage or other belongings?"

"No, we..." the old man hesitated, "they will bring it tomorrow, there was some sort of mix-up." Pauls once again began crying loudly, and Laimdota pulled her small arm vigorously, but the old man's grip was tight.

"Well, come now, little Pauls. Soon, just a moment more, and we'll be there, Mommy will also be here in the morning." He turned to the right and entered the much darker staircase. Esplanade Square could be seen from the high windows of room no. 402 like the back of one's hand. The children's kidnapper at first dashed to the heavy curtains, and for a moment he eyed the square. He slowly closed the curtains of all three windows in the middle room, then the two windows in the adjacent room as well. The moment they were freed from his firm grip, the three small children huddled next to one another at the end of the narrow hallway. Little Pauls whimpered, and Laimdota felt that she couldn't bear it either, but Imants watched the old man's activity near the windows in earnest. In the semi-darkness it was visible that he turned to the children, and put a chubby finger to his thick mustache saying, "Shh, let's be quiet." Pressed up against the closed entrance doors, the children, as if stunned, peered at this strange man who approached them.

"Hello," he whispered hoarsely. "I will be your Santa Claus. There will be gifts and a Christmas tree. We will have everything. You just have to calm down." He sat down on the



dark carpet in the middle of the huge room, the light of Esplanade Square pushing itself past the curtains drawn shut in the room. The bustle on the street could be heard, along with shouting and somebody going through the hallway with soft steps walking by singing, "Will you love me in December as you do in May?"

"There's a surprise." the old man said, raising both of his hands up as if he was praying and spread them out. He smiled. "There's a surprise that awaits you. And," he pursed his lips together like he was blowing into a bag and almost burst into song, "the kind that you remember your whole life, that you remember and talk about."

A solemn peace had overcome the stranger, which had not yet reached the distraught children. However, he would have been ready to laugh out of joy from that peace that had he not experienced for many years. Finally respite! No more climbing that mountain, no more trials ever again.

Upon getting up and dropping his coat with the ragged lining, the old man turned on both massive chandeliers, as well as the green table lamps in both rooms, then in the hallway near the children, and in the luxurious bathroom. With each new light bulb it became apparent how he was changing – he wasn't an old man, but a man full of strength and conviction who was around forty or even younger. Only the faded coat and battered brown boots made him resemble an old man. He sat down on the edge of the chair near the black desk, glanced through a pile of writing paper, took a dip pen, dipped it in ink, and carelessly scribbled down a few words in the middle of a sheet.

"Tomorrow's Christmas Day...we will have it, we will have everything," he murmured, sinking into deep contemplation. His memories came from the smell of the paper or

perhaps the little girl's warm eyes, the confused look of the mother, the unhappy face of the little boy.

"Happy children, three." He looked at them almost as if he was looking through them.

Suddenly remembering something, he began to pace, all the while speaking quickly.

Tomorrow was to be the day for gifts a Christmas tree. Yes, of course, Mommy was to be there as well, the old man answered little Pauls hastily. The boy once again cried loudly when the word "mommy" was mentioned. All of this was only for a surprise, like the miraculous moment of the holidays. They would remember this evening with a good laugh.

He pointed to the wide sofa near the wall for the children. He told them to come closer and sit and laughed nervously. It hurt one's ears. He was not a master of pure laughter: he didn't know how to laugh heartily or with confidence. The children squeezed together came into the room timidly, and sat on the very edge of the soft sofa and watched how the man with the dark complexion plodded with broad steps through the luxurious room – wall to wall, stopping for a moment near a window, then to the hallway, and back. He spoke energetically and quickly, talking about the school out towards Ērgļi, which had caught fire just the day before yesterday. All the writings had burned, but everything had been memorized, so it should be rewritten. His rough hand with the thick, yellowed nails once again caressed the pile of paper. The man talked about how, a year prior, during this period he was spending a lot of time in church, each day, attending a number of times a day, and that had saved him, that had taken him here, "back to his family," he said. It reminded him of his father, who had died in spring - "So that would be your grandpa." - And his mama, who waited for all of them at home.

"We have our own mommy," the oldest boy said, who clenched his hands into small fists and would have gotten in the old man's way had he been a bit bigger.

"Arvīds, you protect your owl." The man stopped, looked at the children with a tilted head, then looked once more without talking. He sat on the desk with a sudden confusion, murmured, turned his back to the children, and stooped over the sheets of paper.

The room became quiet, as if there was no one there, just a metal writing utensil scratching a rough piece of paper, the calming clink against the edge of the inkwell, a sigh, and the whispering of paper began anew. The children watched with a frightened look at the gray hump of his back and threw a glance towards the door, but the smallest one – little Pauls – tearstained, fell right asleep in the warm room. "No, we won't leave him," both of the older ones thought, exchanging looks, and then laid down next to the little one.

### **Arvīds Gaiļkalns**

Finally, they fell asleep. The girl had curled up in a little ball with the youngest, but the third, the stubborn one, slept apart from them. I sensed that the time for celebration was near and would soon be brought to completion, and the guilt would finally melt away. Melt away? It would melt away, be cast off. I would break out of the cocoon and once again become a single whole – a person. Rūdolfš. This primeval name smoldered on the paper, my root: "would melt away." Like a candle. I drew faint lines around the name, joined three dots. The city had calmed, the window was shut tight, and the room was warm and quiet. Yes, it seemed at last it was possible. I would set forth on my long-awaited path. I was jolted by a light fever due to fear, because to go back so far – it was the rare person who

successfully survived that. I was already swimming downstream, I was there, and the middle of June was very close to the beginning of a totally new century – the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Looking from a bird's-eye view, one could make out a triangle on our side – the apple tree that had caught fire in the spring on one end, the mighty owls' oak on the second, but on the third there was a sad, old alder tree leaning to the side with a cross carved into its bark. It was a cross made by Brods the schoolteacher. If the trees were joined with a line, our house was located on one of the edges of the triangle – the house of the Reiznieks with a low overhanging roof, a somewhat tilted entrance to the cellar, a dilapidated barn; on the second border, which climbed the hill – the rebuilt Gaiļkalns farm with new buildings, a tall silo and expanded lime kiln. At the foot of the hill was the Ogre River, which wound around the edge of the triangle, flowing particularly quickly there, and became broader and deeper as it freed itself from the grass of the shore.

We used to understand each another with half a word, sometimes without any words at all. If I saw him coming up along the very side of the road, with one leg in the corn, I knew that the day would not be very merry, that he'd be downcast and quiet. However, if he ran down the middle of the road, jumped over the root of the crabapple tree, and yelled out, then it would be a joyous day. How did we spend our time, what did we do from the early morning until the late dusk of summer evenings? I can't remember. What could have been so precious, so promising in our conversations and daily life, boys of an age where they could be shepherds? But I do know that I had always wanted a brother like Arvīds, my neighbor from the Gaiļkalnses' house on the other side of the river. Arvīds was only three years older,

however, as time passed, the difference grew bigger and at the same time I, like someone possessed, quickly gravitated towards him. Until I realized I was in the current, right in the middle of the river. Split in two, full of some sort of guilt, which one could liberate oneself from only miraculously by chance, and my lot that was cast, praise the Lord, had come up a winner this time.

"Arvīds Gaiļkalns." After writing these two simple names, I looked more closely at them. I felt how powerful, how deep they were. Unctuous and eddying like the Ogre near the support pillars of the old bridge. Perhaps that is what made Arvīds so strong? As soon as he entered the yard, joy would appear in every home and chatter would break out. Men who were considerably older than us came and showed us every new thing, talked about the tilled field, or the tree that was chopped down, as if the delivery of every new thing was dependent on Arvīds's opinion. The women would busy themselves with setting the table and the girls would gaze at him as if... it appeared to me that the passion of rivalry had been released in them unnoticed. In their forced laughter, they buzzed around him like bees. I already wanted to write "like bees around a flower," but I couldn't put "flower" on the piece of paper because Arvīds was not at all a flower that adorned the room and faded. He did not fade. There were deep and broad roots in him – a singular root, strong and sinewy like an oak. He was able to provide hope and assurance. I don't know if there was anything that could scare Arvīds Gaiļkalns.

Fear. Yes, you'd have to go some years back – I was perhaps five, Arvīds was eight, but Jausma, my sister, was fourteen then. Now I am able to easily calculate the years. That's also something I picked up from him. At the time the gray oak seemed four times the size it

is today. The world, an entire herd of sheep could find shelter in the shade of this huge turtle. The wood shavings, which acted as an army, took up their positions among the mighty twisted roots, while the enemies' horses pulled themselves up from the ravine. What did he, the ancestor of all oaks, think about those boys, who nibbled at his petrified flesh, tearing off little pieces of bark, blushing, climbing up to the crown of branches? They were afraid of climbing higher, for that was the beginning of the kingdom of wasps and bees. Each year they dash under the hives to the cavities – there were at least five of them – while a family of owls had settled in the higher levels for their eternal reign. No, they were not afraid in the least - when we brought home baby owls that we had chosen from the oak cavity my father, with no shadow of doubt in his sunken eyes, had smashed two of the three tiny heads with the back of an axe. Arvīds, a cheeky kid that was brown as a hazelnut, with brown-yellow hair, yanked his baby owl out from under the axe.

"What are you doing, dummy, they're the ones eating the chickens. Give it here."

"No, I won't give you mine. You might as well chop my hand off." And he, blinking his gray eyes, calmly put his hand on the small log between the two dead balls of feathers and claws, where there were just a few drops of blood. Father looked for a moment at Arvīds like he was looking at a talking grasshopper, spit, threw the axe between the stacks of firewood and walked away. Jausma and I stood there with our mouths open wide in utter surprise: underneath father's intent look we normally would hang our heads, but he had walked off instead. Arvīds remained with a live baby owl in his hands, having protected his rights.

Later, when Jausma dug a grave for the dead baby owls behind the barn, I reasoned that it would have been better for us to have been born to a father like Arvīds's dad, Old Matiss.

Jausma didn't like how I was talking. She growled I shouldn't babble on about things that I can't comprehend yet, but I thought that the quick end for the birds had upset her a bit. "You didn't have to drag those nasty things home," she said, as she put the birch branches in the form of a cross on the freshly dug mound, said her farewells and glanced back one last time.

Afterwards we trudged home. Mama was already waiting for us near the porch, waving energetically, and, as always, I dashed to her, springing up and down as I ran. Jausma stayed far behind. She wasn't in the habit of running to Mama. She also already only said, "Made." I had never heard her say "Mama."

"She can't be a mama to Jausma at all. She's too young," said Arvīds all-knowingly. We were in his house, in the well-lit central room, a round and tall vase in the middle of the table, lush peonies drooping around its edges. He glanced at my pointer finger, which followed the alphabet. Arvīds diligently readied me for the beginning of school. He wrestled with my heavy head, which could not collect the letters together so they would come to light as ready-made words.

"Oh, la-nd-sss, ugh," I murmured.

"Well, and together that would be..." Arvīds fidgeted in the creaking chair, and my head was ringing from putting the words together. The fly under the ventilation pane buzzed in the room. All the little letters hovered above it and knocked against the window pane.

"La-nd-scape. You'll have to try again and again, until you can overcome it. You can't give up."

"Why can't Mama be a mama for Jausma?"

"The difference in age is too small. Children aren't born to anyone at 13 years of age. Look."

He pulled out a piece of paper and drew straight lines. "This is us: this is the year 1881," he wrote down and made a thick dot under the number. "Your mama just celebrated her birthday – she's 28, right? Then her birth year is 1853." He again made a dot and wrote down "Made." "Ok, this year your sister will turn 15, so her birth year is 1866." A dot, with the name "Jausma" appeared underneath. "Now the most important thing – if you take 1853 from 1866, you get 13. That means that your mama was only 13 years old when Jausma was born. She was younger than Jausma is now, and you just can't have children at that age. Old Ede told me that, and well, she's totally right. So, do you understand?"

"Probably, yes." I looked at the dots and lines, the numbers. I couldn't grasp much of what Arvīds had said, but an uneasy doubt remained. And still at the time it seemed to me that there wasn't a smarter person in the world than Arvīds. But there were others that had such thoughts – one night I couldn't fall asleep and I heard how Father was whispering to Mama:

"The Gaiļkalns boy is supposedly doing things that are making the schoolmaster's jaw drop. Apparently they sent one of the papers he wrote to the priest. Who knows what he wrote there, but supposedly he's mighty famous. I don't know what could be on that paper."

"Who said that?" I heard something peculiar in Mama's voice, almost as if she was very sad concerning Arvīds's achievements.

"It was Edene. I met her near the church, all puffed up, as big as dough in a bowl, and just rattling away. She probably spruced up the truth about the paper a bit. I am just thinking how it's going to go for our son, whether he'll even be able to be in school. I can't be of any help with his papers and books."



"He'll be able to. Arvīds will help him," Mama said curtly.

"Look, what a wiseguy," Jausma hissed when I told her about the numbers and dots on Arvīds's paper. "Let him keep his nose out of our business. You should ask if that so-called aunt Ede of his isn't too old to have children. Let him count that very carefully." My sister shouted the words so loudly that you could hear what she said through the wind at the Gaiļkalns house.

"Son," Mama said in the evening, taking me into her lap, and I understood that Jausma had told her everything. "Those are things that little ones shouldn't be told, because they have not yet been provided with the understanding of grown-ups. I am raising both of you – you and Jausma – I never keep tabs of those figures in my head. You tell your friend he can speculate what could be and what can't. Throw those years out of your head too. It would be better to learn from Arvīds, learn to read, because only that will make you free."

"What do I have to become free from?"

"Dear, dear little Rūdolfs. The brother of my father, your grandfather, is far away in Kurzeme and is a very famous wheelwright – his master's quarters are as wide as a barn, the family and hired help is as big as the three of them on this side. And he's pushing all the children, all the relatives to go to school because the people from our generation don't have too many paths they can go on in the world. One leads straight from us, because the bread of a farmhand can be quite bearable for a rather long time. However, sooner or later you pay for it with your entire life. The second path goes up a hill – it is overgrown and rocky, and in places so narrow that the people traveling along it have to go sideways, to squeeze through.

However, this little path promises the highest prize for people – freedom. He said that, and those words have weight."

"The path is already going up, from our house to the Gaiļkalnses. Just that it's not so narrow, I cover it every day."

"Yes, that's right. Just that the one I am telling you about is much, much steeper and harder. And school is just the very beginning of this path." Mama was once again smiling. She was the most beautiful in the world, always. She looked at me so warmly, little dots in her greenish eyes, the late afternoon sun shining between the branches of the linden trees. Mama fluttered her long eyelashes, raised her arms, stretched herself. Ten golden fingers were covered with sunlight, which went down through the hands of my most beautiful mama, crept into the slender curve of her neck above her shoulder and merged in the locks of her dark hair, with the smell, peace, and safety of summer rocking in me tenderly. Then Mama sang to me – first of all she buzzed like a forest bee, then the first words came out silently from her red lips, then she laughed, freeing all of her strength. The words glimmered and ran like the Ogre River. The wind took her song over the river, over the hill, over the powerful house of the Gaiļkalns family, over the pine forest and further still. I was the only one in the world who twisted and turned from Mama's song.

The moon above the city whitened the snow-dusted roofs and fields and glimmered in the open space of the frozen river, where the wind blew the snow away in some places all the way down to the dark glassy ice. One man smiled over his totally whitened face while a greenish light fell from the electric table lamp. He moaned something like a song, like he was sighing, and his hand drew light lines between the three dots. Then he colored over the

words "will melt," which he had carefully written in the middle of the triangle. In that place he wrote: "Rūdofls. Whole." The line of ink reminded one of a river that runs over the sheet of paper, flows beyond the edge of the dark table, disappears without a sound, and is absorbed in the thick carpet of the hotel room.