

**Biography:** Jana Egle, born in 1963, is a Latvian poet and prose writer. Her first collection of poems *Dzirdēt noklusēto* [To Hear the Unsaid] was published in 2002. She has been writing prose since 2011. In the 2015 Prose Readings Festival, she received the main prize for her stories *Tāds Rudens* [Such Autumn] and *Aiziet jūriņā* [At Sea]. Egle's collection of stories *Gaismā* [Into the Light] won the Annual Latvian Literature Award 2017 and her episodic novel *Svešie jeb Miļeņkij ti moi* [Strangers or Milenky ty moy] was shortlisted for the Annual Latvian Literature Award 2019.

**Synopsis:** This episodic novel comprises eight stories: Margarita, Harold, Alyevtina, Sandris, Theophil, Adrian, Veronika and Carrie. The protagonists of each narrative are closely connected with each other; this is revealed when reading the stories one after the other, in sequence. The author has succeeded in incorporating a wider characterisation of the period in each story. Through the stories of Margarita, Harold, Sandris, Theophil, Adrian and Carrie we catch a glimpse of contemporary life, through the story of Alyevtina we are introduced to the harsh realities of the Soviet era, but Veronika's life story reaches back to events that happened during World War II.

## Excerpt

### ADRIAN

#### *Here and now*

The mobile phone buzzes, a 'caller not identified' number shows upon the screen, but Adrian recognises it. It's Adrian's secret phone number for staying in touch with his flings and with the mad little lizard Judy. After their last conversation Adrian threw it into the glove compartment angrily, thinking that afterwards he would push it down deeper inside, but he forgot... Didn't even think about it even in the morning, when Margarita

couldn't get her car started and asked Adrian for the keys to the BMW. Today Adrian is working from home again, he doesn't really need the car... Margarita took the keys and drove off. And he didn't think of the mobile the whole day. There was a lot of work to be done, all of it urgent; screwing or Judy didn't even enter into his mind.

Actually, there is nothing to hide. Adrian can tell Margarita everything and explain, the numbers of the last few flings are under fake names, the others have been deleted, but the phone calls from Lizard are few and far between, and as for the text messages – it's plain to see, isn't it, that the little one is simply mad, totally lost her mind, he has never replied to Judy's insane texts. At this point Adrian is furious that he didn't delete them, and the numbers of the flings as well. At first he would delete everything, however, for the two years that he'd been using this phone Margarita had never stumbled across it and his vigilance naturally slipped. If truth be told, he cannot explain anything – neither the screwing around, nor this indefinable relationship with Judy: it all lies somewhere deep down inside where words and formulas cannot reach.

Adrian draws a deep breath and presses the reply button.

Margarita is lying. Adrian puts the receiver down. Why is she lying? That's not her work colleague's telephone.

Margarita was calling from his secret mobile phone and lying. Adrian, confused by the unexpected call, went along with her game and now all kinds of questions and speculations are milling around in his head, jostling each other and pushing each other off their feet. Scenarios of infidelity and provocation play through his mind. Margarita has a lover, definitely. Adrian adjusts this thought to his feelings, he has imagined this situation so

many times before – how would it be if Margarita suddenly found a lover? Would that change his detachment and boredom with their relationship? From time to time, when weighing it over in his mind and wondering how it would be, Adrian had hoped for relief. All Margarita's tension, craziness, anxiety and never-ending questioning would then be directed at someone else and he would be able to relax, finally. It's so tiring; at the beginning of their relationship he thought that when they started living together, she would calm down, settle and find her equilibrium. It didn't happen.

***A few days earlier***

"How did it go today?"

Margarita, having kicked off her high-heeled boots by the front door, bursts into the room, unwrapping from her neck the several metre-long fine crochet scarf. Adrian doesn't answer, in any case she never hears him. Margarita strides over to the window and flings it wide open.

"There's no air in here. None at all."

So saying, she returns to the front hall, picks up her boots, puts them back down again in their proper place, neatly, both together, heels against the wall, and, demonstratively making a lot of noise, does the same with Adrian's heavy outdoor shoes. Adrian couldn't care less where and how they have been left. Usually they stay right there, lying about by the door. Once in a while, he purposely leaves his shoes in their proper place. But with their toes pointing towards the wall.

Adrian starts to feel cold, he gets up and takes the quilt from the bed and, having wrapped himself in it, continues working at the computer. The administration of webpages, a routine job, he is tired of it just like he's sick of Margarita's daily tantrums, but his client is waiting.

"Aren't you going to talk to me?"

It's Margarita's voice once again, right behind his back

"Good evening, darling," Adrian replies pointedly, eyes glued to the monitor.

"Where have you been? You've been out, your boots were in their proper place this morning. And your gloves lying about on the kitchen table. Where were you? You said that you were going to work all day."

Adrian can hear that Margarita is struggling to control the tone of her voice, though a harsh note creeps in now and then.

"I went out to get some cigarettes."

He continues staring at the computer screen, then throws off the quilt and turns towards Margarita. There is a brilliance flaring in her eyes, the one that always appears when any attempt to have a normal conversation or explain something turns out to be a waste of time.

"You're lying! I can tell that you're lying!"

"Yes, I'm lying. Is that better now? What do you want to hear?"

Yes, Adrian is lying. He had gone out, he had a rendezvous with one of his flings. He didn't like this one; in the photo she looked completely different, so nothing happened. Adrian gets up, goes out into the kitchen to get his cigarettes and then goes through the

other room to the balcony. Pulling the door tightly shut from the outside, he lights up a smoke. It's cold, not only his hands but his whole body is trembling. Third floor. Far down below, the paths of the internal courtyard with high concrete edging. In their first year, shortly after they had moved here to live together, Margarita with her endless interrogations stemming from her jealousy had driven Adrian to the point where he was standing on the balcony railing, teetering, arms outstretched wide either side to keep his balance and swaying this way and that, and not only with his body alone. He hadn't cheated on her then, not once. His mind was perfectly clear, momentary visions of the trajectory of the fall flashed past as if sketched in with a sharp pencil. Only he wasn't certain that his head would hit an edge or the cement below. That's why he hesitated. What if something went wrong and he ended up disabled - not an attractive prospect at all. That time, while he was swaying and wavering, he looked over his shoulder into the room. Margarita was standing at the window. She was frozen still, lips half open, her forehead completely white. With her huge pregnant belly, in the eighth month. And her hands crossed over her stomach, as if guarding it, shielding it from view...

She had nothing to fear. It was just a silly impulse, a moment of weakness. And it has never happened again, no longer does he feel that burning despair, except that now he is totally fed up. He puts out his cigarette and drops the butt into the jar kept on the balcony for that reason. With precise movements he screws the lid shut to stop the stink and goes back inside the apartment. Margarita is now moving about in the kitchen noisily. That's good. Usually cooking calms her down. Even though from the outside it may sound like a massive riot. She doesn't know how to pick up something and put it down, she only knows

how to grab it and then fling it down with a loud clatter. She doesn't know how to open or close anything, only how to wrench it open and then slam it shut. And forever tidying up all the time, putting everything into place, arranging it precisely and immaculately.

"I'll go and pick up Carrie, it's half past five already."

He pulls on his boots and shrugs on his thin parka, and then, without gloves or scarf, escapes out into the stairwell. Once outside he can smell the stink coming from the second-floor piss-up, though the air really is fresher out here.

Carrie cheerfully runs out into the cloakroom and, hands outstretched, immediately presents her dad with a drawing.

"Look, look! I did a drawing of Babala!"

The drawing is a portrait of a human being with a round head and cheeks coloured in with little red circles. The sleek hair, the hat and the face make it difficult to tell whether it is a man or a woman, but there are so many colours, ruches, flowers, ribbons and everything else that Adrian assumes that it must be a woman.

"Is that Babals?" he teases his daughter.

"No, of course not, it's Babala!" Carrie curls her lip and enunciates every single word with emphasis.

"And who is Babala?" Adrian asks, his hard hand fluffing up his daughter's unruly hair, loosely gathered up into a ponytail.

"Good evening, Carrie's Dad."

The teacher is standing at the door. Today it's the sensible one. The one that's worth having a word or two with occasionally about how Carrie is fitting in with the group. The other one, a redhead, seems to Adrian to be altogether flaky: she stutters, flushing pink, giggling and unable to say anything normal about his child. He is not convinced that the children under her care are safe. But these are only vague impressions.

"Babala is, Babala is..." Carrie plucks at her Dad's hand, ready to explain, but Adrian has already turned towards the teacher who clearly wants to say something.

"Today we were drawing our best friend," she says. And casts a meaningful look at the piece of paper with drawing all over it in Carrie's hand. "Carrie did a very beautiful drawing."

Carrie is hopping around excitedly, but then the teacher whispers in her ear. Carrie hands the drawing to her father and runs off to the toilet.

"Carrie's Dad, you should have a chat with your daughter. Perhaps you should even see a psychologist. It seems that she has an imaginary friend."

"Alright then," Adrian growls under his nose, without looking at the teacher and has already started opening the cupboard with the picture of a silly-looking bear cub on the door.

"It's quite serious, Carrie's Dad. She insists that it's a real friend, this Babala, one that she misses a lot and hasn't seen for a long time."

Adrian sighs. An imaginary friend, heaven's sake, has any child ever grown up without an imaginary friend? Up until he was eleven years old, every night, huddled under the blankets Adrian would talk over all his joys and sorrows with an utterly worn and faded

rag doll clown. He doesn't even know where it came from, and how he came to have it, but the clown was the only one who ever listened without reproof to his yearnings and the hate that arose from them, and his anger with Grandma and anything that she did, or said, or even how she moved, and then afterwards, eyes filled with tears, begged for forgiveness. He didn't have anyone else - only his grandmother. The old raggedy clown was his most faithful friend. Adrian is irritated. They've lost the plot with their psychological theories.

The teacher lingers awhile, as if waiting for Carrie's Dad to comment, but eventually, not having received any response, she turns around and goes back into the classroom to speak to the three children who are still waiting for their parents. Carrie has come back from the toilet and, humming quietly, they both get dressed, say their goodbyes and go out into the street. Adrian lifts his daughter up on to his shoulders. It's already dark and the streetlights weave knotted and curled rings of light among the damp bare branches of the trees.

### ***Even longer ago***

He spotted Judy for the first time in early September, on his way home from work. It was raining heavily, you could hardly see through it, and at the bus stop that did not have any shelter at all there was a child sitting on the bench. Behind the curtain of rain she looked even tinier and more fragile than she is in reality. Adrian, unable to bear the dramatic scene, stopped and opened the door of his BMW.

"Jump in!" he calls out, not caring about the soft, cloth-covered car seat on which the girl, soaked to the skin and without a moment's doubt, sits down, after shaking out her



black shoulder length hair. There's no point, the rain is pouring down in sheets, you can't shake it off. Yet she wriggles like a wet dog. But when he sees her face, Adrian gets the impression that he is looking at a skittery lizard. Eyes slightly protruding, her mouth a thin line, narrow lips, barely there. A fine-boned chin, though rather flat and wide. Her hair, flattened down by the rain, makes her look even more like a lizard. Lizard. She sits down and places her backpack on her knees.

"Where do you need to go? I'll take you there."

Without saying a word, the girl smiles at Adrian. There is something odd in this smile, a hint of the lewd and the inappropriate. Adrian realises that the girl is older than he had thought when he'd first seen her through the car window. A schoolgirl, nonetheless.

"Can't I come to yours?" she says unexpectedly, in a soft deep voice.

Adrian stares at the lizard more carefully. No, she's not a prostitute. Small skinny schoolgirl, schoolbag on her knees.

"What's the price?"

For some unknown reason he asks her, fully aware that he is behaving like a fool. That's of no interest to him. The girl could well be his daughter, if in his youth he'd been a bit more ardent or careless.

Lizard's prominent eyes freeze, closely observing Adrian's face. But in the girl's gaze there is no hint of fear or disgust. Rather a kind of painful longing, a soundless howl of desperate loneliness, a sudden opening up, a readiness to be vulnerable. Adrian is confused by the unexpected reaction and his sudden urge to take the little lizard into his hands, to dry the rain off her body and hair and to put her – like that, warmed up, dry, settled – in a place

where she could curl up carefree and relaxed, not afraid to bask in the sun like a real lizard on a sun-warmed boulder.

"Sorry, I'm only joking." He backs off clumsily. "Really, don't take it seriously. A moment of madness. I'll take you home, just tell me where."

"I don't want to go home..." The girl bows down her head and presses her forehead against the backpack. Her wet hair and clothing are steaming faintly inside the warmth of the car. Something makes him realise that it's not just teenage angst, childish stubbornness or the first attempts to prove to herself and her family that this little girl is already grown up. The child is alone. The unmistakeable, sharply cutting breath of loneliness emanates from her together with the tendrils of steam of evaporating rain. Adrian is unerring – he recognises this breath.

"I guess I'm in for it," he thinks to himself without worrying unduly. The drops of rain are no longer drumming on the roof of the BMW with the roar of a thousand voices but pattering in their natural, steady rhythm, ever more slowly and gently. The girl stays silent, head still resting on her bag. Adrian, too, doesn't dare to speak, he doesn't want to disturb her – maybe she is crying, or maybe she has fallen asleep in the warmth...

The sound of the rain peters out completely. The lizard raises her head, her eyes turn out to be clear and calm. The girl stares hard into Adrian's face once again.

"Thanks."

She turns away and reaches for the handle, then opens the door and climbs out of the car without a backward look. She shakes her hair again like a wet pup, returns to the bus stop and sits down again on the bench. Adrian continues with his journey but only a

moment later cannot understand whether what happened was for real or whether the girl was just a ghostly apparition that had emerged from the rain, a girl with the face of a lizard. He brushes his hand over the car seat. The cloth upholstery is damp.

Three days later, Adrian spots the lizard at another bus stop, in a completely different part of town. This time the sun is shining, it is warm, but the girl still looks hunched up. She is sitting and reading – the bag once more on her knees, a book on top of it. She is sitting at the bus stop and reading, as if none of the town hustle and bustle, noise, smell or exhaust fumes were there, surrounding her. Once again the breath of loneliness gusts past the car, and Adrian is unable to drive past. Having found a space to pull in, he gets out of the car and walks back to the bus stop. He touches the apparition lightly on the shoulder. Loneliness assaults his nostrils, pungent like ammonia. With a sudden movement the raised head reveals eyes that are even more bulging, and the flat mouth is already opening to say something, when the girl realises who it is that's bothering her and immediately relaxes.

"Hi. I thought that I'd meet you again but I wouldn't have believed that it would be so soon," she says tranquilly, closing her book and shoving it into the bag. People are walking past the bus stop on both sides, striding, pitter-pattering, scuttling, dragging themselves, loitering, hurtling, hurrying... The bus arrives, spits out a small crowd of half-masticated pitter-patterers, scuttlers and loiterers, sucks up another portion and then lurches away. But everything is external. Internally they are just the two of them: the man, perplexed inside himself, who cannot comprehend what and why he wants something from the girl who reminds him of a lizard, and the girl exuding the sharp tang of loneliness – each

word and every movement of hers is a confirmation that everything is happening exactly the way that it was meant to.

"Perhaps you'd like to eat something?" Adrian asks, surprising himself again, but evidently not the girl.

"Yes, that would be great. My name is Judy."

Half-closing her eyes in the sunlight, she stands up, slings the bag over her shoulder and follows a silent Adrian, her whole figure expressing inexplicable trust and confidence, as if it were he who was that sun-warmed boulder on which a chilled-out lizard could recover after a lengthy winter.

Adrian can see in Judy a trace of something broken, out of balance, although, observed superficially, the girl seems steady and unshakeable. There is nothing, absolutely no external circumstances, neither favourable nor dramatic, that could arouse in her sudden anger, or excitement, or hysterical bustling around, or alarm, or flight. She is not impressionable and pliable as clay, conversely, she freely and unforcedly glides through everything that happens to her and around her. That is just on the outside, however. When looking at a building with windows and a painted facade from the outside, it cannot be seen that inside everything is a shambles, broken, burnt out in places, and the roof isn't there at all... And then you walk around the building to the other side and notice a wall that once upon a time had supported another house, nestling close to it. You can see the outline of a staircase, rooms one on top of each other, most probably a kitchen, smudged imprints, peeling wallpaper, walls painted with oil-based paint, the place where a table once stood –

underneath it the paint is cleaner, above it the wall is streaked with food smears, rubbed away by sweaty shoulders, tired heads resting on hands... There has been life here – real, plodding, completely ordinary life. And now there is nothing there. A vacant space.

To Adrian, Judy is a reminder him of himself - when some time had passed after grandma's death and Adrian had already realised that nothing would ever be the same as it had been. The only thing that occupied him and motivated him at the time was survival, how to keep on living in a reality that was alien, incomprehensible and frightening. To hide whatever feelings he might have had, to blend in with his surroundings, and time, and space, to on keep flowing forwards together with it. It was awful at the orphanage, but it was only the genuine orphans who really knew this, the ones who had come there from their homes, from real and ordinary life, having lost all their nearest and dearest. Some had been here since birth and had grown up here, others had simply forgotten the first years of their lives. For them it was the only life they had ever known, the only one that they knew how to deal with and understood. And yet others could still remember the filthy apartments, the permanent smell of squalor in their clothing that they could never get rid of and the faces of their mothers or of both parents: puffed up, saliva-covered faces, and would long for them every single day. In Adrian's group there were two such genuine orphans. Adrian and Igor, who was a year and a half younger than him, and whose family – both parents, two sisters and the dog – had all drowned. The car had spun around on the icy road, turning a somersault and falling into a lake and landing on its roof. Igor would sit up bolt upright in the middle of the night with a sudden loud intake of breath. Without a word, not a single articulated sound. Just a shuddering gulp, as if he had just emerged from diving

underwater. Igor has no memory of how they pulled him out of the lake. He didn't even make it to the family funeral: he was still in hospital. He had been at the orphanage for a year when Adrian arrived. The first time Adrian came in and joined the group, he hadn't seen him. Only later did he realise that that was the only way to survive. To be invisible. You had to be either a wolf, a sheep or a forest. That's the way Adrian labelled the various castes in the unshakeable system that ruled over the boys' relationships. And Igor was a forest. Wolves fought among themselves, trying to establish who was the leader of the pack. From time to time they would attack a sheep. The sheep bleated and were forever crawling into places that they weren't meant to be - some of them out of stupidity, others because of a weird wish, one that Adrian found inexplicable, to be noticed and to get hurt. The forest just was, wordless, without movement, alongside, all around, observing everything that was happening, avoiding a direct stare. It noticed everything, but covertly – in shadows and in reflections, and that's what you had to do: avoid looking into people's eyes. Too frightening to look into the eyes of the wolves, too embarrassing to look into the eyes of sheep. Occasionally something would change. A wolf would lose in the fight for supremacy and end up being a sheep; someone in the forest would make a wrong move, look into a wolf's eyes and join the sheep; one of the sheep would slowly, surreptitiously and silently leave the flock, merging with the forest... But neither a sheep nor a forest could ever become a wolf. They were too weak, they were still possessed by fear. Even though, when looking at the shadows and reflections of the wolves, Adrian was not convinced that their fear wasn't any less overwhelming and devastating. The shadows were transparent, there was a lot that shone through them.

"I don't have anyone any more. At least they'll be able to go off and search for their whorish mothers and pisshead fathers," Igor said coolly, as the two of them, standing behind the outdoor boiler room of the children's home and shivering in their thin, brightly coloured clothes donated by Swedish charities, smoked the cigarettes that they had scrounged off the stoker Ivars.

"I don't either," teeth chattering, Adrian mumbled as pulled on his cigarette.

He himself didn't know whether he was lying or speaking the truth. Now and then an image of his mother would float up into his mind like an unsteady, shimmering and grainy black-and-white TV picture, but it didn't have a face, instead – a blurry flickering patch. Only occasionally did he think that he could remember large, grey eyes. There were a few visions that would sometimes flash by, but he wasn't able to tell whether he had imagined them in his yearnings or whether it was something that had really happened. White, glittering snow, Adrian on a sled and an enormous man with thick black hair. The man pulling the sled, Adrian with half-closed eyes watching the tiny stars twinkling in the expanse of snow, flashing on and off in an elusive dazzle. Then mother comes along, felt his cheeks, pulls his scarf in tighter and takes the enormous man by the hand. And Adrian, small and all alone, merely watches from behind as they walk on ahead, pulling the sled and gradually become distant, disappearing and melting into the glittering whiteness of the snow... At other times he would have a vague memory of a voice speaking with a heavy Russian accent, the same as Igor's, only his mother's Latvian was even worse. A monotonous song sung in Russian, a sad melody, the words completely erased from his mind. But she had left Adrian such a long time ago that the only real, genuinely tangible

emotion left in him was hate, double-edged hate. It tore him apart and sought to reach out to his mother in the faraway distant corners of the globe, to hurt her, to tell her how abhorrent and useless she was to him. To find her in order to reject her, to tell her that Adrian didn't need her any more. The boy had absolutely no idea where she lived, what she looked like, or even whether she was still alive... Or whether there was anything that had the capacity to hurt her any more.

Adrian managed to survive throughout his years in the orphanage by staying in the forest. During the first half year he was raped one night by one of the wolves of the largest group – Elvis, but this did not become the norm; it was more that, having popped a few tabs, Elvis was too lazy to go searching in the dark for one of his more usual sheep. At first Adrian slept near the door. When Elvis, with his powerful hands, threw off his blanket and turned him over onto his stomach in one swift move, Adrian did not resist. He had already heard, several times, the squeaking of steel bedsprings in the night, a sheep kicking around, the moans escaping from a clamped mouth, groans, the thuds of blows and slaps. And among it the panting of desire and the throaty gasps of orgasm. Adrian knew that nobody would rise or move, nor would they say or question anything. Adrian, too, had not reacted when the noises and the panting came from the other row of beds. Then he just lay there as if dead, a rag, a piece of meat, and waited for Elvis to be done. It didn't happen that soon, nonetheless it did finish eventually.

When one of the boys in their room, after a decision by the Family Court, returned home to his parents, Adrian moved over to the bed he had vacated – in the furthest corner, next to Igor. From that moment onwards, nobody ever touched him in that way again. Elvis



would come to the room at night quite regularly, at times together with one of his mates, and then anyone could cop it, two or three of them. But they never hit on Adrian again.

During the day Adrian kept quiet, invisible, but he was always tensed up inside, observant, intuitively sensing and spotting a potential attack by the stance of a wolf, by his stare, the tension of his muscles and trembling nostrils. This special awareness protected Adrian from accidentally finding himself at the epicentre of events, he always knew when and through which chink to vanish. To feel cowardly and disloyal – that was a matter of course, if you wanted to remain in the forest. Sheep were beaten up and abused every day.

Judy looks the same as Adrian did when he was living at the children's home. From one aspect – by observing everything, unobtrusively but attentively, she senses every threatening situation as a barely perceptible tingling in the nape of the neck. The Lizard's jaw clenches tightly, and the wide open, protruding eyes seem frozen, yet the gaze is fixed on one point only seemingly – the side vision, clear and precise, infallibly oversees every detail and every smallest movement within the radius of her field of sight. On the other hand – such a trusting readiness for going with the flow, fluidly slipping into various situations and then almost unnoticeably sliding back out of them through barely discernible gaps, is to be admired, enviable. Judy is a forest. A life-filled, mysterious forest.

Judy attracts and interests Adrian, but he cannot explain, even to himself, all the contradictory feelings that draw him to the girl. The most powerful of these is the wish to protect her and fear for her. There are wolves wandering around everywhere, he does not doubt that for a moment, he knows – that's the way it has always been and always will be...

"Why did you let yourself get soaked in the rain that time?"

"Just because. Mamma was at home."

They are sitting in the car; once again Judy declined his offer to take her home.

"And?"

"I just didn't want to. I'm more used to it when she's not there."

"You were meant to be at school."

"What do you know, where I'm supposed to be or not..." Judy mutters grumpily.

"Listen, I don't even understand why I'm wasting my time with you here," Adrian

bursts

out, genuinely offended, at the same time switching on the ignition. The engine, ticking over rhythmically, roars into life.

"That's it, just say where you need to go, I'll take you there and that's it. End of story. Or else get out right now. I can see that you can't find your place, that you are running away from something, but if you are running away then you're bound to run into trouble and it won't be that easy to get out of it again. And you won't be better off, I'm telling you. I know!"

"Sorry..." Judy lifts up her eyes and there is such an abyss in them that Adrian is scared to look at it.

"What's the matter? Are your parents hurting you, beating you, abusing you?"

"I've only got a mum..." Judy says, her voice breaking.

"Your father's buzzed off, has he? Has he's drunk himself into oblivion? I'll give you my number, if you really want to run away, give me a call. We'll go for a drive around town,

or somewhere nice, you'll see that it all blows over, you can get out of every situation, you just have to find solid ground, the real foundations, to survive any situation. You can stand on your own. And I can help. I really can."

Adrian feels inside his pockets, and inside the door compartments until he finds a pen and an old receipt. He scribbles his number on it and places it on the dashboard. The engine continues to hum, rhythmically and steadily. Faces glide past, just outside the window of the car, it's the city's tramps and drunks. Adrian looks at them with disgust. God Almighty, how often he has looked back at them, mostly the women, staring at their swollen wrinkled lips, the mottled skin on their cheeks, their forehead hanging over their narrow, slanting eyes. Once the boundary has been breached, they all begin to resemble each other. Not only their faces – their wooden lurching gait and grating voices as well. And then, floating in their cloud of stink, they walk around in pairs, in threes, all of them as if aged, pathetic twins, triplets or quintuplets; they meet and share their cigarette butts or their bottles of cat's piss, just as murky as their gaze. Brothers and sisters of the bottle in their unmistakable likeness. Adrian stares at them in despair, desperately hoping and at the same time dreading that he will spot someone. One that he will recognise. Somewhere among these very spectres, his blood, his flesh and his beginning is roaming around. *Or else has long been rotting in the ground, let her reek and decay, let the remains be eaten by worms and dung beetles*, he thinks to himself fiercely and once more turns to the lizard. The receipt with the phone number on it has disappeared.

Judy is sitting next to him completely silent and inconspicuous, however, having noticed Adrian moving, she speaks quietly:

"My dad died when I was six years old. He was attacked on the street one night, and he died soon after that..."

Adrian is confused and doesn't know what to say. He stretches out his hand and places it around the lizard's fragile shoulders and pulls her towards him. They both turn out to be so similar, so close and as if they belonged to each other. And he no longer wants to ask anything about Judy's mother: it's perfectly obvious. They all, having lost their men, lose the ground from beneath their feet. They couldn't care less that for their children, from time to time, the entire framework of the world breaks and shatters while they, the egoistic bitches, lick their wounds, disinfect them with alcoholic liquids or else seek to patch them up with the careless caresses of other men; they only live for themselves, clutching on tightly to the lost, the departed, which in reality no longer exists, and meanwhile they lose those who are yearning for love and endless sympathy and are just as capable of giving it back, next to them, still trying to hold on to them. But it is not possible, to keep hanging on to their dissipated, egoistic, treacherous existence, it is not possible. Everything dissolves and crumbles, and the hands that are longing for support are left holding on to thin air...

"But you remember your dad, don't you? I was scarcely three years old when my father was cut to shreds by a chainsaw. I don't remember him at all. Not at all," he repeats as he caresses the girl's soft, childish shoulder with his right hand, pressing his lips into her hair consolingly.

Judy is crying. She sobs and snuggles closer to Adrian; Adrian is now holding the girl in his arms and he lets her have a good cry. Nothing will be able to fill in this void, and only now he begins to understand why she is clutching at him, a grown man, why she submits to his baffling urge to protect the girl, to watch over her. That is so natural and so cruel. Nothing, nobody, neither Adrian nor anyone else, will ever be able to replace the father she has lost.

Gradually the girl stops crying, she hiccups once or twice, but does not pull away. Adrian starts to feel a little uncomfortable and tries to move away, but Judy flings her arms around his neck and presses even closer to him. Adrian, taken aback, strokes her thin, childish shoulder once more and suddenly becomes aware, with surprise, that she is kissing his neck, then his chin, that her lips are moving ever closer to his mouth.

"No, but listen, you are really mad. What's going on? I could be your father!"

Judy persists, she puts her arms around his chest and tucks her face into Adrian's armpit.

"You could be my father. Yes, please, please be my father."

Adrian has now had enough, and pushing her forcefully away, he takes her by the collar and shakes her.

"I was only comforting you just now, I feel sympathetic, what are you doing now?"

The lizard smirks with her wide mouth, she is smirking and it looks as though she is closing rounded her eyes in well-being while Adrian shakes her. When he decides that it is enough, Judy turns away and starts rummaging through her school bag. She pulls out a

book, it has *Algebra for the 10th Grade* written on the cover. Leafing through it, Judy finds a photo.

Three smiling people. A young, dark-haired man with a rather wide mouth, dressed in a denim jacket and brightly coloured shirt, the corners on the collar far too long, and a nice-looking woman in a pale yellow summery frock with a thin belt, and a five-year-old little girl – the mouth, eyes and shape of the chin clearly indicating that it is her – Judy.

"Look, you're similar to him. You look like my dad."

Adrian first of all notices how Judy is looking at the photograph, her face is glowing with a radiant brilliance, one that he has never seen before, a light womanly flush and an expression of doglike devotion. Then he looks at the man in the photo. Judy is right. Adrian has not only the same wide, expressive mouth, but the forehead, too, nearly as far as the nose, is almost a mirror image of himself.

"Perhaps I do... I don't know."

Judy places her hand on his knee. Her face continues to emit gentleness and submission. With one definite, unambiguous movement Adrian takes her hand off his knee.

"That's it, get out. We had our little chat, now that's enough."

"I'll call you sometime," says Judy, replacing the photo into the book, and the book into the bag as she crawls out of the car. Once outside, she throws a glance at Adrian once more and slams the door.

"Now I'm really in for it," Adrian thinks. "Shouldn't have given her my telephone number." But it's the spare number, the one for the flings - Adrian's whorish one-night stands. And just as well.

He seeks and finds his flings on the internet. There a few websites where there is no point in looking for a happy life, though you can find a good screw, if you know how and work at it. Over the past two years Adrian has worked out how to choose, how to approach, how to persuade them so that the transaction will have a successful outcome. Her only selects from those who have a photo. There is no point in him wasting his time, discovering in the end that even theoretically he wouldn't be able to get it up for this piece of flesh. Even then, the image of the photo does not always match reality; women tend to put online the picture that they consider to be their most beautiful, regardless of whether it actually looks anything like them. And the fat ones put on photos from when they were younger, or ones where they can be seen only as far as their bosom.

Adrian needs a mousy, scrawny one with fine bones, it's alright if she is naive or a little dim, maybe that's even better. And big eyes. Older than him. And with long hair, so that he can really grab her by the barnet and then take her from behind – without any caresses, without any unnecessary sweet talk. Screw her, hump her, shag her, mount her, simply fuck her over. When riding them Adrian always works himself up into a rage; that submissiveness, that wiggling of the arse accompanied by those attempts to moan and pretend that she likes it, it all makes him furious and violent; he thrusts his member even deeper, and this plunge excites him even more, and he is overcome by the most powerful orgasm when they no longer can pretend but are moaning for real, from the pain, and then he swells up to an unbelievable size and with a roar thrusts his last, deepest push and explodes inside her, swearing profusely. Whore, bitch, cunt. That's it. Clumps of hair remain in his hand, and often his member is covered in blood from her vagina.

They never meet for a second time, and now and then Adrian changes his online profile and nickname. There are some phone numbers that he keeps, thinking that they might come in useful, however – no, may the ground swallow me up, they are so dumb, at times fluttering their grey, tear-stained eyes and lying – wow, that was so good, what about you, did you like it? He never picks them up in the car, he leaves the beamer behind the corner and walks to the ones who have their own room, their own apartment, and who – during the day, while the children are at school – are seeking their fortune on the internet, their dream man. And they find Adrian. Courteous, reserved, doesn't ask them on a date the first time they meet but instead launches into conversation, with the rare tasteful compliment. Who tells them that he is looking for someone to grow old with, that he's done with running around and is longing for a warm home, a tasty evening meal and soft slippers; he doesn't need a tiger woman alongside him, he's longing for an ordinary, loving and faithful creature, a girlfriend. He truly is a prince, only without a horse, he's the real man for a tired, lonely, mousy but decent and honest woman, who puts a picture on the online dating website in which, half-naked, wearing cheap and trashy underwear, she lolls about on a bed covered in clobber, against a background of tatty wallpaper...

Afterwards, remembering, he loathes it all. For a couple of months he finds it too repulsive to visit the website. Whatever for? He has Margarita, hasn't he, and, whatever difficulties they may have with understanding or not understanding each other, the intimate side of things is in good order: he desires her, and as far as Margarita is concerned, usually she enjoys his approach and caress. And he touches her completely differently from the



flings. Whether this is love or not, the devil himself would break his neck trying to find out, but it is something completely different in comparison to the screwing. So why does he need it? He doesn't know. Only, after a certain period of time, there comes that moment when the growing hatred and powerlessness coming from who knows where has piled up like a medicine ball, it drives him down onto his knees, and there is no other way that he can get rid of it. Other than by screwing, humping, shagging.

Once, while he was driving to the office, Adrian saw, walking along the pavement, one of his flings, both hands full with supermarket bags stuffed to the top, and a little girl hanging on to one of the bags. She could have been the same age as Carrie, slim, running next to her mum at a trot; the woman didn't catch sight of Adrian but the child, turning her head, looked directly into the eyes of the man driving past, with huge, grey, impossibly beautiful eyes.

### ***Here and now***

Adrian strides around the apartment, from one room to the other. No, it cannot be, she doesn't have a lover, she's with Carrie, isn't she. It cannot be that she would get their child mixed up in it, Margarita might be impetuous and unpredictable, nonetheless, she is smart and sensitive. She would never harm Carrie, however much they may not get on at times, even to the point of screaming at each other and slamming doors.

Picking up his mobile, Adrian stares for a moment at his own number, his secret, treacherous screwing number; now, gazing at it he is overcome by completely contradictory feelings, he doesn't know what to do next. Nonetheless, he presses a button, it beeps at the

receiving end and Adrian waits. He waits for a long time, until the call is cut off, afterwards he presses the button again. He waits. No answer. Then he suddenly sees the light and rings Margarita on her own number. Subscriber out of range, or the phone has been switched off.

That mobile contains Judy's text messages. She had rung the very next day, but the telephone, switched to silent, had been shoved into Adrian's car.

"It's me, Judy. Why won't you pick up?" said the text that arrived shortly after several calls. He had rung back to tell her that they shouldn't meet any more. But the cunning little lizard persuaded him that she had had a major *meltdown*, and if they wouldn't meet, then she'd probably get onto some train, whichever turned up at the station platform, and then she would go on a journey without a ticket, as far as she could, if only the ticket inspector wouldn't throw her out at some station stop in the middle of the forest, or some other unfamiliar and enticing place. Adrian gave in, he was convinced that that's exactly what would happen, that Judy was simply insane. They did meet, and lunched together again, and then drove out to the breakwater at the harbour to go for a walk. The lizard spoke little, she said that today she had been at school and it had been the most stupid thing of all that she could have chosen to do out of all the possibilities for that day.

"Don't you have any girlfriends there?" Adrian cautiously enquired.

"No, I don't," replied Judy. "They don't understand much, and me they don't understand at all, bitchy and up themselves..."

The lizard shook her hair and turned to Adrian with a pained expression.

"I feel that you are the only one who really gets me and understands me," she continued, coming closer to him and pressing her shoulder against his hand. Once more

Adrian was overwhelmed by an urge to take her by the collar and give her a good shake. He desisted.

"We'll remain bound forever and ever," Judy spoke up again.

"What do you mean by that?"

"All people who have met, even just the once, become bound to each other. For life. Whether they have made contact with their flesh, with words, with a look – it doesn't matter how, but once it's happened, then the connection never disappears."

Adrian didn't really know what to say, there was nothing to disagree with. That's probably the way it is.

"And these connections from one to another reach out in all directions. Some of these have both the circulation of the blood and nerves; you can feel them each day, we feed off them, and they hurt. Others are so ancient that they've dried up, withered, stretched out as fine as a hair, but they don't ever let you go."

"But what if the person dies?" Adrian asked.

"Don't you ever feel connected with those dead people with whom you have made contact? These ties are sometimes more alive and sensitive than those that link you to some living persons. It's like sometimes you suddenly know things and the answers to questions that you couldn't have known, no way. Things you have never experienced, or have never heard, and then suddenly in broad daylight it bobs up in your brain, and everything is clear and makes sense to you. That's been sent by those departed, they see everything and know everything."

In Adrian's memories the face of his grandmother immediately loomed up. It was true, she continued to be important, their mutual connection fed and hurt... Even though 20 years had passed since she died. And his father. In Adrian's mind there was not a single vision of memory, not a single impression from their being together, and yet this connection was also present, alive. And Elvis from the orphanage, Igor, the big black-haired man from the snowy vision of memory. And mother. The connections reach out in every direction and there is no knife that could cut them, no teeth that could bite through them, nor nails that could tear them asunder.

"Clever you are, my little Judy. Been reading lots of books?" Adrian smiled.

"And those living, nerve-filled ties, if people get too close to each other, they cannot shrink any shorter, they fall to the ground in curves and loops," Judy continued without paying any attention to Adrian's ironic tone.

"And then you have to step very carefully, to make your way through cleverly; you have to watch out that you don't step on them, trample over them, so that you don't hurt anyone. And you too will feel the pain, the ties link us both, those nerve endings and that flow of life in both directions..."

"Stop it, Judy. I can't take it all in and digest it. Stop, hush with your talk." Adrian slowed down his pace and raised his glance to the sky.

Above their heads, gulls were circling, screeching horridly, these coastal rats of the sky. For a while Judy walked next to Adrian, leaning her shoulder against him, but then she pulled away, sped up until she reached the end of the breakwater, and then, without a backward look, she crossed the asphalt parking lot, past Adrian's car and then turned the

corner around the nearest harbour warehouse and was lost to view. Only the wind blowing about her hair across the overloaded backpack and off she had gone.

They haven't met since. And Adrian has realised that they shouldn't. At times she sends him text messages, quite perverse, saying that she would touch him in his most intimate places and in the strangest ways, how she would get him all worked up and excite him, how she would take him, and belong to her; then at other times she apologises and promises that she would stay quiet and not bother him, except that – please, please – you must meet up with me, just one more time, we are bound together, we can't change that any more.

Margarita's got the phone now, Adrian thinks to himself, powerless, God forbid that she should open the inbox, perhaps she is so busy that she doesn't have any time to investigate this unfamiliar mobile phone...

How odd that Adrian no longer likes the idea the Margarita could be with some other man, not at all. *Am I getting proprietorial?* he thinks. *What's happening to me? I chose to be with this woman, I wanted children and a family nest, I wanted to care for them to be a decent husband in a good family. All those things that I'd never had and have always missed... What's happened, how did that door slam shut, the one through which the trust, tranquillity and warmth flowed back and forth between them? It seems as though the door has been closed for a while now, and maybe Margarita has tried, she has attempted to break through it, but it isn't possible, you cannot do that, it is a door that cannot be broken open, it has to give way of its own accord. Perhaps I have failed to notice something, we really had become so close that the link between us had been trampled into the blood, I've*

*only thought about myself, I'm still a forest, impenetrable and unfathomable, egotistic and selfish, perhaps that's why Margarita is so distraught, so crazy and dissatisfied, maybe she's simply hurting.*

"No. It takes two to tango," Adrian says to himself, short and sharp.

In the absence of Carrie and Margarita, the apartment is disconcertingly silent, during the day he never feels it; he has often thought that he likes a solitary existence, that he never has enough time alone. Here it is – an unexpected gift on a working week evening, hah! It turns out that he doesn't know what to do with himself. He goes to the kitchen and opens up the fridge. Everything is in containers, plastic and glass, in neat rows; the dairy products on the top shelf, sausages, cheese and pickles the next shelf down, all in its right place, sleeping quietly and waiting for Margarita to come along, smashing and throwing everything that she touches, everything that is in her way. Yet even this annoying habit of noisiness and never-ending drama doesn't arouse in Adrian the kind of fury that the self-effacing and impersonal creatures do, the ones from the screwing website... Even externally Margarita is very different from them; that's weird, thinks Adrian, imagining with pleasure his wife's slim build with the slightly rounded stomach, her largish firm breasts and the movements of her long limbs, swift and gracefully flowing at the same time. No, he doesn't want anything to eat. Adrian closes the fridge door. He is dazed and confused, he can feel the anger building up inside him, this time it is directed against himself. He doesn't mind anger, anger and stubbornness have carried him along, kept him on the right track. It's because of his anger that he managed to get through university, while working at the same time. Adrian cannot understand how he was able to withstand it, working nights, attending

lectures during the day, writing essays in the evenings. For months he lived on two or three hours of sleep a night, regaining some sleep time on Sundays, but never enough; while recalling that time it's as though it consisted of a multicoloured jumble of deadlines, but it was worth it: he got his diploma and a steady job with a very nice salary. And all of it thanks to his anger. The children at the orphanage were prepared for a different kind of life. No, that's not true, they weren't prepared for any sort of life at all. Unless that vicious life and death struggle between wolves and sheep counts as preparation for real life. And then they were tossed out. Some, without realising it, had already died before they went out into the big wide world. Occasionally Adrian sees their spectral faces among their twins in the fraternity of the bottle; their eyes have become devoid of any spark of life, the one lighting up the eyes of those boys had who had hope and awaited the moment, like a miracle, when they would be set free. However, the door of the children's home proved an illusion. The real exit to life was elsewhere. Only – where?

It's already past nine o'clock. On the other side of the wall someone is learning to play the piano. They are repeating the same tune over and over again, Tchaikovsky's *Neapolitan Song*, though it's being played much too tentatively and without definition; Adrian, shrugging his shoulders in time with the music, accents every note that should be staccato, he is irritated by this limp-wristed, indecisive rendition; the opening tune is being repeated over and over again, internally he is anticipating the next musical phrase, but it never comes; and Adrian is now walking from room to room ceaselessly, he stops at the front door of the apartment and, endeavouring to hear through the massacred Tchaikovsky,

he listens to every sound coming from the stairwell; at times he thinks that the downstairs door has opened and that his precious dear girls are coming, yet it always turns out to be someone else who walks past and climbs up the next flight of stairs, or, keys jangling, unlocks the door to one of the apartments on the first floor. Somewhere down below a door opens, a child screams out – *Papa, nakonyetsto* – and the door closes again, followed by silence. Adrian doesn't know any of his neighbours. Margarita greets everyone and every now and then tells him about someone whose wife is ill, or someone else whose son was lucky, found a job working on a ship and then went off to sea for three months, or someone else who has a new puppy, so friendly, she tells him, and then her voice changes, losing its strained note, she chatters and laughs, a white, fluffy bundle, it's going to be a Samoyed, she says, can you imagine – there is breed of dog like that, a Samoyed!

Adrian waits, consumed with longing, he is at a loss what to do next. He goes outside onto the balcony for a cigarette. The courtyard is dark and quiet, in the feeble light from the streetlamp above it is impossible to see the paths or the concrete edging.

*I have to disappear, he suddenly decides. That's it, enough is enough. I have no idea what to say, how I should talk, how to act if Margarita were to suddenly appear at the threshold and come inside. I won't know how to explain if she asks me about the mobile phone and the text messages, I have nothing to say and I don't know how to persuade her, how to stop her, if she comes and tells me that it's all over, she's decided, she's seeing someone else. I need time, at least two or three days. I don't want to live without Margarita, but I have think it over very carefully, what to say to her. And, more importantly – how I'll go on living. First of all, I have to understand for myself what's going on between me and flings,*



*and what happened between me and Judy. I have made contact with all of them, and now I have to keep on living with these connections. I don't need them, I only need Margarita and Carrie, but I cannot change anything, make it disappear as if it had never happened. The only thing I can do is to put everything in its place, not feed it, let it dry out and wither...*

He stubs out his cigarette, throws the butt into the jar and goes back inside. Behind the wall, Tchaikovsky is no longer being screwed over. Unable to get beyond that first phrase, the young pianist has now moved on to playing arpeggios. They are just as monotonous, though less annoying. They have a definite beginning, a middle and an end, and the next one is like a completed circle, and then the next one again. Complete and distinct. Adrian walks over to the bookshelf in the living room and opens the upper shelf. Reaching into its depths he extracts an old backpack. It's a faded green canvas bag and it contains everything from his life before the children's home. A folder with papers. His birth certificate. A few photos. And Grandma's letter...

"Dear Adrian, tomorrow you will be fourteen years old. I promised myself today that tomorrow I will tell you everything you may have ever wanted to know about your parents, and why things happened the way they did. You are already sleeping, my beloved grandson, and I really do not know whether I am strong enough to tell you honestly all that there is. That is why I am writing this letter and, if I no longer have the strength to speak, then forgive me, I will give you this letter in which I will try to be as fair and truthful as I can, from the heart, about everything that you wanted to find out. It won't be easy for me.

Firstly, I want to say that people make mistakes: serious, painful mistakes. Everybody goes through the experience of being wronged, a moment of being hurt and an

experience that they would rather not have had. Painful things, more or less so, happen to everyone, and even more importantly than what happens is that you know what to do afterwards. How you go on living. How you view the world, either in the mirror of this painful event that has crippled everything and everybody whose reflection is in it, at whose centre there will always be the ugly, the difficult, the irrevocable, or else you will manage to leave it where it is, without carrying it with you and feeding it for the rest of your life, feeding it with yourself, piece by piece, so that there is nothing left over for anyone else. None for those who should be your nearest and dearest. But if you are no longer seeing them anymore, you, your head bowed down, are carrying on your back your Hurt, your Sorrow and your Hate, and feeding them constantly with your time, your thoughts and your entire life force.

If I could start all over again, dear Adrian, if only I could... I am so guilty before you, and not only before you, but also in front of your father Oscar, and your—————"

There follows an illegible wavy line that slips diagonally across the page and then, finally, stretching out straight, it continues until it falls over the edge.

That night, Adrian was woken up by the sound of a loud thud, as if a sack of potatoes had been thrown down onto the kitchen floor. It was after 1 am, but there was light still seeping through to the living room from the kitchen. Grandma was usually in bed by midnight. Surprised, Adrian felt for his slippers and shuffled towards the kitchen door. He opened the door and instantly saw the piece of paper with writing on it on the kitchen table, but he only noticed Grandma lying on the floor when she made a sudden movement. Adrian crouched down at her side, terrified.

"Grandma, Grandma, what happened to you, get up!"

He tried to prop her body upright and lean it against the table leg, but she wobbled around and sagged like a sack and it was impossible to pick her up. She was trying to say something all the time, her mouth was pulled to the left and spit was dribbling from the corner of her mouth, but she tried and she tried. Yet Adrian couldn't understand her, until finally she managed to say:

"Four fifths," she mumbled.

"What did you say, grandma, I can't understand you," Adrian was already crying, frightened out of his wits.

"Four fifths," Grandma repeated, again in a mumble.

At last she muttered: "*Pask zakroy!*" – "Shut your trap!" And then fell silent. To this day Adrian does not know whether that is what really happened, or whether there was something that he couldn't understand, or was unable to hear in her stroke-affected speech. These words seemed so strange... Four fifths. *Shut your trap!* His grandma neither knew how, nor wanted to speak Russian; he had never heard a single word from her in Russian, perhaps she had said something else. Unable to sit her upright, the boy took the cushion from the footstool and placed it under her head, and dashed into the living room to phone for help. Initially the local doctor, picking up, sounded disgruntled, however, having heard Adrian's babbled, tearful cry of desperation, she promised to be there in ten minutes. Grandma was taken away in an ambulance. She died the next evening without having uttered another word.

Adrian shuffles through the photographs. He has not looked at them for ages, perhaps even since before they moved here... There are none from when he still lived with his mother. There are no pictures of his mother at all. But there are several of him and his grandmother, one of his father Oscar's graduation day photo where he's wearing a suit and holding an enormous bunch of flowers in his arms, and then another of himself, standing in the kitchen with grandma underneath the big clock and with his beloved rag doll in his hand. That was before he had started school. A colour photo, slightly brown around the edges. Both of them smiling widely, right up to the ears, the boy's blond hair and the doll's red yarn hair dishevelled and sticking out everywhere. He looks happy.

It's almost ten o'clock. On the other side of the wall there is silence, finally. Adrian throws a few pieces of clothing into the old backpack, in addition to the papers and photos. Phone charger. He takes a piece of cheese from the fridge, a little bit of bread and the almost empty packet of coffee from the cupboard. Margarita can have the other one, as yet unopened. That's it. Enough for this evening, tomorrow he will eat breakfast in a cafe. He writes a note for Margarita: 'Don't worry, all is well. I'm going to spend a few days in a hotel. I need to think about myself, about us, about life in general. Please call me when you can. Love you.' Then he screws up the piece of paper, throws it into the bin and writes a new note: 'Everything OK. I want to be on my own for a while. Say hi to Carrie. If you want to talk, give me a call.'

He takes the half-empty packet of cigarettes from the kitchen table, throws it into the bag, puts his shoes on and reaches out for his parka. Then he hears somebody coming

Jana Egle "Svešie jeb Miļeņkij ti moj" [Strangers or Milenky ty moy]

Excerpt

Translated by Terēze Svilane

up the stairs outside, two people - more precisely, two females, and they are chatting to each other quietly. One of them is a child and Adrian can already recognise Carrie's voice.

Then the doorbell rings.