

Biography: Jānis Veselis (1896–1962) learned most of what he knew about literature through self-study: before the First World War he studied German and French on his own, and when he was nineteen he experienced "a moment of clarity, oneness with the Universe" and began to take a deep interest in the ancient writings of various different cultures. As a result, he developed his own unique approach to literature, which he used in his own written works – prose, plays, poetry – as well as in his reviews. During Latvia's first period of independence, Veselis was one of the most prominent prose critics and wrote about nearly all of the most prominent authors of the day.

Synopsis: *The Day's Burden* is one of the earliest and most important modernist works of Latvian prose, and was seen by the author's contemporaries as having been inspired by James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Veselis had also published a partial translation of *Ulysses*, as well as a discursive essay about it. The plot centres on a tragic love story, though fundamentally *The Day's Burden* is a deep examination of Rīga's working classes. The book focuses on the intertwining lives of the residents of a tenement house over the course of 24 hours, during which several romantic dramas and personal crises arise and are resolved, occasionally overlapping with the comical events that occur each hour. These connections were very important to Veselis, and to emphasise them he created horoscopes for all of the characters before writing the book.

Excerpt

The First Hour, 5 – 6.

I.

A chilly February night pushed slowly towards morning across Rīga. The city was still asleep and wrapped in the nightmares of the predawn hours. Late night drunks wandered down the streets leading from the centre looking for home, swaying, bellowing tangled, woozy

shanties and tender curses, while struggling with horrific belches. A scattering of couples was returning from parties and walked along the icy, echoing sidewalks, their warm bodies – excited by dance and anticipation – huddled together in the frigid air and under the star-barren sky.

Groundskeepers were getting to work, assessing their patches of street and brushing off the light snowfall from the previous night. Front doors and gate keys scraped, as shivering watchmen, hurrying to return to the warmth, opened gates and trusted brisk caretakers with their remaining responsibilities. The city had never become completely still during the night, but now it was transitioning into the haste of the morning. The evening's weary, dying sounds were joined by the piercing ones of daybreak.

A large suburban five-story apartment complex composed of three grey, crumbling buildings was wrapped in a fog that had wandered up from the clearing in nearby Grīziņkalns, the Biķernieki forest mires, and the dark and distant amnesiac waters of Jugla. Mixed with locomotive smoke and constant eruptions of soot from chimneys, its chill, stinging swirls made the square, black windows of the buildings even darker and more opaque.

Floor by floor, step by step, one hundred thirty-five apartments were fit into the buildings. Like drawers in a store cabinet, they were all completely identical. This larger human cabinet, was also carefully locked down every night and opened again the next morning by the bearded night-watchman Lazda. Many of the drawers had the same arrangement: one room with a kitchen and then a lavatory – which was always littered with torn newspapers – set in a hollow at the stair landing and shared by four apartments. The building's drawers were filled with a mix of people: starting with harbour porters and warehouse sweepers and ending with impoverished members of the nation's most exquisite

intelligentsia. There was a dark rumour going around among the tenants that a department director – in all his glory – was actually living in one of these drawers. No one really could believe it, wives shook their heads in shock saying "a department director?"

The cabinet's residents did not really know each other very well: each one had their own separate existence, their own job and position, their own friends and activities. Passing acquaintance sometimes took place at the door of the lavatory, waiting in line with an odd, anxious impatience, or meeting on the stair landings when neighbours would happen to be emerging from or entering their drawers at the same time. Usually these were limited to awkward smiles exchanged without a word. Wives were the only ones to get to know each other a little better as they pounded dusty blankets in the windows of the stairwell and hung laundry to dry on lines connected to tall poles and strung between buildings.

There were two cobbler's workshops in the front building of the complex. The larger of these took up a rather expansive semi-basement apartment whose upper window panes were just barely above ground level and employed several lads – just like in a factory – under the supervision of a master cobbler – Kāpiņš. The other workshop was set in a tiny hut composed of a narrow rectangular room by the front gate. Where the groundskeeper's equipment – shovels, crowbars, watering cans – had once been housed, Īkstiņš the cobbler now practiced his noble trade in a rather petty bourgeois way. The street side of the complex was home to the meat and sausage shop of Gariņš the butcher. Its signboard had an impressionistic drawing of a cow in a green meadow on one side, while the other, dictated by more contemporary principles of efficiency, showed a dark salami braided with a lighter bologna, their cut off ends displaying flecks of fat in especially sharp relief. Gariņš the butcher looked mainly after the needs of the residents of the complex and did not hold high hopes for attracting a broader range of clientele. Buyers' tastes were fairly unchanging

and the quantity of meat sold in mornings and evenings was about the same. The only problems came from the dazzling members of the nation's intelligentsia. One time they had requested quite a lot of ham, which was a product no one else ever bought in the building, another time they had asked for the finest filets or meat pounded flat. Sometimes their purchases would total several dozen lats in price, other times days or even weeks would pass without any of them showing their face in Gariņš' shop. This made this honourable gentleman incredibly sad as he was accustomed to leading an orderly life with a steady income and expenses and did his absolute best to ensure that the residents of his complex had everything they needed. Yes, he even felt patriotic about his complex, a feeling that he never, of course, expressed too loudly, but only through occasional self-assured statements: "our complex has enough to eat", "our complex has enough sausages", "dogs in our complex are never short of bones".

II.

The clock had just struck five on this crisp and dark February morning, the first to arrive at work was the petty bourgeois cobbler Īkstiņš. He had to knock, because Lazda had not opened the gate yet. They greeted each other, but did not say much else, because the watchman was still sleepy, muttering and shivering from the cold, which had reached his flesh despite the thick sheep's wool coat he was wearing, while he had been sitting motionless and dozing in the special deep-set chair reserved for the watchman. Coming from his apartment, which unfortunately was not located in the same building, Īkstiņš spent a long time rummaging around his hut by the gate, jangling his keys, coughing and clearing his throat, until finally he opened the thick barred outer door just enough and was able to

unlock the inner door, which had a paned window in its upper frame. He entered his gloomy lair, which was immune to even a single ray of light from outside. He looked first at the dark, empty window at the end of the fourth floor in the second building, which had a strange, sharp dot glowing in its centre with the pin-point brilliance of a star. So the beautiful young lady was still sound asleep – as was her strapping, young man.

The cobbler lit the small kerosene lamp with a narrow, sooty chimney and rubbed his hands together. The workshop was so cold that the bricks had frost on them. He gathered together the scattered firewood in the corner and lit the small iron stove while sitting on the stool draped in his coat. The flames rose and its iron body warmed, but he thought about how this stove could ruin him all on its own. It used an incredible amount of firewood and only put out its scorching, smoky heat while it was lit. But there was nothing to be done: there was no way to get permission to install a permanent brick stove, even though he had been the occupant of this lair for a long time.

He kept the stove lit, warmed himself, coughed: his chest was narrow and sickly from hours of sitting hunched over, pounding shoe linings with his little hammer, his face was also narrow and a pale yellowish-green with whiskers hanging down over his thin lips.

Somewhat defrosted, he began rummaging around the shelves, he waxed the binding twine, moved the boxes of hammers, tacks, and nails nearer to him, placed the stool closer to the glowing stove – its iron form was now exuding a pleasantly intoxicating warmth – he put on a leather apron which had worn through in three spots and had frayed, worn edges. He bent down and felt a stinging pain in his right side, which took his breath a way for three seconds and got to work. He did not have set working hours like they did over in the large basement workshop where the workers arrived at eight and left at five, still feeling dissatisfied with their work conditions. The laws concerning working hours did not apply to

him – he was a small business owner with his own tools and materials. He also never thought that he should only work during a specific limited time – no, if only he could get more repairs, more profit – he would pound soles from three in the morning until ten at night. But there were just a few orders: yesterday only three pairs of shoes were brought in to be mended, and there were still a few unfinished orders from the days before. At the end of the night, the beautiful woman from the fourth-floor window on the end had brought in a pair of shoes. In fact, she only had her shoes repaired by him, while the young man from the same apartment and almost all the other residents of the huge complex just walked around with holes in their shoes or only went to Kāpiņš, and only those who were especially stingy or poor, after they had gotten done bargaining or cursing, finally came to Īkstiņš who worked for a dozen santīms less.

He was supposed to have already finished straightening the crooked heels and refinishing the worn toes of the young lady's shoes, because she was coming to pick them up this morning, but just for the joy of it, he had put it off until the next day. As a true craftsman, he enjoyed his work for its own sake – pulling the twine, tapping the tacks, fixing every fault. And some of these faults could sometimes seem as painful to him as wounds afflicting living flesh. He took special joy in busying himself with shoes that would later adorn a lovely, pleasant, and kind young lady's beautiful feet. Once completed, the finished product no longer belonged to him; he placed it on the shelf where it waited for the arrival of its owner and no longer tugged at this hand, his mind, his heart. As he worked, he muttered about the stitching, softly chiding the foot that had walked so inconsiderately to have completely worn out one side of the poor shoe. He kept current in developments in his trade and was happy that his skills kept improving, and sometimes he could even imagine something more, dream about something better, happier in his life. The light of these

visions reached his soul only rarely and then only like a sharp ray of starlight aching with an awareness of its impossibility. He would remember her slender legs, slim back, round hips, bright, svelte form, which had seemed untouchable when it had once stood in his dark, dirty workshop. She had exuded a light, happy scent among the pungent aromas of old mildewed shoe linings, leather, boots soaked in street grime, train oil, various salves, and cobbler's wax. His heart ached with these thoughts, but still they somehow made everything seem lighter, brighter, and distracted him from life and the heaviness weighing him down.

He retrieved the young lady's pair of shoes from the shelf. They were patent leather and rather worn, in a few spots the shine of the leather was broken by small fissures, but these scars were not large enough to cause a committed cobbler heartache. The heel had been damaged and twisted – that happened to everyone who lived in this area due to the terribly uneven streets or in the courtyard of this same complex where pieces of cobblestone jutted up from the ground at odd angles. The toes were a bit worn, but this seemed to be the result of the unique qualities of the attractive young lady's feet and gait, because the toes of her shoes would always wear out first – even in completely new shoes, the toes would need to be repaired after only a month of wear.

We'll fix it all up right away, they'll be good as new, he thought as he coughed sharply. His experienced hand gripped the knife, trimmed, fitted new pieces of leather lining, poked with the awl, tapped with the hammer.

He sat by the fire and when he would glance up through the window pane, he could see the fourth-floor window at the end. He doted lovingly over the shoes as he repaired them and when he had finished his work, he did not let go of them and looked again at that window, as if he were connecting the graceful lightness and elegance of these shoes with the lines of the floor of the young woman's apartment. It happened that just at that

moment the pale star-like glow in her window was broken by a rosy flash. Someone with anxious, clumsy fingers was trying to turn on the lights in the room. They flashed twice in vain, but then the third time the light came on.

Īkstiņš anxiously noted the light's appearance. Why did the light turn on at such a strange hour and with the impatience evident from the brief flicker of the first two attempts? Had there been an accident? The light stayed on for a moment and then went off, leaving the pale glow in its place again. The cobbler was satisfied and crouched down again over his awls, linings, wax balls, and twine.

III.

"Why are you yelling and making so much noise at night, Viktors?" Austra groaned with irritation and turned towards the wall.

But Viktors, who had just screamed loudly in his sleep and had slammed his feet against the floor, was impatiently trying to turn on the light, but the bulb had come a bit loose and did not light up at first.

"I'm not making noise, I just wanted to get something to drink," he said as he reached for the glass of water on the edge of the nightstand.

"Just because you're thirsty, doesn't mean you have to scream like you've been stabbed," Austra rebuked him, shielding her tired, beautiful eyes from the light with the edge of the blanket.

"Come on," he said trying to calm her down, "don't be cross."

He wanted to tell Austra about the dream – actually, a nightmare – that had wrenched him from his sleep and pushed him out of bed, but in the end he stuck with his

belief that you should never share your dreams with a sleepy person, especially so early in the morning, because they might just have been dreaming about something more pleasant. And so he laid back down again and reflected on the disturbing images he had just seen.

He had never had such a brief, clear, focused yet also horrible and upsetting dream. Five minutes after waking up, his heart was still racing and even if he did not want to admit it, his legs were weak and shaking from fear.

The cloud cover had been pristine, curving slightly, and infused with a darkly iridescent quality. Set in its centre was a slate grey star, its glow was cold and menacing. All the other stars were invisible or obscured. The sky was bounded so that this single star could assert itself. Then suddenly a rapid red glowing body appeared at one end of the sky and rushed with dreadful purpose towards the frozen, grey heavy star. At the moment they met, there was no sound, just a long, sharp spike, which shot through the whole world, the whole earth, the whole of existence – and though the dreamer did not see it directly, because the dream was so pristine, so simple, he somehow intuited by way of a sixth sense that it signalled an immense catastrophe, many separations and misfortunes. But the sharp spike was also aimed at him. At the point where the two stars met, a red liquid gushed out like blood. Finally, the sky appeared white like a fresh sheet, and the blood seeping from that single point formed a cross. And the cross was a pristine red, lonely, quiet, immeasurably painful, it lay across the next day and the entire life of the young dreamer, fixed and certain as the grave. Viktors was a strong, young man and shook off these nocturnal visions of doom, but not before screaming, waking up, and startling Īkstiņš the cobbler and Austra.

Viktors was surprised by the dream, because usually he slept soundly after a day of running around and tiring himself out, and he never saw even the most fleeting vision in his

sleep. He rarely thought about the stars, because he did not feel bound to anything above the earth. He tried to connect what he had seen to his recent experiences, disagreements, and setbacks with Austra, who had grown increasingly remote and chilly towards him, whereas in the past she had been the epitome of obedience and devotion. They argued every day and he began to blame her more loudly and more often for her past. She would fire back at him, reminding him that he had grown up only thanks to her parents' but also partially her own support. Especially painful to Viktors' pride was that increasingly in their arguments it became clear that she did not need him at all, that she could survive without him just as she always had, that he did not have any right to accuse her of anything, and that he was just a thankless street urchin. In his fury, once he had even wanted to shoot Austra, but later was ashamed of these threats, which were stupid and immature, especially since he was nineteen and supposedly an adult who earned his own living and could not allow himself to fail. But even taking into account their fights, the dream still was something different, something not connected with any of that. And he felt a strange, horrible awareness taking a hold of his entire being and showing him a path, which could never again be unseen.

He turned off the light and lay there with his eyes open. He saw the indistinct silhouette of the cold stove, the wardrobe at the far end by the exit, Austra's bed along the wall, chairs onto which they had thrown their clothes. Her outfit was gentle and wavy; when he looked over at her bed he saw a white sheet hanging over the edge, it reminded him of the pristine sky and the red, bloody glow that had spread across it. It drew his thoughts again to the terrible dream and he flipped onto his other side and faced the wall. Several unusual sounds welled up from the darkness: a rooster crowed in the courtyard, a freight truck wobbled loudly by, someone was shuffling in bare feet across the floor in another

apartment, a child was crying – probably sick and cranky. Viktors could not fall asleep. One moment he felt like the rest of the night was still incredibly long, filled with hour upon torturous hour, the next moment it seemed so short that he would have to get up right away but he did not want to, because he still felt a drowsy weariness deep in his bones. Viktors wanted to move and to work so he could chase away the nightmares that haunted him at this lifeless hour. Austra seemed to be pretending she was asleep on purpose so that he would not think of cuddling up next to her. He got up, stepped over quietly to her bed, and leaned down over her lightly scented hair. No, she was really asleep: no one feigning sleep could breathe so calmly and deeply. For a moment he was filled with anger at the thought of her sleeping so soundly, while he was being menaced by upsetting signs and visions, he wanted to tear the blanket from her round shoulder, but stopped himself remembering that she had come home late and tired from her audition. He fumbled for a cigarette on the table and lit it, he lay down again inhaling the nicotine-rich tobacco smoke, his mind grew cloudy, and he fell into a deep sleep.

He was no longer thinking about the star, about Austra – close friends, school, his everyday struggles, the twists and turns of fate all seemed to be shrouded in ever cloudier visions.

The Second Hour, 6 – 7.

I.

Rīga was still waking up: Tram No. 4 made its first journey of the day to Rēvele Street, on the opposite side, Tram No. 3 rushed down Jānis Asaris Street to Pērnavā Street tearing its way through the Jewish quarter along Marija and narrow Spring Street – a place which seemed to have never felt the cool, refreshing gurgle of any spring. The milk trucks began rattling down the streets, the sticky quarts clanking at each gate, as the more or less reputable milk was poured into the cans, cups, and bottles of the thirsty residents. After the commotion at five in the morning, the apartments of Viktors Mežaks and the Gandars family had sunk back into a sweet, lazy slumber.

Austra was sleeping on her left side, her hands were palm-to-palm and squeezed between her folded legs, her head was nestled deep in between two embroidered pillows. Her long, full, coiffured dark blonde hair was scattered across the top of the blanket, covering it and spilling over its edge. The lovely shape of her legs, her full shoulders, and her raised, rounded elbows could be seen through the blanket. Tonight Austra had a difficult time sleeping, but for her it was because she was not dreaming. Earlier she had dreamt of pearls – string upon string of large, bright pearls covering her naked body, wrapping around her legs, breasts, shoulders, and arms, cool as large, clear raindrops. Her sleep felt empty without these pleasant visions, and she also found it difficult to rest on her left side.

Viktors was still in his uncomfortable position: he was on his right hip, but had twisted his upper body and head so that he was otherwise on his back, strong, hot breaths forced their way out through his open mouth. All of his senses and centres of subconscious

awareness had not ceased functioning even while he slept and had concluded that he had died after his recent nightmare, that his flesh would stiffen, that his continued breathing and his beating heart were not breaths or heartbeats indicative of life. His sleep was tinged with a strange quality of oblivion this time: winds blew across the earth, people and things moved around, everything could be seen and heard like events occurring in a shadow realm, everything passed easily through everything else while still somehow remaining solid though also now lacking any material substance. While Viktors slept, his unconscious awareness had already plunged to such depths that its roots had transcended the human, transcended space and time. Thoughts he had never thought and feelings he had never felt filled him in an organic way just as our own bodies can be filled with things, with which we have had no prior contact.

Old Juris Gandars was asleep with his wife in the kitchen under the dish cabinet and across from the stove. It had gone out and was not radiating any warmth, and now the cold of the winter night had pushed in through the thick, though porous, outer walls and swallowed it. The old couple warmed each other. Their wrinkled, grey skin was shedding flakes of dandruff, and their brittle bones were like dank, mouldering logs that crackle and smoke when they burn instead of giving off a bright, pristine flame.

Gandars had already been up since four in the morning: he was racked with dry, stabbing pain in his knees and thighs that never ceased. He suffered in silence and would clench his teeth, so he would not wake his wife who was exhausted from washing laundry and also so he would not startle the young people in the next room. Even so, every once in a while, a sound similar to a short, suppressed dog's howl would escape from his lips. During the day he would gladly complain about his suffering, but at night he knew that everyone needed peace. The pain had been suspiciously quiet for several weeks, but now it had come

back with a fury. He felt the cold coming up from the floor, which was dangerously sunken right beneath their bed as if it were about to collapse, he felt the cold also coming in through the window, even though it had been carefully stuffed with bits of felt and rags, he even felt the cold coming from his old lady who had turned her back to him and was sleeping lightly. He tried to find a position where the pain in his hip was not quite as sharp, and after slowly and carefully manoeuvring his body, he found it.

II.

Gandars was an old factory worker and now received support payments from social services. Before the war when he was still strong and vital, covered in soot with lines seared into his face, he had stood under the arched passages of the Phoenix next to mighty machines whose steel pistons, cogs, and wheels were in constant motion. He would talk with other workers, secretly attend meetings and other smaller gatherings in apartments, read brochures, proclamations, participate in strikes. Back then everyone knew Lynx (his codename) and they were expecting big things from him during the next revolution. Back then every worker, every young person was roaring like a fiery gale: *onward to the future! rise up!* Everyone knew what they had to do, what their goal was. Workers meeting for the first time could understand each other by exchanging just a couple of words. Though work was sometimes difficult and poverty was extreme, there was still hope and a sense of happiness about being alive. When the world war destroyed the factories, when the thousand horsepower machines and giant switches stopped forever, and the arched passages fell ghostly quiet, Juris Gandars did not despair. He believed that the war would bring change and an uprising, that this would mark the beginning of the end of the old

power structures, that the roar of cannons on the front would soon move to the country and tear down this unjust order. The leaders told him all of this and he felt it even more in the mood of the workers and immense throngs of humanity: everything both mentally and physically seemed primed for a revolt, the dynamite had been set, the fougasses had been placed under the palaces of injustice, they were all just waiting to be lit. The war was that spark. It destroyed commerce, organising, secret meetings, because the secret police and gendarmerie became a hundred times more watchful and whomever was arrested was immediately sent to the court martial. The war had freed up the energy of the workers for other things, it had given them a shared belief and attitude, which made them so close and united that there was no need anymore for meetings or convincing. Not only workers, but also grey, lowly soldiers soon felt the same. The frontline city sunken in darkness prompted them to think about more than just how to get on the good side of officers and NCOs or how to march better in unison and stand straighter in formation.

Gandars did not get carried away with the patriotic fervour for even a second, which perplexed some of his comrades. The younger ones became riflemen to fight the Germans. For a time, the trend towards unrest seemed to be channelled towards the war.

When the revolution finally came to Russia and Rīga, Gandars received this as a long-awaited, happy event. He could not understand those comrades who said that the excitement and enthusiasm had been greater and the goals and ideals had been nobler in 1905, despite the lack of any achievements back then. For him this was the greatest and most beautiful revolution that there had ever been. It was completely clear from the start he was on the side of the Bolsheviks: no half measures, no weak-kneed looking back, no Menshevik national defence in the war. The old unjust world – he spoke and thought about political questions in the language of leftist newspapers and proclamations – had to be torn

down to its very foundations so that a new better world could be built atop its ruins. He also participated in meetings, and though he was not a skilled speaker, he still had worked out several techniques that left the desired impression on listeners. One of the peculiarities of his speech style was that while he never yelled "down" with anything, the content of his speech moved listeners to the conclusion that some things had to be torn down so that others may live. At that time the party considered him a useful, helpful voice, which nevertheless sometimes overstepped the bounds specified by the programme.

Then came the ghastly German occupation. That is when he saw that there were no bonds between workers from different nations, that national interests are and remain primary, that the blue-grey German soldiers listened only to their officers, their always victorious commanders, not to some Karl Liebknecht or Rosa Luxemburg, rotting away in a jail somewhere. This partially, though not completely, shattered this worker's faith and hopes. If Germany was also too bourgeois, if its working class also took pride in its military victories – while in Russia the old power structures were completely broken – then Russia would be the source of their salvation. Starving, running around to soup kitchens that served thin gruel, eating it with bread made with sawdust, suffering abuse from soldiers and local Germans, he began to agree with the war for the first time. He waited with impatience, sadness, and anger for the revolutionary army on the opposing side of the front to become strong and well-armed enough to expel the Germans from this revolutionary land. It never happened: Russia's collapse only expanded. When the Germans were finally defeated and forced to leave this revolutionary land, this was accomplished not by the force of a revolutionary nation, but with French and English cannons on the Western Front. Their powerful blasts freed the land and opened the path for the Red Army, which could now enter Rīga without firing practically a single shot, and as an honest person, Gandars felt a bit

ashamed that the revolutionaries who had mocked and cursed the Western "imperialists", now had to thank those same "imperialists" for their liberation.

With the arrival of the Red Army, the famine in Rīga only became more severe. The famous "era of scrounging" began. Gandars' wife and sometimes even he would take sacks and go to the countryside looking for food. They would travel out to distant corners of Kurzeme for flour, meat, and butter, pulling a sled piled high with goods, trudging through deep snow, sleeping in empty houses, barns, saunas, or trenches, sweating and freezing along the way. His personal life was going to hell, but the new Socialist world was soaring like a bright sunlit bird towards the future. The party forgot about Gandars. The government and party committee had its hands full and they had no time to remember some sickly pauper. His connections with the outside world began to break, only his closest co-workers would occasionally come to see him, but could not really help him much. Despite the destruction, poverty, cold, starvation, loneliness, and illness, Gandars never lost faith and even encouraged his comrades.

"Stick it out till the end! Give up everything, let us useless ones die, but the workers must be victorious this time. This is our last good chance. If you stick it out, then a good life will start for all working people."

His mind seemed to have frozen along with his diseased joints and it now held only a single thought and desire. His flesh was aging and wasting away, but his spirit did not retreat from what he had held to be right for his entire life.

However, things were not going well on the front or further inland. Hunger had blunted the workers' thirst for victory and belief in their leaders. Liepāja was not taken due to either the leaders' treachery or cowardice. A wide zone remained where the new Latvian forces and terrible German mercenaries were organising. Gradually the front moved back,

the Red Army, which was mainly composed of exhausted fighters from the world war, fell apart. The forests were full of deserters, the houses were full of deserters, and soon they banded together to form an anti-Bolshevik guerrilla force.

The Whites took Jelgava and were approaching Rīga. Hastily recruited groups of workers sent to the front no longer were enough. Collapse was everywhere. The Germans entered Rīga. The slaughter of workers – and Latvians in general – began. Two thousand people were shot over the space of just a few days and in most cases these bullets were directed right into the victim's face, so that they would be too horribly disfigured for their loved ones to be able to identify them. The corpses lay in the street for a long time until they were taken by the cart-load to the cemetery, to sand mounds, to the fields by the railway depot. Arms and legs were hanging from manure carts and platform wagons, blood-soaked heads poked through with smashed brains, bullet-riddled foreheads, cheeks, mouths. In the coming years no one would mention these nameless victims, no one would ever write their stories. They did not even receive what every soldier receives: a death notice in their regiment's records. They died alone and unknown for an unknown cause.

III.

Lying awake but remaining quiet so he would not disturb those around him from their rest, he remembered how on the evening of that horrific day on 22 May 1919, his close co-worker Mežaks' ten-year-old son had run into his apartment terrified and babbling about the Germans grabbing his father and taking him away. He had followed them from a distance and then watched as his father was shot on the sand mounds by the hussar barracks. The man's son was shaking like a leaf, crying from fear and anger, until he

collapsed from nervous exhaustion. As the boy no longer had a home or family – his mother had left this world long ago – the Gandarses took him in and raised him.

Their own daughter Austra, a few years older than Viktors, was in high school. After she graduated, she immediately got a job as an office worker. When she had an affair and complications with a married man, and wanted to be more independent, she left her parents, lived for a few years on her own giving them a part of her small salary, but later returned disappointed with life and love, resentful and bitter. She was studying to be an actress, attended classes, performed in workers' theatre troupes and schools. She was usually never at home in the evening, occasionally she would travel to other cities to study her parts.

Meanwhile, Viktors had grown from a boy in to a carefree, brave, plucky young man. He also earned his own living – first as a newspaper seller, later as a deliveryman for a shipping company. A close bond grew between him and Austra as they lived together. She liked his openness and honesty. Throughout her life she had learned only how to be humbler and more submissive, not to expect too much from human connections. As she had grown older and more experienced, she wanted to play a more dominant role in love, she wanted to instil better manners in Viktors, because he was still too much of...a street urchin. At first, overcome by youthful passion, he had given in, there were moments of harmony, happy nights – they did not see each other during the day – but then all of a sudden he became spiteful, undercut her dominance, he became unkind and jealous.

Old Gandars had noticed the connection between Austra and Viktors long ago. he wanted his daughter and the son of his murdered friend to become involved, but he never said anything directly. He had already been cast out of life – its waters now flowed past him. The younger generation seemed different. Its members lived more for the external, for

sports, motion, expressing their desires through flexible emotional relationships. They had no goals or ideals for the future, they only thought about today and themselves like all sensible people these days. Gandars wanted to understand the younger generation without interfering in their personal lives or arguments. His wife was more like him. She made sure that everyone had enough to eat, that everything was washed and mended. Three days a week she went to clean other apartments and three more days a week she stood in front of a laundry tub, not saying much, just focused on her work.

The morning hours were long for the ill and infirm. They had to think about more than just their own existence, carefully noting every sound and tracking each movement of light as it cut through the darkness. He heard the commotion and racket from the other room. It seemed angry without the exchange of barely a word and then had sunk back into sleep. He heard the bed creaking and the sound of bare feet on the floor. He sensed the calm that followed afterwards, though also that it hid many barbs.

If only it were morning and daytime already, then he could complain to his quiet wife about the pain in his knees and joints and have her make him some raspberry tea, but that hour approached slowly. The outside world filled with city sounds. It became noisier and the powerful, ceaseless hum of the city embraced the building, washing over it from its foundations to its roof, and woke those who had fallen back asleep again.