

Biography: Writer and translator Baiba Zīle (1974) was born in Ventspils, Latvia, and now lives in Frankfurt am Main in Germany. She has translated into Latvian the works of Boris Vian, Albert Camus, and Simone Weil, among others. Prior to *The Master of Lies* (2017), Zīle published the novel *Simulating Life* (2006) under the pseudonym Anna Kravicka. She has also written several books in English under the pen name Barbara Sea.

Synopsis: The novel *Master of Lies* is a fast-paced tale in which a classic thriller and crime plot are used to create a more profound theme – that of a person’s path to self-awareness during a period of historic complexity, and the dilemma of balancing the desire for survival with that for a clear conscience. The engrossing story of love, crime, and a search for the meaning of life unfolds against a vividly depicted background of recent Latvian history. Alise and Aleksandrs grow up in late-Soviet Riga – in the same period of history, but in different worlds. Alise is a child of a well-to-do party functionary, while Aleksandrs, having arrived in the capital city from the countryside, ends up in a communal apartment and hanging out with street gangs. The grown-up Alise spends most of her time in her own world of dreams and feelings – living in a bubble that gently sweeps her through the times of change, while Aleksandrs flees the USSR and becomes part of an international mafia dealing in gemstones.

Excerpt

Alice

“Master of Lies”, I repeated.

“Yes, you can call me that, if you don’t want to call me by name. But you can choose yourself.”

“I knew somebody... a guy who could tell if somebody was lying” “Interesting. Even I can’t do that. Where is he now?”

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More information: info@latvianliterature.lv

"He died. In a fire."

"Of course. Such knowledge is too much for someone. So you wanted to know about your father?"

"Yes. Did he also lie to you?"

Master of Lies laughed again like a young man.

"Alice, no-one lies to me, that is the whole point. It is not possible to lie to the Master of Lies because he will always find the truth."

"But..."

"Be patient. You will see. A cigarette?"

I did not notice that I'd finished the previous one. Ash was hanging at the very end and fell to the ground. Neither me nor Master of Lies paid any attention to that.

One thing was clear – Master of Lies wanted to involve me in some kind of business, the way he did with my father. My father shot himself and if I was going to make a deal with Master of Lies, I could end the same way.

"I will not sign anything."

"Jesus Christ, we are not signing anything! The signature is one more lie, but there are enough lies for us. We will work only based on a mutual trust."

If I would not sign anything and there would be no witnesses to our agreement, then in theory I was not risking anything. That, I as a lawyer, knew. No proof – no crime.

"Listen to me, Alice. There is a little dark secret hidden in every person. A little piece of darkness that lives in every heart. I want, Alice, that you give this little piece to me. Nothing more, nothing less."

For a moment it seemed to me that he was a bit drunk. However his blue eyes were staring at me, coldly and directly.

"A piece of what?"

"A tiny bit of somebody's lies. Give me their lies and every time I will give you a little piece of truth. Including about your father."

"What their lies?" "Well... you will see."

"But how would I do that?"

"The same way you did with the others – with Pierre, with that guy from the TV. You knew their secrets. Weaknesses, secret desires... that you will find out later. Don't touch your husband though; he is not interesting to me. I am interested in other men."

"You want me to meet other men? That was your plan? You want to be my pimp?"

"A pimp? Hahaha! No. It is not my business how you would do that, but remember – if there will be no passion, there will be no heart. And where is no heart, there is no little dark piece that I need. So... think about it."

I felt dizzy. I had drunk the whole glass, I never even noticed, I was so appalled. Somewhere, very far, like a cock's song after midnight I heard the ring – the first act has ended and also the intersection has passed.

"But... why? Are you a voyeur? Are you feeling aroused by all that?" "I like the way you think. But no – I am not. It is just my job."

"So you want me to meet other men."

"You can also meet women, I don't mind. But bear in mind – it will be much more complicated and time-consuming. I would not recommend that."

"And then I should tell you their secrets." "Yes."

"But that is against the law."

"Where – in which law is it written that you are not allowed to gossip?" Master of Lies laughed again.

"But remember – to capture the dark heart there should be passion. No passion – no heart."

"If I understand correctly... you want me to sleep with them."

"Where have you seen passion without sleeping with someone? Are you fifteen years old?"

I mechanically gave Master of Lies my empty glass. I should tell him something, something clever, something based on fact. Something about my father, that I was hiding in the yard when I heard their last conversation, when Master of Lies handed him the gun ... But my lips were paralyzed, not from the cognac, of course not, what was one glass in my age, - I was just tired and I should get rid of Master of Lies. It was useless to argue with him – that was clear, to talk about feelings or moral values even more useless. He was just an old pervert and there was time to go home. My father's destiny belonged to the past and I had made a big mistake by touching it.

"For sure you think I am an old pervert," Master of Lies said smirking. "No, why..."

"And now you are thinking how to get rid of me." "You don't ..."

"Don't worry, there is no rush. Go home, relax, sleep, think about it... and you will find a dark heart that you will want to open, believe me. That always happens to someone who is looking for the truth. And everybody – remember, everybody has a dark heart. Only then you will find the truth."

"I..."

"Don't worry. When you will be ready, just find Ansis in "The Little Barrel", write a letter to me and I will contact you. He will know how to find me."

"And then?"

"And then I will find you."

Alexander

I saw the White Mare's ring for a short while, then the whole group left the table and went to the next room. "That is Bela's office", Gerda said, "we can't go there". After a while I heard the door closing. Bela was coming to us.

He looked satisfied, but a bit worried.

"So, tell me what you heard? What about Katz?"

I honestly told everything I understood from the short conversation. That the man with chalma wanted to show the ring to Katz, but the other – in a striped suit discouraged them because he was afraid of someone named 'King'.

"And...?"

"And he said that... that King could kill you." "Ok..." Bela frowned.

"They said that they would not show..."

Bela was silent for a while, then took a dark red bottle from the buffet and filled three glasses.

"Come here!" He said to Gerda.

We 'chin-chinned'. None said a word.

"It is late, Sasha." Bela said. "You will stay here tonight."

He waived at me. We went upstairs, to the second floor. There he opened the door to the big room with an impressive bed. It looked much better than my modest doss in the gallery.

"The bathroom is on the left. There you will also find the towels. Are you tired?" "Not really."

I turned to the bed, when Bela laughed.

"Wait, that is not all. You did well tonight with your task and there is a prize waiting for you."

"A prize?"

Gerda appeared at the door. She had changed from cocktail dress into a black silk dressing gown. She was also wearing high heel shoes. In the dark corridor she looked so similar to White Mare that I shivered.

"Good night," Bela echoed on the stairs.

Gerda's breath smelled of the port we had just drunk, but her palm, touching my hands, was oozing calmness.

"But you... aren't you a girlfriend of Bela?" She laughed.

"I am his friend, just like you. I work with him."

She kissed my neck. Her lips were soft and warm. I felt like a fool and there were thousands of questions buzzing in my head, but Gerda was winding around me like a warm and curly snake.

"Who is Katz? And King?" Gerda laughed again.

"You will find out everything from Bela. Soon he will tell you everything. He has big plans for you."

"Like what?"

Her lips were soft, warm and encouraging. Gerda slowly unbuttoned my skirt.

Then she unzipped my pants and started to slowly caress my dick. Only now I understood how turned on I was.

"Don't worry about it. Just let yourself in and everything will happen."

I gently moved her head upwards, opened the dressing gown and started to kiss her breasts.

The resemblance to White Mare was still there, she was here in the air like a ghost between me and Gerda and the desire was immense. I did not understand where I was and what is going on, but the one thing was clear – I had to have this woman tonight and not only once.

After all I was making love to death.