

Jānis Joņevs

## **Jelgava '94 (The Best Doom Is Black)**

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I went skiing on Wednesday, I skied down the hill. The hill was big but not very long. I did not fall. I went down several times. I wished that I fall down some times the next day.

Guntars. The Notebook of Events. 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

Everything narrated is based on real events.

PART I  
THE SHOT

1

It is 1994. Men in checkered flannel shirts are coming. Jelgava is quietly abuzz. Still standing in the library door, I wait for the men to pass.

I was slightly afraid of them, just like I was afraid of everything else. Having waited long enough, I walked out and saw that the sky was aglow.

It was exactly April 5, 1994.

Having taken two determined steps, I saw them standing by the store; they had occupied the entire sidewalk. I was not a coward, no, I just did not want to insult them by demonstratively crossing the street. So I decided to turn left and walk home taking a shortcut through several inter-connected courtyards. Normally, I chose streets, leaving the concealed courtyards for football players and like *déclassé* dawdlers. But this time I boldly turned into a courtyard.

Right behind the back of the library, on the edge of the courtyard, there was a strange object – a small brick cube that served an unknown function – perhaps the ventilation shaft of a hell's dressing room or something. And right on top of this object, there sat another group of *them*. There was the school thug Ugo (not his real name, but a bandit's nickname) who was a couple of years older than me and two others I did not recognize, but certainly of his ilk. All three were smoking.

I tried to think of something else and to pass unnoticed by them. Not a chance.

Ugo opened the conversation with:

– My, what glasses we have!

He was seconded by a gentle:

– Don't just run. Let's talk.

I stopped, turned to them, and the books in my hands felt pitiful and vulnerable, even provocative.

Ugo sensed that and asked:

– What do they write?

And the other one switched to a command:

– Tell us quick, what do they write?

Many witty replies ran through my mind, but I chose a quiet:

– All kinds of things.

Both interrogators turned to the third. He gave me the kind of look that probably only I perceived as strangely excited and said:

– Give us cigs.

At that very moment, far away, thousands of kilometers, on the other side of the ocean, in another continent, a hand ran over a Remington 20 gauge, pulled back the magazine, and someone looked inside: yes, it was loaded.

But here I just shook my head – and not out of stinginess or hatred – I simply did not have any cigarettes. The third one was unperturbed and urged me:

– Let's have a lat.

I replied:

– I don't have one.

In confirming my regret, I spread out my arms in dismay, thereby dropping my books. With a gesture, he stopped me from leaning down, leaving him who once believed that he will rule the world face down on the Jelgava soil, and continued:

– Let's have fifty santims.

I spread out my free arms. He became even more modest in his demands:

– Let's have twenty.

This time my regrets were a lie, and the third one said:

– Now you are asking for it.

He stood up.

Over there, far away, at that very moment, the Remington 20 gauge clicked like in the movies, ready for shooting. The barrel was turned toward a head.

Here the third one took that one and only step that separated us; his chin was very near, in my head, a siren turned on, and I really wished to be elsewhere.

There, elsewhere, the bullet found its mark precisely, breaking a skull, tearing tissue. The noise from the shot sent a gentle ripple over the nearby pool, yet it was not heard by neighbors or people in the streets.

But I did feel something. The siren stopped and something resembling music came on. It seemed that something had happened, it was just not clear what. And that something else will happen, but that too is unknown. I even wished they would beat me up, well, at least sock me one, for that may introduce an Event. I straightened myself somewhat askew, looking somewhere past them and started scratching my forehead as if trying to remember something.

Ugo jumped to his feet and called attention to himself with desperate gestures, as if wanting to say something. Later, he said that he had clearly heard a shot.

The second one who was sitting next to Ugo, claimed that he had heard a strange combination of three chords and felt so happy, so very happy that he'd almost started crying. He dropped his cigarette, burning his shirt, and he was grinning like an idiot.

The third one, who was standing in front of me, was the only one who avowed not having heard anything. At least that's what he later insisted. He was stupefied by my suddenly meditative expression, he turned to his criminal colleagues to point out my idiocy, but saw Ugo with his hands up in a Y and the Second One laughing, his shirt smoldering. The Third one became totally frustrated by the other two helping me pick up the books, whereas I picked up the burning half-cigarette and inhaled for the first time.

No one understood anything.

I went home in a daze, even the books had lost their appeal. I set them on the table, did not talk to my family, did not watch *Saved By the Bell* but looked through the window at Jelgava, knuckling out some rhythm against the windowsill. It was clear to me that I no longer wanted to do homework, and that there was no need for it, but what I wanted and what was needed was not yet clear. In the evening, I sat at the table for a long time, without turning on the light. I did not have my own room, so I could not turn on only the table lamp.

A couple of days later, Radio SWH announced that the body of the leader of the group Nirvana, Kurt somebody or other had been found. The first version was of course suicide. The radio DJ expressed his sympathy and respects as well as his hope that this sad occasion would not attract an unnaturally large flocking of fans as it had been the case when Freddy Mercury died.

Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha.

Forget about Mercury, Mr DJ. Why don't you have yourself a "Merkurs".

DJ's hopes were not fulfilled. He could save them for November 1997 when, following the death of Michael Hutchence's charmingly scintillating death, the number of INXS fans really did not increase. But then, in April 1994, our destinies were decided.

Another few days had to pass for me to understand it – for the intuitively collected newspaper clippings about unknown unkempt musicians; the theoretical and

self-condemned interest in inebriating substances; inklings of depressed aestheticism and planning of routes for wandering to find their justification. For now, I simply felt strange. Stranger.

But I used to be a good kid. I listened to my parents, and to my teachers to, I was a good student and thought about a good future as a lawyer or president, in which capacity I would put the world in order and defeat negative people. The thought of becoming wise, rich and famous appealed to me. It was one and the same: if someone is wise, everyone benefits from it and the world, naturally, rewards him with money, fame and happiness. Probably also with beautiful girls, with whom I was not having much luck so far. I did not believe in these wise and poor, good and unhappy, and lonely ones. The world had to be right, and I wanted to be right in the right world.

Suddenly, I found myself on the other side of the barricades. As if for all these long fourteen years I had accumulated the power to long for something incomprehensible and senseless instead of knowledge about life. Why, why would one ever want to be Kurt, be sad all of one's life, make others sad, marry an ugly broad and then shoot oneself? Isn't it better to be someone from Take That who smiles, is liked by beautiful girls and tops it all off with cash? But suddenly there was a whole bunch of us (no, not a bunch, we were the rare ones outside any bunch or crowd) who hated the successful and admired the bad.

I sat in the bushes facing the Gypsy House, a long wooden building with fake, painted-on windows (Gypsies did in fact live there, whole families of Gypsies; when I was little, other small fry told me that Gypsies should not see your teeth). There was also the Alunāns Park and another spectacular thicket of trees, in local geography known as Shitket. I sat together with Ugo and other gangsters, smoking. There were some other truculent folk sitting with us, sad and notorious. There was Spooky, one of the three or five brothers living an alternative kind of life; there was Nose, his brother, who did not even attend our school but just came to the bushes to sit with us. There was also DJ, a fine and dangerous person. He used to get in my face. I was very much afraid of him, so I always treated him indifferent-snappish. And some other three whose names I did not know – all with shoulder-length hair (almost no one had it really long then), one stranger's hair was light, another's was lighter and the third one's was greasy.

Nose spoke. He was old, at least two years older than the rest of us, so experience spoke in his texts and his intonation was full of light melancholy.

– Some kid in America took a shotgun, put the barrel in his mouth and said: I can do the same as Cobain! And the piece went off.

– And the kid?

– Cashed in.

– Guns are goddamn sensitive.

Nose cast a sad look at the author of the redundant comment.

– You of course are an expert in heaters.

The latter scratched his greasy head.

– What heaters?!

Everyone grew pensive for a moment. I too had something to ask:

– How could he speak with a barrel in his mouth?

And I immediately felt ashamed. I just could not get over the logic inside me.

But I had to. DJ gave a bitter smile and announced:

– All his life, Cobain sang with a gun barrel in his mouth. But you wouldn't understand that.

He pointed to the school.

– Fuck you!

Everyone was silent for a while. I heard Eolus play “Something in the Way” in the Shitket.

The one with the light hair (I had seen him somewhere outside of school) lit his half-cigarette and said:

– Cobain lived in a cardboard box. He had a stomachache all his life. That's why he used drugs.

DJ got all hot and bothered again. He threw his arms up in the air and announced angrily:

– And right he was! We should all do them. For they over there, – and he once again

pointed his finger in the direction of the school, – say that we shouldn't. But we are with Cobain. At least I am.

The one with the greasy hair thought about it:

– But where can we get them?

DJ waved his arm dismissively and mysteriously and pointed toward the Gypsy House.

Nose consoled:



– We can drink. Vodka.

DJ nodded in agreement, but Nose's brother objected naively:

– It's goddamn hard to get that stuff down.

At this, everyone livened up and started giving advice:

– One can chase the vodka with a cig!

– Or mix it with “Yuppi”, – noted the stranger with the light hair.

I recorded these recipes in my head. “Yuppi”, by the way, was a powder, popular in the first half of the 1990s, which was used to color water making it into a soft drink. I also recommended something:

– Vodka is very good if you drink it with a straw. You keep it in the inside pocket of your coat, put the straw in your mouth and have at it. You can get a wicked, I mean, a great high that way.

I was speaking in an unnaturally natural voice about things I had not experienced. I knew the smell of vodka only from my dad's breath. The business with the straw came from my sister who told me about the guys in her class. As I spoke, it occurred to me – what kind of a straw would reach from the inside pocket to your mouth? I was lying and my new, unfamiliar friends, haters of lies and hypocrisy, will unmask me and dispatch me to the A-students after breaking my glasses against my nose as a good-bye gesture.

– What coat? – DJ yelled defiantly, raising his arms and demonstrating his torn jean jacket, which was covered with inscriptions in ballpoint pen – “Hate”, “Incesticide” and “Fuck”.

My mom and dad would never allow me to do something like that.

Spooky spoke:

– I still think beer is better. One time, I drank, – something had caught his attention on the side of the Gypsy House and he continued in a louder voice. – One time, I really drank beer...

A girl was standing there and looking in our direction – long hair, a short skirt, heavy boots. DJ jumped to his feet and ran over to the girl; she kissed him for real and both walked away, phew, holding hands. On her back she had a strapped on wallet – that kind of backpacks were the fashion then.

The silence was interrupted by Ugo, who suddenly announced that wine was good, too. I remembered the dinner at old marshal Richelieu's where the King of Sweden was served a Tokay incognito, the drink glowing in his glass like liquid ruby.

– But wine is so expensive!

That's what I blurted out. Ugo smirked, then smirked again, pulling a bottle out of his pocket. He blew off the dust and showed us the label that unmistakably read: "Wine 'Puzzle'". Everyone said:

– Mmm! Ooo! Let's go.

Ugo offered to share the bottle with us. We all agreed. But my heart started pounding. After all, a class was about to begin. Students must attend classes. I am a rebel in spirit and in my looks, I also smoke but must I really do something in addition? Let me go to my classes, dress decently, listen to my parents – in truth, I am of course with all of you in my heart, which is pounding nervously at the moment.

But the bottle contained alcohol, which had always intrigued me secretly – just like stories about maniacs, despots, catastrophes. Just a few years ago, some girls in my class copied descriptions of torture from our history book and read them out loud. I understood any interest in pain and intense feeling – somewhere there was the life that had to start one day. Alcohol was a part of it; it glowed in the bottle like a liquid disaster.

And girls were supposed to like drunks (at least that's what Blaumanis said). At least girls with heavy boots at the end of long legs for sure. Girls from Kurt's world. I stretched out my hand. Ugo asked:

– Anyone have a corkscrew?

Just like everyone else, I felt around in my pockets as if a corkscrew might have settled in there by magic. Everyone made gestures of dismay – oh no, what can we do, stupid, isn't it? almost looks like we have to go back to school. Nose interfered, explaining that wine can be opened with a reverse motion – just need a good cork-pusher, which function could be served by keys, a good size stick, a pen. We immediately set about looking through the bushes for pens, whereas the stranger with the greasy hair announced:

– Eureka! I'll run to the cafeteria. There must be one!

And he quickly ran off to school. I looked after him thinking that there might not be any corkscrews at the school cafeteria and even if there were, such a rare find would hardly be turned over to a slovenly student; he simply took off, he ran away from the crime, from degeneration, from the puzzle that remained amongst us. I was slightly envious of the escapee, but had also good feelings toward him: he had taken on the burden of fear and betrayal that should have been my lot. He was already

opening the heavy school door, we heard the bell ringing, and then the door closed with a bang and we no longer heard it.

After a long time, a whole eternity really, not long after this book was published in France, I received a letter:

“I read your book. Yes, I remember that occasion when we were drinking wine in the bushes by the school, and I would like to correct a little of what you have written. This is what really happened. I was the one who ran to get a corkscrew and I was not running away. I had good friends in the cafeteria, I had slept with all the cooks and monitors, and we often drank together. Not everyone at school knew about it, just the coolest people. Presently, I am writing to you from Nancy where I am working for a hair cosmetics company and drinking two bottles of Bordeaux Champagne every day, if you know what I mean.”

Sooner or later I had to return to school, however. It stank of floor-wax and chalky rags there. And they told you how to live. There was no problem to get punched in the face either. Everyone was running and shouting.

I was a good student, only in sports I was not doing so well. A nerd, in other words.

In school, you were taught in a very definitive way. Nerds had good grades but they had to fear everything. Thugs were strong and athletic, but also stupid. Girls were beautiful or they didn't exist.

Jurgis and I belonged to the nerds. We lived in the same building; we had attended kindergarten together; had been sitting together since first grade. We played together, building ships from chairs and launching battles on the rug and later tried to survive at school together.

And now something changed at school.

One time, Jurgis and I were sitting in the lobby behind the potted palm, busy fantasizing something. We had a piece of paper in front of us, on which we were drawing some sort of plans. And then, usually, some thug would come over, grab our plan, crumple it up and throw it away.

This time, the thug was Ugo.

Upon seeing me, he put the crumpled ball of paper back and said:

– Ciao!

– Ciao!

That was me. Ugo waved his hand in a not fully realized handshake and left, without even calling us morons.

I was overwhelmed with pride. See, school can be broken! See, the world is changing! Glory to Kurt. He protects us. We are protected by a precise chord and a shot.

I looked at Jurgis to share my joy.

But he said to me:

– So you're with them now or what?

And he gave me this insulted, betrayed look. I said:

– What? It all turned out well!

– You’re getting on well with them? Maybe you are smoking and drinking wine in the bushes with them, too?

Really, would he rather get it in the noggin? Was he envious of my victory? But he just kept at it:

– You’re just nuts.

And what had he been like lately? I said to him:

– Okay, enough with the crystallizing of plans, it’s time to begin conquering the world.

But he replied:

– But it was only a game.

No, to me it was never only a game.

So I asked him:

– What, are you not listening to Nirvana?

And he replied:

– I don’t like them. They’re screaming.

How about that? Life had broken into two. And I found myself in that other part?

But it actually did not sound too bad – the crazy me. Isn’t that what anyone desires? To break out of the quotidian, the pedestrian ordinariness and receive confirmation of one’s existence. Wasn’t Kurt crazy? Me too. I can be like Cobain.

That’s how I lost a friend.

And also a teacher.

I scribbled on my desk: “Kurt Cobain 1967—1994”.

Mrs. Raudupīte noticed it and said:

– But, Jānis? Not you too. You are a good student after all.

She wanted to keep me. Up to now I had been something of a teacher’s pet. I would provide commas for the entire class. This is how it went: Raudupīte reads a dictation; she reads out a sentence once, then another time, so that everyone would get it. During the second reading I knock on the desk with my pen at every comma. A sharp, precise hit, just like Dave Grohl who at the time was drumming unknown to me. And so the entire class would put in a comma keeping with my beat. Afterwards, Raudupīte read out the whole dictation, and I drummed in the commas. The semicolons and dot-dot-dots were up to each individual. I experienced a secret traitor’s joy vis-à-vis Mrs. Raudupīte.

Teachers should not be too nice. I remember our first teacher Lielkalne. She was quite famous for her loving, maternal approach. Our parents said:

– You are really lucky! If you don't obey *this* teacher...

It was a real curse. Mrs. Lielkalne really was a fairy-tale character. When we did something wrong, she sat there, covering her face with her hands. We felt bad. Moreover, judging by the sad tales the teacher told, we had been the worst of the worst she had ever dealt with.

A person needs the right to be bad. Transgressions and punishments should be formulated simply like prices in a store: murder is worth a death penalty and a messed up toilet is worth a reprimand. It's an honest deal and no crying.

In Kurt's time, such a situation would simply not be acceptable. And then – oh, the fairness of nature! – our class was taken over by Mrs. Burkova. The prosecutor's wife. She had a sharp voice and a boyish body. And the best thing about her – she was nasty, unfair, holding some stupid grudge. So we had reclaimed our right.

No, I will never be a good student. Yet I could not let myself go completely – what would they say at home?

OK, let Burkova rest. Now it was Raudupīte shrieking. I did not hear her, though, for I had borrowed a cassette player, which was travelling from desk to desk and was currently with me. It had a cassette inside, also not mine. Something new. Pearl Jam's "Ten".

I got to the main song. I listened to it, stopped the cassette, took it out and rewound it on my pen. It would be wrong to waste batteries. I listened to the song again. It was about me! I too am quiet and sad and spend my time "at home drawing pictures", it all fits, except I am not yet fifteen. That's okay, I can wait. If no one can see inside me, I will scatter my brains before them to see. Moreover, it will be a beautiful tribute to the song. Then everyone will finally understand that it really was important to me. The entire class.

– Jeremy spoke in class today.

And I want this song to be playing softly in the background. It's so good. Or is it perhaps too beautiful?

Someone was tapping my shoulder; without looking, I knew that someone was claiming the cassette player. No way, study your commas instead. The tapping continued, however, and I quietly voiced my opinion, using expletives. Yet something

said quietly may sound pretty loud, particularly if “Jeremy” is going full blast in one’s ears.

In front of me, in front of my poor desk, stood Raudupīte. With sad eyes. She had been delivering a great lecture in my address but I had failed to hear it. I had only replied. The class was in stitches. The entire class, with the exception of Jurgis.

I was told to leave the classroom. To return with my parents. For such trifles! Almost any one of those remaining in the classroom had got into worse shit. It was my first time.

I stood in the hallway all by myself. A running little tyke appeared, then he slipped – the floors were being waxed here not just for the smell – , got up quickly, darted a glance in my direction to make sure I was not laughing and disappeared in the lavatory.

I had lost a friend and a teacher. But I was not going to miss them much. On a nearby horizon, there was a bunch of new friends and teachers, crazy and lonesome. That’s what I was thinking while the tyke was taking a shit.

I turned on the table lamp. It was very old, having shed light on my sister's path before. She had pasted banana stickers onto it: "Ecuador", "Colombia", "Costa Rica". It was all wrong, yet I also did not feel like tearing them off. I did not possess any more topical stickers. So I wrote on a piece of paper: "I feel stupid/ And contagious" and glued it onto the lamp with my saliva.

I opened the old "Crown" cassette player. Dad had brought it from Finland several years ago. For a number of years, it had been good as new, but then aged within a couple of months. I put in a cassette, closed the slot and pressed play. It didn't work. I opened it again, took out the cassette (with difficulty, it was stuck) and saw that one of the spindles had popped out. I pushed it back, yet it popped out again. I took the plastic cap off the spindle and discovered that the concealed little spring was at fault. I threw it away, put the cap back on, put in the cassette, closed the cover, pressed play. Now it worked. I was extremely dexterous at the time.

"Insecticide", the mysterious 1992 Nirvana album played. I sat there listening carefully. How strange "Sliver" was, how very non-Nirvana-like it seemed. And what did they sing about, some lost childhood or what? And what about "Molly's Lips"? It was almost scary to like it, because the song seemed so pop. "Polly" – so fast and lively compared to the familiar "Nevermind" version. At the time, it seemed to me they were singing about a parrot or a cat. "Polly wants a cracker." I did not know that the song is about a tragic event; I thought – oh, how original, they are singing about a cat. But the last song, "Aneurysm", was the most beautiful of all. "Love you so much, makes me sick." These were the only lyrics I could understand, but it was enough to understand how beautiful the rest of them, the ones I did not get, were. I could not help it, I had to turn it up.

My sister emerged from the other room.

– What are you listening to?

– Nirvana.

– Again. Listen to something else for a change. Turn it down.

I could not argue with my sister – after all, she'd be the one to go and talk to Mrs Raudupīte. And the last song was already over, so I took out the cassette. What now? Kārlis had given me the album "Troublegum" by Therapy. Let's go.



It was no Nirvana, not at all. But probably worth listening to. “My girlfriend says / That I need help.” I have no girlfriend, a complete lie, let’s do something else! “My boyfriend says / I’d be better off dead.” Better already. “Fuck you I gonna get drunk”, that’s the spirit. Shit, can’t get the rest of the lyrics. “All people are shit!”—well, that’s pretty deep. The main thing is that it’s surly and without any compromises.

Dad came in, turned on the TV and sat down on the couch. The couch was moderately broken – my sister and I used to jump up and down on it, but that’s been over for a while now. I turned the music up a notch, Dad’s athletes were yelling too much. If our TV had a remote, he too would have turned it up, but he simply said:

– Turn that madhouse of yours down a bit.

In fact, Therapy was not anything to write home about. No madhouse. I took out the cassette. I put in Nine Inch Nails. Yes! “The Downward Spiral”. That’s more like it. I had read about this band in the evening newspaper “Vakara Zinaş”. Trent Reznor was relating how all his friends are doing themselves in and so on. Having found this cassette at the market, I ran home excited to find out how best to do myself in.

That was something different, it was all right. There were all kinds of clanks and clackety-clacks – how beautiful. That’s industrial music for you. “Black and blue and broken bones / you left me.” When will someone leave me? “Nothing can stop me now / ‘cause I don’t care.” That’s right. No one will stop me.

– Shush. Or simply turn it off. You don’t like it anyway. What can anyone find to like there.

That was awful. I felt like the last guardian of the fragile genuine art. I did not turn it off, of course. A couple of months ago I would have, but then it was different music. Whereas now: “I wanna know everything / I wanna be everywhere / I wanna do something / That matters.” So there, Dad. I want to do something. And I am doing it now, right here, by the cassette player. I am fighting my father.

Then “Hurt” came on. It was so beautiful that I immediately forgave the world and turned it up, so that others could partake of it as well. One cannot not like something like that. They will hear it and understand. “And we can have it all / My empire of dirt.”

Dad in fact did not object, I felt that he was overcome by the beauty of pain and he was made happy.

The cassette stopped. What next? My collection was not very extensive. Stone Temple Pilots. I had recorded it myself. "Play".

Dad shifted uneasily in his seat.

– That's too much!

He did not realize that this was not nearly too much, in fact, neither did I. Okay, okay, I turned it down. I leaned closer to the cassette player, paying it full attention.

Mom came in wearing an apron.

– Come and eat something.

Neither one of us gave any reply, which, I must admit, was rather rude. I was not aware at that time that politeness may be our most valuable possession.

The cat came in, took a look around and went back into the kitchen.

– Even the cat cannot stand your so-called music.

I got up and went to the kitchen to sit down for some potato pancakes. I put them on my plate one at a time but mom kept sidling up to me and putting a whole stack on my plate. I had pointed out to her several times that I don't like it. I ate them all but my emotional balance was lost. And she also tried to talk me into eating the pancakes with lingonberry jam – supposedly I had no idea what was good and was breaking her heart by having what's best in life simply pass me by.

No, I have no use for your "best in life", you cannot force me to eat lingonberry jam! The fight is on.

And then it came to me: I must listen to Ministry! I rushed back to the room. What an ingenious idea to call a band Ministry. On RBS TV I had seen their video clip where they were turning over cars. To listen to this music is like turning over cars. I ran to the cassette player and shoved in a cassette.

– Enough, enough. Time to go to sleep.

– Just one last one, just a little.

The last one had to be turned up. Well, this was something, I'll be...! How they pommel those drums! How they hit those guitars! Can there ever be anything more beautiful?!

– Jānis, didn't you hear? Enough.

The entire family had encircled me.

– Jānis, think about others.

But Ministry shouted:

– What about us?

What about us who don't want to go to sleep?

My sister decided to stoke the fire:

– You tell him, he won't listen to me. He just keeps listening to that jumble and is becoming weird.

They were all upset with me, the good child. Dad, the deepest, most beautiful Latgale, his brother moaning and dying, the doctor is far away, the Germans set up their cannon in the yard and treat him to round bonbons, the army service behind the polar circle where airfields emerge from underground, then work, work, nothing but honest work; mom, still a beauty, just at the time when she would not heed the teacher's order to cry for the dead Stalin, when she went to the barricades and took dad with him; my sister, my holy sister who will soon not say a word to anyone and just live in her world of quiet dreams and write strange poetry that will be liked by many.

But "What about us?"

Okay, okay, I turned it off. Hiding my curled lip, I crawled into bed.

It was wonderful: Ministry, also Jesus Jones and Sonic Youth and KMFDM and Psychopomps and Temple of the Dog. This I learnt from Kārlis, my classmate since the first grade, up to now an uncultured hooligan who once kicked me in the belly during a football game. Then we somehow started talking and he gave me a few cassettes like some drug, a weapon, a forbidden turtle. Those were usually obtained somehow by his brother. Kārlis said that he and his brother had listened to Nirvana already before April 5, 1994, can you believe it?

Nirvana. That was the best in the world. Better even than The Cranberries, better than Dolores O’Riordan’s eyes deep as the lakes of Ireland.

– By the way, she also drinks.

That’s what my friend Pūpols, a unique character told me. He resembled a *pūpols*, a pussy-willow catkin, only in form, his content was jagged, sharp, wild and impenetrable. Up to now, we had discussed Assyrian archers and Corsican brothers. I remember how once we could not stop talking about them and to continue the conversation, I walked him to his house and then he walked me to mine. Now we discussed only music and the associated lifestyle.

I already knew that the name “Puzzle” refers not to the legend of wine, but rather its provenance, contents and consistency. We repeatedly partook of it in an abandoned construction site that must have been meant to become a wedding palace. Now we were wedding ourselves to the bottle and cigarettes. When I told this to Jurgis at school, he said again:

– You are nuts.

I liked that. Whatever. Not too much nuts, just a little. Girls like that, right? It’s not working now, however. But that’s okay, I’m used to it. I have been alive long enough to understand that girls don’t like me. But at least I am crazy. Just a little, within reason. Don’t you worry, my friend and deskmate.

Pūpols vigorously defended the view that one should drink a lot. Really a lot. For we should finally get drunk, shouldn’t we? So far, only Kārlis had accomplished that. He had even thrown up on the way home and his older cousin had remarked:

– From a boy, Kārlis is turning into a man.

But we failed. We drank beer, almost two bottles, five of us shared a bottle of wine, a bunch of like minds took turns drinking from a bottle of vodka – nothing.

Back home, I put my head close to the cassette player, filling my head with a heavy dose of Nine Inch Nails and trying to establish if something had changed in my consciousness. It seemed that it hadn't.

The wedding palace crowd included some fully adult women, aged eighteen. They had long since managed to get drunk and, "from boys, turn into men", and therefore they could advise us in our sorrow:

- You shouldn't eat beforehand. It will work much better on an empty stomach.
- You should mix as many different types of booze as possible. You won't regret it.

Eva worked as a drawing instructor; she was looking at me and saying something with her eyes. I perceived this as something ghostlike – something like that may happen, but it is not true. Yet I remembered her advice.

On Thursday, I did not go to the school discotheque. In fact, I never attended those but this time I had a feeling that I may miss something. And come Friday, the school was abuzz with news. The discotheque turned out to have been quite eventful. Classmate Artis had reached the goal, i.e. he had gotten soused and passed out right there in the assembly hall. And that was not all – he had passed out so thoroughly that even the headmistress had failed to revive him. The liquid ammonia had exhausted the school emergency supplies, so an ambulance had been called to rush the young man to be brought back to life. So others have things happen in their lives.

Pūpols too had not lived that night in vain. As part of an undetermined crowd, he had drunk half a liter of vodka and gone home. By his house, his stamina gave out, however, a bunch of classmates suddenly appeared and pushed the boy up to the fifth floor and delivered him right into the waiting hands of his father. The father taught us history, political science and German. He listened to the presentation of his students:

- We found Pūpols here...

He picked his heir up and carried him to bed. Pūpols's youngest brother did not lose time reporting right from the field: the next morning, when father started asking questions, Pūpols had held fast:

- Where did you get slobbered yesterday?
- I didn't drink!
- Nonsense, you vomited all over the place last night!
- I did not vomit!

When I related this to Eva, she just purred as if in a trance:

– I like such scandalous people... those who misbehave.

That same day, I went out with a sense of mission. In two or three other households in our town, my friends left their parental abodes in the same way, warning that they will stay out late and silently begging not to be waited up for. The Jelgava winds were humming: tonight, my boys, you have to get drunk.

Friday night, I decisively put three lats in my pocket and, with Kārlis at my side, walked to the Fifth. Some funny friends of ours were living there, who had a reputation of being real drunks. After marching for about half an hour, we reached Cips's house. He came out all groggy (he was always groggy) and said that it could be done, but that meant we had to go to Jelgava to get money. Thirty-five minutes later, we were back in Jelgava where Cips met someone, obtained ten lats in a mysterious way and said:

– So let's go back and drink.

Kārlis threw in the towel and refused to resume marching. But Cips was in the habit of being true to his word. So the two of us walked again back to the Fifth. Some forty minutes later, with another savage from the Fifth, we went to Fourth and bought a bottle of champagne and a bottle of beer in a kiosk nicknamed "Bordertown". We settled into some construction site meant never to be finished, drank half a bottle of the champagne, filled the empty spot with beer and enjoyed our treat. The local savage commented:

– Hard to tell. Is it bitter or is it sweet?

I drank in a quiet and determined fashion, awaiting the impact. Nothing.

When we were done it turned out that it was time to run to the bus to get home on time and not run into problems. Once again, we had to pass "Bordertown", where, awaiting a turn of his luck, the brother of the Local Savage was lingering. He talked Cips into buying a bottle of the brandy "White Stork". Then everyone walked me to the bus. At the bus stop, the bottle was opened, but the others strangely refused to drink. Only Local Savage's brother and I hurried to suck at the neck of the stork, finishing the brandy in good speed. We successfully finished up right at the time the bus pulled up. I jumped onboard and thought to myself:

– Once again, nothing.

But this time, it did not worry me. I could not find a convenient position in the seat. I was not really there, I was in a movie about myself, I saw myself shifting around on the seat. This movie was not very absorbing, yet I had never seen it before,

so I watched it for a spell with weary interest. The bus slipped into Jelgava. I started thinking that soon I would probably have to get my puppet ready for getting off, but then, in a flash of clarity, I was struck by the thought:

– What if it's *that*?

Indeed, what if I am finally intoxicated with alcohol, have finally opened the door of consciousness and found myself in the other world?

The bus trudged up to the stop, the next to last before my own. I saw a water-pump by the side of the street. Eureka! All I have to do is to rinse my face in cold water and it will all go away! I was half squeezed by the automatic door, but managed to get out.

In the film about Jelgava, the sun was setting, it was setting over the nine-storey apartment blocs, over the empty ruins of the wedding palace, over the crazy steeple of Anna Church. With weary suddenness I understood that there was nowhere I had to go, this moment would last forever. Like a little robot, I leaned down at the iron water-pump, grabbed a hold of the handle, I pumped and I pumped, and a waterfall cascaded onto my face. Indifferent water was flowing over my face.

I will not go into detail. I resolved to never use alcohol again. Because of that fun evening I was made to cut my hair that had just exceeded the standard and was not allowed to attend the first evening at a Jelgava metal dive (the club for alternative people). Thus my social life was cut short and locked. I had to look for another way to the non-world.

The answer was not far away. It had a waist, pronounced hips and a g-string. As well as five others. The guitar.

Kārlis's brother said that one of his legendary friends had kept playing the guitar until he was drafted. There, the lieutenant had ordered the platoon at "attention" and asked sternly:

– Does anyone know how to play the guitar?

– M-me.

– Can you do Nirvana?

– Yes, sir!

– Let's go. You'll teach me.

So they went to the best barracks whereas the rest of the platoon was ordered to weed thistle in a mine field.

If you know how to play Nirvana, even war can't touch you.

Hoping to steer my growing craziness into some halfway decent direction, mom bought me a guitar that cost eight lats.

I took it into my hot little hands, I freed my mind, sank into nirvana and let my heart do the talking. Yet the guitar sounded different from the heart. It turned out that it was not tuned.

I put the instrument in a linen bag and toured my friends. Most made references to some Ģirtiņš or Edvīns who would tune it so well that it might be enough for one to merely brush against the strings with one's belly and "Bohemian Rhapsody" would sound. But somehow we managed to tune it without Ģirtiņš and Edvīns. All the tuners and their brothers used the opportunity to also play their entire repertoire. Kārlis's brother knew how to play the very beginning of "Come As You Are", something like the beginning of "Plateau" and a few random chords from some song by INXS. Kārlis knew only the very beginning of "Come As You Are". I knew nothing at all. At home, I would nurse my guitar and wait for it to start talking. But it wouldn't. I would



enjoy the sound of a single string, but, as soon as I added the next one, total mumbo-jumbo chaos ensued.

An eternity passed before I figured out the beginning of “The Man Who Sold the World”. Then, from some papers, I half-learned some Beatles songs. Then someone showed me how to do Clapton’s “Tears in Heaven”, a peace with which I could pretend to be a melancholic virtuoso for a whole twenty seconds.

– It’s a go! I guess I am a prince of the guitar, yessir.

The sounds began to obey me. I combined the chords I knew, then added ones of my own and original, aching beautiful compositions were born and the familiar pieces of idols found their rendition under my slender genius’ fingers. Upon hearing them, my parents said:

– Go to sleep.

It all got better and better. Classical pieces heard and unheard were lured out by the slightest touch. I did an experiment, strumming all the free strings one by one. And it turned out to be an excellent rendition of Nirvana’s “Where Did You Sleep Last Night”. Perplexed, I went to bed.

Next day, our teacher brought in the new student. She was blond, shaped a little like a guitar and had a somewhat strange smile. As became clear later, the most fitting name for her was Milady. From the desks occupied by boys an inaudible howling could be perceived.

During the break, everyone gathered around her and spoke without looking at her:

– Yesterday, in basketball, I had a paranormal three-step one.

– You’re just dumb, fatso.

– The day before yesterday we beat up some Gyps.

– You’re a Gyp yourself.

Kārlis did not say a word but was looking straight at Milady. I did not give in to this unhealthy obsession, I never joined the masses. Wearing a stoical grin, I was thinking about the crusaders entering Constantinople. No, about Kate Moss for whom Christ appeared at a Nirvana concert. I wonder what kind of little helper Kate had that time? Where could I get one? They say, it really helps with the guitar.

The suitors started pushing and shoving, and the tall, gawky Edmunds simply ran into me. I sat at my desk, removing myself from the world.

That was all they needed. Having exhausted their mutual witticisms and independently of each other, the boars decided to turn their alpha-male vigor against me.

- Don't just sit there, sing some Nirvana!
- Tell us what y'all are doing there in the bushes?
- You guys are not normal, right, you are not, are you?

Actually, these were all good questions and I would have been glad to answer them if she had asked them herself instead of those clowns in a spectacle dedicated to her. Now, my head bent, I searched my backpack for an "Uzi" or some other automatic weapon. The bell ruined it all. The venerable teacher Raudupīte walked in and gradually calmed everyone down while getting more and more on edge herself.

This class was full of idiots. Or of crouching dreamers who were likewise of little use. But Milady expressed herself without any urging. At the very first period, and quite to the point. Some nerd. And if you are so very smart, could you tell me about the guitar? How could I get rid of this crazy feeling that only what's strummed outside school is beautiful? How can I find my way to the straight and narrow?

Then Raudupīte made me weigh in about Ruģēns. Actually, Ruģēns was a pleasant sort and quite strange. One time he played a trick on the local scribe, telling a rich farmer from a different parish that it was a monkey.

- Wanna see a monkey, Pāp?
- Don't mind if I do.
- There he is, sitting behind glass.

The farmer goes into the local council building and indeed, a monkey is sitting behind glass (the scribe had been bearded and very hairy). In his joy of discovery, the farmer started poking him with the handle of his whip, laughing:

- Ha, see how he doesn't like the poking! Just like a human!

But now I was the one performing in front of all these peasants who were not listening to me and just laughing, and I felt like the monkey of Ruģēns.

After class, I wanted to go up to Kārlis and talk about Pearl Jam. To regain my senses, return to humanity, have my existence confirmed by the coolest guy in class. But Kārlis was already talking to Milady.

What could they talk about?

I was leaving the classroom. At the door, she addressed me:

- Do you like Latvian literature?

– What?

– Chicken butt!

And she smiled in such a way that the world split in two.

– It’s just a joke, not very literary one. But I’m just a country girl. But hey...

I let my gaze reach a bit higher than her lips.

– You don’t really like Nirvana, do you?

I had no idea what she was getting at. Was it a test? Who wants to know, little girl?

– I do.

– That’s weird. You look more sophisticated than that.

And she walked away, her skirts fluttering.

After school, I wandered around. I no longer worried about courtyards, I walked right in. This way, there was less chance that a colleague of my mom’s might see me smoking. I stopped by a garbage bin to have a smoke, looked up and said:

– If nothing comes of me and Milady, it’s okay, it’s not what I need; I’d rather learn to play the guitar!

What makes us think that someone should observe our self-imposed rules? When I returned home, I could not do the guitar at all. When I returned to school, Milady would not look at me.

I had new friends and new interests, but some of my habits remained the same. I still read books. I did understand, however, that “Ivanhoe” just won’t do anymore. That was over and done with. Now I had to read something weirder. Like “Stranger” or “Plague” by Camus. Those I could talk about with Milady when we chanced a moment alone during a break. Eva gave me Salinger’s “Catcher in the Rye”. At the time, I was most fascinated by the fact that it was the book Mark Chapman was reading when waiting to murder John Lennon. I still liked Lennon, that was legitimate – Kurt liked him too. But that did not prevent me from admiring this murder, which had happened right in my birth year, and Salinger’s book fit in it very well. The content of the book was also quite interesting. Salinger ponders wanting to talk to Maugham and Hardy. Did I want to talk to Salinger? Well, yes, I guess. What would I ask him? I don’t know. I would like him to listen to me.

As the observant girl had noted, I did also like Latvian literature. At the time, I was devouring Andris Puriņš. He too wrote about ordinary things. His protagonists sometimes made it to the Aztecs and aliens, but by and large they were ordinary drunks and punks. They were high school students who dreamt, suffered, drank and listened to music a lot. They too did not like school.

But someone had to say the thing Kafka is talking about: “There is a point after which it is impossible to backtrack. This point has to be reached.” Where would that point be? We have yet to become truly free, the fallback is still so very close. What is the step to be made to be really gone?

We did not read Kafka then. But another book offered alternative advice. It was rather popular. It was “Memento” by Radek John and it was quite popular, this didactic work of a Czech author about the devastating impact of drugs. For me as well as for many other reading geeks it became the bible exulting the awesome power of narcotics. Yes, Michal’s girl and friends died and he went crazy, but it was life. It was what we were dreaming about: to not be just a tiny screw. So if I wanted to live, I needed drugs.

Where to find them? The newspapers claimed that drugs were everywhere, more accessible than ever. But where were they then? Eva said that she had a friend who could get some weed. Using a pen, Gacha demonstrated the right way to smoke but he did not know where to get the stuff. The crime news broadcast claimed that

pills were confiscated from high school students and they had claimed that they found them on the street. I kept my eyes peeled, yet found nothing on the street.

Those who wandered around the Alien School and smoked around the basketball basket said that all the best things in life were the legacy of the departing Soviet army. In their abandoned bases and bomb shelters “FOF” pills designed as an antidote to poison were found in medicine cabinets and anti-gas kits. One girl had taken one with her coffee. For the rest of the day she was followed by a pair of which one was a long, flexible, reticulated pipe and the other was something round and fluffy. Ingus from the Alien School had eaten these things by the handful. Apparently, he had come home, picked up a hammer and put it on the telephone.

– Have to charge it.

Parafins had ground half a fof against the table with his lighter and snorted it. Soon there had been blood streaming from both nostrils and Parafins had got the impression that he was going to die. How beautiful.

Yet I never got a hold of any fof. They were always somewhere just out of reach.

Parafins knew of substances that were even easier to come by. Once he went into a store’s household goods department and started a conversation with the salesperson:

– Five vials of the “Moments” superglue!

– Why so many?

– It’s my birthday today!

Apparently, one could get high even from bananas. If I only knew how, I would try it with bananas. The glue is too smelly, it could cause a headache.

One time we were sitting on the pavement by the Alien School. I was weighing in on the topic of drugs. My knowledge was rather extensive, albeit unsystematic.

– At times, I’ve got to see a huge, pulsating flower. It’s pulsating –

– Where is it?

– Right there in the room, on the floor... Takes up half the room.

Salty was chewing on a straw and correcting me.

– Don’t make me laugh. Pills, if you’re lucky, make your whole body stiff.

– Including your dick?

– Certainly not yours.

There were tiny pieces of shiny quartz in the pavement. I imagined how they would look under the influence of drugs. They would turn into tiny planets. Fairies would live on them.

Just then, a Gypsy walked up to us. My entire body went stiff with horror. It's normal to be afraid of Gypsies. He said hello to Jelly, squatted next to us in that classic *urla* squat, saying something in a low voice. Jelly pointed at me. The Gypsy got to his feet and waved at me to step aside.

I really fear Gypsies like I fear dogs.

I got up and stepped aside. A siren was blaring in my head. The Gypsy walked another couple of steps and I followed him. He extended his hand. His handshake was very weak – he simply grabbed and let go of my hand.

– You need plasticine?

That's what he asked, looking straight past me. To be sure, I like plasticine, I used to make various animals from it, particularly hippopotamuses. But why would I need plasticine now?

– I'll show you how to beat it. And I will also show you where you can get some Belamor.

I was getting less and less out of this conversation. So I said:

– Ideal! It'll do.

His glance turned closer to me while still sliding past me.

– How much do you need?

I still had no idea what to say, so I just said again:

– It'll do.

The Gypsy shot a glance around. So did I. The guys were still sitting on the pavement and not looking at us. They were playing rock-paper-scissors for fofans. This is how it's done: you put your hand on the head of the victim, then pull back the middle finger with your other hand and release it. Salty was really good at it, so it was sheer luck that I did not have to participate.

– Come in two days. At eleven, when there is nobody here. Four lats.

We joined those sitting on the ground. No one asked any questions, the usual pleasant conversations were taking place. But I understood that I had become party to a crime. I will be buying drugs.

It would be all right, if I could share this with someone. I ran into Gacha, who was leisurely walking down the street. He seemed to be a kind of a messenger from

our future: he always stayed on the sidelines, always quiet, a little angry and upset about the correct world. He was sure that another path should be followed. So I decided to tell him.

And he did not say:

– Oh my! Don't do it! Stay away from the Gyps and drugs!

Instead, Gacha said:

– Excellent!

He nodded in approval, adding quietly:

– Would be great if you shared some.

That's exactly what I wanted – to share. It was so moving that it did not even occur to me to ask him to come with me.

So I went to the assigned place all alone. I was already circling around the Alien School when I ran into Milady. I did not get all shy and wordlessly offered to accompany the girl. I could think of nothing to say. Then she asked:

– What are you knocking about for?

I was trying to think of something extraordinary to say but then the truth came out:

– I am going to the Gypsies to buy some weed.

She reacted in the sweetest possible way:

– Oh my God.

She said it so calmly and impishly – as always. I added that I may get my face bashed in and she smiled. Milady cast a glance at the gravestone shop and let out a laugh:

– The class rumor is that we are a pair.

I too sniggered – they talk a lot of nonsense in our wonderful class. What is it that they smoke.

I saw her off to the kindergarten and walked back to the Alien School. Then it occurred to me – and what are *you* knocking about for?

Soon the Gypsy appeared at the agreed spot, extended his sly hand and asked:

– You alone?

Like it was some movie or something. He nodded and we started on our way till we reached the very heart of the Gypsy block. It is a horrifying block: a separate town hammered together from painted boards; a town in which a person finds himself

feeling as if he were abroad, for only Gypsy is spoken all around. Gypsies of all sizes were coming toward us. My Gypsy was trying to reassure me:

– Don't be afraid. True, you're very white, but don't be afraid, I am with you.

Then he suddenly looked straight at me.

– You a normal boy. Not hairy.

Salt in my wounds. As I already mentioned, I had to cut my hair after my first drunken episode and now I looked ordinary. The Gypsy continued:

– We are at war with the crazy hairy ones.

He pointed at some distant spot in deep Jelgava:

– There, in Victory Park, they have their base. Our guys went to fight them there.

Holy Kurt! He is talking about the metal club, about the first and up to now only big party at the “Villa Medem” house which I missed. Great battles were said to have taken place with the Gypsies there.

– There are so many of them! We were at the door, on the stairs. At first we were winning. Then the door opens and about a hundred of them come out! All hairy.

The Gypsy raised his arms expressively, his brown eyes wide. Well, it could not have been a hundred, at least as far as I knew.

– The first one was holding an iron bar!

According to what I heard from the protagonists, it had been a simple broomstick.

– A good thing we ran away. But we will go there again. Do you know when they have that bazaar there?

I did not know. We were standing in front of a small wooden house.

– Give me your four lats.

He said that in a businesslike yet quiet manner. I gave him the money and he went into the house – without knocking. I stood outside for a rather long time. Finally I started thinking that I'd rather not wait till it gets dark here, in this Gypsyville. Okay, I get it, I've been had and I will learn my lesson: such a lesson for four lats is a pretty good deal.

Four lats was a decent sum at that time.

Finally, he did come out. Today, no dice. Come back tomorrow.

Happy and free I went home, sans money, sans weed.



The next day, with a heavy heart, I went back to the small house. It may have been his brother who came out holding a big wrench. No, Dollar is not home. Relieved, I walked away again. There was no sign of the Gypsy by the Alien School. Okay, a textbook case – I've been cheated in a case involving drugs, that's how I'd put it.

But not for long. One day, Jelly came up to me and said quietly:

– Dollar asked me to give this to you.

He stretched out his hand balled in a fist. I stretched out my own. What will drop in my outstretched palm? The plasticine of my dreams? No, it was just my banal four lats.

– He couldn't get it now, had me give you the money. He said he was an honest Gypsy.

It was something beyond belief. Everything, absolutely everything in this case turned out wrong.

But okay, we had our poor folks' ways of getting high. For those we needed neither lats, nor Gypsies. The Alien School gang did it by the brick wall, over there, near the bushes.

Voldiņš, the volunteer, squatted by the wall and inhaled deeply 17 times (everyone counted aloud). After the last one, he held his breath, got up, pressed his back to the wall and the master of ceremonies, with the help of an assistant, punched him in the pit of the stomach. And Voldiņš, the volunteer, blacked out. His head dropped to his chest, his body slid down the wall, tilted and Voldiņš's cheek hit the pavement with a soft thud. Gentle slapping soon returned him to consciousness and, having come to, he could relate his experiences:

– Devils. Some sort of devils. With horns and pitchforks. The devils are singing. Women, their tits covered with blood, are licking the ground. Monsters are flying about and vomiting. Yeah, dudes, fuck y'all, I'm going home now.

Does Voldiņš really have such rich imagination, I wondered. Of course, I took comfort in the fact that there was nothing original there, it all came from fairy-tales, pure and simple. But now I know that Voldiņš did not invent anything, he just peeked at the future. All that he related soon actually took place.

In Jelgava, the sound was decisively turning to grunge, alternative rock and music of undetermined genre that without a doubt was the purest underground. I no longer was such a good student. Pūpols wandered around acquiring ever more dubious friends. Eva's recently obtained job was rocking.

I had a guitar and a plan to form a band. The only problem was that the concept was yet to become clear to me and I had great trouble learning to play that piece of wood. I could do only one Nirvana song, "Sappy."

But other bands had in fact sprung up in Jelgava. Increasingly often, the talk was of rehearsals and fingers cut on strings. Concerts also took place.

That evening here, at the Jelgava art school, almost all of Jelgava underground barged in.

Imbecile Hog. It was a band started by Ugo from our school, more punk than punk.

With Cut. The best group out of the Other School. Mareks on drums, Ēriks singing, Gints... all were famous. The genre was Jelgava grunge.

Shiny Hairless. The city underground legend. Later they will become the pop band Herlis un Citruss, but for now, no compromises.

Frontlines. Šolis's band, wonderfully depressive. Thanks to them, I later developed a fondness for Joy Division.

I stood by the window of the lavatory, smoking. The smoke did not overpower the smell of paint, too many children had rinsed their brushes here (it was a style of sorts – to rinse one's brushes in the john instead of the sink). Through the door, I could hear the first band warming up and I was overcome with a sense of imminent greatness: finally events were unfolding, history was being made here. Nirvana or Pixies also once played in some school, just like this.

Someone called me from outside. I looked out – these were some guys, complete strangers. One of them asked me:

– Are you already in?

I nodded and sucked on my cigarette.

– Do you know how one can get in?

The entrance was well within their view and quite accessible, but a homeguard was standing behind it demanding one lat. I decided to be magnanimous:

– Go around that corner, – I waved them in the right direction and sucked on my cigarette again. – Wait by the second window!

I knew of the secret corridor and the stairs that led to this window.

They were already there, waiting obediently. I opened the window, which was very close to the ground. All four of them heaved themselves in, but with considerable effort – particularly it can be said about the one who was holding an open bottle in his hand. He offered the bottle to me. I put the bottle to my lips and immediately sputtered out the sip I had taken – one of them had hurriedly unzipped his pants and was peeing on the wall, no, it was not peeing – it was brutal pissing as if he had not had a chance to do so for a whole year; there he was, teetering, making the entire wall wet, pissing on the greatness of the event. The others roared with laughter. One of them asked:

– How much do you have in you?

Now when my emotions have dried out, I think that perhaps he simply was embarrassed to do it outside because of the late night passersby. He was simply too shy, this person who was now soiling the walls of the art school. The reason for this orgy was his shyness. I feel that a good part of the crazy events of the time were caused by our excessive sensitivity or awkwardness.

When the shy stranger had finally buttoned up, we went upstairs. Imbecile Hog were already done with their performance. That's what the Jelgava punk rock of the 1990s was like: sharp and quick.

In the corner of the assembly hall I met Eva's crowd. The girls were passing around the one-and-a-half liter bottle of the soft drink "Fantastika". Baiba handed it to me with the words:

– There's screwdriver inside!

Believe it or not, at that time I was still so pure that I lifted the bottle to my eyes and scrutinized it for the screwdriver that must have mysteriously fallen in there.

Enter Kārlis and his gang. They had a bottle of mineral water "Mangaļi" that was filled with some liquid the color of Coca-Cola. Two obvious innocents: mineral water and Coke. They came up to me and announced that Gatis could not get in. Because of the one lat. I went out to meet him.

I could have brought him in through the true and tried window passage. Yet I found it embarrassing to have my sophisticated friend visit such soiled places.

There he was, standing outside all sulky and annoyed.

– Well, can you get me inside?

I pondered it awhile. Nothing else came to me. Gatis had a suggestion:

– Let’s try to copy the stamp.

He had a small bottle in his pocket. The stamp on my wrist that confirmed that my presence at this event was legal was soaked in vodka. Then Gatis pressed his wrist firmly against my own. A moment of intimacy. After this, we looked at his wrist. There was no stamp, only a suggestion of a red patch. I looked at my wrist – no longer any stamp there.

Gatis sighed, sniffled and walked in through the front door. I went with him.

He simply passed the guard. The guard looked after Gatis but did not say a word. With his long hair and otherworldly stance he must have looked like he belonged at the event. The glance the guard cast in my direction was more demanding, but I instinctively waved toward Gatis – I’m with him – and was also in.

The school’s assembly hall was flooded with sound. With Cut did not indulge in any flirtation and, without waiting for any requests from the public, started playing their greatest hit:

I don’t see you, I don’t see me,  
hell burning all around.

Then a spell of indecipherable lyrics and on to the refrain:

Fire – Fire!  
Fire – Fire!  
Fire – Fire!  
Fire – Fire!

A couple of fans were jumping up and down in front of the stage. Most of the public sat on the floor, leaning against the walls. My guys were sitting by the door, so that there’d be not far to go to smoke or throw up, and they were passing around the dark “Mangaji”.

With Cut launched into their next song:

They had life!  
They had weed!

Dammit, of course they had life if they had weed. But where do I get my life?! I was watching the screaming Gints carefully – did he realize that he was an enviable rock star preaching the one and only truth?

We live  
Without knowing why  
We keep killing one another.

We murder our brains and our minds,  
We don't know how to live together.

I went up to the stage, mingling with the crowd of fans. Reaching the front was no problem. I was jumping as I had recently learned and kept an eye on the others. Mine were no ordinary leaps, but a dance created in the secret "Garnier" lab for those who had been embarrassed by their dancing all their lives. I kept jumping and felt close to the entire alternative culture, to all the people beside me, particularly those who had not made it to this place tonight. I thought good thoughts about them and was leaping higher than anyone else. But then the song ended and I became shy.

I returned to the girls. Eva caressed my shoulder and handed me the bottle with the screwdriver. Being a neurotic youth, I was annoyed by such expressions of tenderness. Significant words were coming from the stage:

No future. No future.

I wanna live but dunno how.

Eva came from Nākotne. Nākotne, i.e. Future, is located in the Jelgava district. Yet With Cut spelled it out clearly: there is no future. Therefore I decided not to go with Eva anymore and fully commit myself to rock and roll.

With this song, the Jelgava grungers finished their performance. There were no calls for more, it was not the style then. If, during the performance, there were no calls: "Cows, go home!", then the reception was considered quite warm. With Cut guitarist Gatis had received a particular form of recognition, so he walked around with a big smile, telling everyone:

– One girl said that I played the loudest.

Our Gatis was more skeptical. He simply announced:

– With Cut is just a piece of shit.

And then he went to say hello to them. He always knew everyone. I stood there thinking about shit. How so? It was a real band, genuine underground, real Jelgava grunge. How could it not be good?

Eva and Baiba suggested that we climb onto the roof. I called over my friends as well. The vertical metal ladder made our hands dirty with rust. The sky was darkened with night. The boys and girls who did not know one another immediately reached for cigarettes. So did I, the link between them. It was not very pleasant to sit on the roof, yet no one was ready to leave.

Are they not upset that the next band has probably already started? Am I the only one for whom the history of rock and roll in Jelgava and surrounding area is important? But I will not be the one to say something, to remind them. I will not invite them to listen to any piece-of-shit bands. I no longer envy them.

I no longer wanted to play in just any, does not matter what kind of band.

I wanted to play with Nirvana, in the very least.

We used any opportunity to get up on a roof. We liked it there. Often, we climbed up on the roof of the unfinished wedding palace. A non-world, from which the world is clearly visible. From above. There no one saw us smoking. And we solved a “Puzzle” or two.

High times were had on the roof of the nearby nine-storey building. The building was part of a residential area called Zhukovka. Here, we had to use caution, climbing out the hatch.

But it was worth it. From here, we could see all – the hitching palace that never was and the school that equally didn’t happen -- and recognize that we have climbed higher in life. One direction offered a view of Lielā iela, Great Street, which curved into the city center. There were three identical buildings whose windowless walls read: “Work”, “Peace” and “Freedom.”

Looking straight down, a café came into view; it was a place with a reputation of shootings and arrests of gangsters. Such stories were told of every place, but here I once saw it with my own eyes: the café was surrounded, a RAF minivan arrived with strangely dressed cops, each armed with an Uzi, and soon a man was brought out of the café with his hands forced to the small of his back and head bent down. The airplane pose.

These were rough times. Kharitonov reigned at the Central Prison of Jelgava. There he learned Latvian and computer skills, read and did sports. His friends stopped the traffic on Garoza Street and threw all kinds of goodies over the prison fence and no police could do anything about it. It was even worse at the Pārlielupe Prison. One of the inmates there was Kārlis’s brother to whom I once refused to lend my cassette player. How could I have done it? He obtained the cassette player elsewhere and exchanged it for booze, whereas I now had a dangerous enemy.

In the other direction, Great Street turned into the Dobeles Highway leading to Nākotne, to Future, from which I had vowed to disengage myself, Eva kept sitting next to me on the roof, however. What made her, a young beautiful woman, to lallygag with some teenagers on a roof? At the time, I did not pose this question either to her or to myself. Then it seemed to me the only place where a person might want to be. The worst place in the world.

Gatis, Sīnis and Kačaks were also there. We had brought along two one-and-a-half liter bottles of beer. By the bus station, it was on tap for fifteen santims a liter. The beer was delicious, particularly when it was cold. On the way from the bus station to Zhukovka, the beer always warmed up, so we never found out just how delicious it could be. There was also a pack of “Hollywood” cigarettes and a yo-yo, which was a popular toy in the mid-1990s.

Sīnis went up to the edge of the roof and looked down.

– If I was not afraid, I would definitely jump!

He looked over at us. Then down.

– Life has no meaning.

Eva raised her gravelly voice:

– It’s cool that life has no meaning.

She looked at Sīnis:

– Don’t stand so close to the edge.

– It’s okay. Remember, I’m afraid.

– Sīnis, please get away from the edge.

– Which way?

– Please stop it.

I jumped to my feet and also ran to the edge. I put the tips of my shoes over the edge of the roof and leaned slightly forward. It was a game I had invented myself. You had to lean forward so far that you could see the first floor. If you leant that way at home, standing on a rug, it was barely noticeable, whereas here it was thoroughly felt. So I kept leaning and no one was calling me back and I had to lean forward more and more. Luckily, Gatis said in a weary voice:

– Want some beer?

Just like our classic Veidenbaums, I exchanged death for beer. I righted myself, enjoying my strong legs and went to Gatis. After taking a couple of steps, I got entangled in something and fell. I hurt my hand. Everyone laughed except Eva because she had no sense of humor. I took a look – it was just the horrific yo-yo string.

I sat down and set about freeing my white sneakers.

– How did that stupid thing get here?

The toy was very popular and therefore stupid.

– Who is the puller here?



I was persistent. The only one to react was Sīnis:

– Why me? Never in my life, have I even held this piece of shit in my hand.

I looked over at Eva and Gatis. She turned away offended, he just smirked and took a sip of the beer, which I still had not reached.

I looked down at Jelgava. A sad, gray landscape. Fifty years earlier, the city was turned to ruin. Everything collapsed and burnt down. Jelgava was rebuilt from scratch – five-storey buildings, prisons, warehouses. Driving through Jelgava, the famous underground musician Dambis said that nothing can happen in such houses. No thought process.

– What shall we do?

No one had an answer. The beer was finished but no one wanted to leave. And there was no place to go.

– So what shall we do?

Sīnis was getting all worked up. Gatis calmly suggested:

– Relax, do some yo-yo.

That object was still lying in our midst. Sīnis latched on to the opportunity to show an attitude:

– I have never held that piece of shit in my hands!

– So hold it, you may like it.

Sīnis grabbed the poor toy and threw it over the edge of the roof, just where a minute ago he had wanted to take a fall. We all froze, waiting for the sound that would signal the end of the flight.

Crash! The smattering of broken glass and a barrage of Russian cusswords. Bull's eye, in a car windshield! That's what we could infer – no none went to look. But we could clearly hear the voices far below. They had quickly grasped that the hit came from above and swore to kill us.

Kačaks asked Sīnis why he had done that.

– What? But it's cool, we broke the windshield of some urlas!

– We?

– Okay, guys, go ahead, throw me overboard!

Voices were still heard from below. Now they invited some homosexuals to show themselves and come down. We didn't really feel like it.

The voices below promised to come up and show the freaks. We held a quiet discussion:

– You think they saw where that piece of shit was coming from?

– I doubt it. How could they?

The voices below made loud claims that they had seen us and will come up to us. Suddenly the roof no longer seemed cozy. We did not feel like being up. Or down. So where to? Far, far away, to mommy.

The voices downstairs fell silent. It was a very expressive silence.

– They are taking the elevator up.

– Let's go!

For the umpteenth time, Sīnis went to the edge of the roof.

– No, by the elevator.

– But they are in the elevator.

– There are two elevators. This is the right moment to vanish.

We rushed to the hatch. We still had to conquer the rusty vertical ladder before we could get to the elevators.

– Let's go, no dilly-dallying!

I was pushed and dove into the hole, grabbing hold of the rungs. After taking two steps it occurred to me how impolite it was to go ahead of Eva. What did mom teach me? – there were two versions of negotiating stairs – in one of them, the girl should go first and in the other, just the opposite... What should it be this time? I looked up and there was Eva, her panties were green, she stepped right into my eyes and I dismounted further, having received a supplementary dose of vibrations.

One of the elevators was obviously occupied. Its buzzing was coming nearer.

– To the other one!

The other one was occupied as well. Either the gang of murderers was too much for one elevator or some old lady was ascending with a bag of dumplings.

– The stairs!

We were plodding down and, having reached about the seventh floor, heard a murderously heavy elevator going up.

We stopped at the front door but only long enough to smell the aroma of urine of various stages of freshness. Eva pushed open the door. We walked outside.

There really was a car with a shattered front window. A man in a red jacket and three people in sports clothes were standing by the car. Their glances were unpleasantly attentive. Without saying a word, we turned to walk away, but, since we

had not agreed where to go, we turned in different directions. Eva and I even ran into each other. Her nose stabbed my cheek.

The man in the red jacket called out to us:

– Hey!

It was the same bloodthirsty voice we heard from the roof. They apparently had not gone up.

– Come here!

My legs buckled under me. The others stood motionless. That did nothing to dispel the suspicion of the man in the red jacket.

– Where are you coming from?

No one replied. The next question was even more to the point:

– Who are you?

He was swinging the damn yo-yo.

– Is this yours?

No one rushed to actively deny his ownership rights. Suddenly one of the guys in sports pants spoke up. He must have been the brains of the group.

– These are not the ones. These morons are playing only with pills and razors.

He took a step toward us and gave Gatis a kick:

– Get a haircut!

Gatis was the only one with long hair. We had only torn jeans and sad eyes. But see, it was enough to get recognized.

– Get lost!

And we did. For the first time I had a feeling that I belong to something, something different. And this difference was what saved us.

I looked up where we had just been and felt a definite high.

If there's all this stuff about drugs and rock'n'roll, how about sex, you might ask. After all, it was the time when the world was free and girls would write "Rape me" on the seats of their jeans.

Yes, at some point, they started teaching about health at school. The teacher was blushing like crazy and her smile seemed frozen on her face. She explained that now the time had come for us to learn about the world of sexuality, about sexual organs and kisses. And when the first lesson was finally coming to an end, she announced:

– Homework for next time. Draw a bush!

Silence settled upon us. I fell silent because I felt I had misheard in a most Freudian way. My classmates, too, I know, I asked them afterwards. We were surprised that this up to now very respectable teacher was using such direct language, but probably it fit the world we were about to discover. Okay, but how exactly should we go about doing the assignment? I was not familiar with the object at hand well enough to be able to draw it precisely. So nervous voices were heard from all around:

– What is it we have to draw?

– A bush. B-u-s-h.

– Wha-a-t?

– A bush, b-u-s-h! B as in book, u as in use, s as in school, h as in human.

It turned out it was a kind of a psychoanalytic task. The drawn foliages were analyzed and each person could find out if he or she was a sex maniac, or a retard, or gay.

We are learning not for school but for life. Gatis and Edgars went to the bar at the bus station. They sat down and very quickly drank through all the money they had. They sat there and did not know what to do next. The bartender took pity on them and gave them each a cocktail consisting of the brandy "Merkurs" with coke for free. The boys were happy to drink it and the nice bartender bought them each another one. People were kind and rich in the nineties. It so happened that soon enough Gatis and Edgars found themselves to be the last customers. The bartender said he had to lock up but suggested that they continue with their consumption of alcohol at his house. Naturally enough, the guys were amenable to that. They did not know the bartender, but one can get to know a person, can't one? Plus, the bartender had shown himself to be a very nice man. So they all went over to his house. The man kept his

promise and treated his new friends to more booze and, being an altruist, drank very little himself. Our guys did not pay much attention to him and just partook of what life had so generously provided till they finally passed out.

Edgars apparently woke up from his fly being unzipped. He opened his eyes and saw the host holding on to his pants. The latter did not claim that he had just wanted to undress his guest to make him more comfortable as he slept but staggered away theatrically, pretending to be drunk out of his skull.

Society was hardly as puritanical then as it is now. Lesbians went to celebrate their marriage at the Freedom Monument and received only understanding or intrigued smiles. Edgars, however, decided to go home to his parents. Gatis could not be awakened, so Edgars yelled into his ear:

– Get up, Gacha, if you don't want to be fucked in the ass!

So Gatis got up. Both friends left without saying good-bye.

They spent the way back home in a drunken state only half slept off, in an existentially mysterious border state. They had already reached Rainis Park when Edgars was overcome by that delayed fit of anger that we all are so familiar with. Some late passersby made a joke about the length of both friends' hair. Discharging his anger, Edgars gave a somewhat sharp-tongued reply. Immediately, a couple of strangers got a hold of Gatis while a couple of others gave Edgars a shiner.

Such sexual adventures were had by my admirable friends. But not me.

I could just sit at home reading books. Or I could visit Edgars to watch a movie. He was always watching movies. Usually they were horror flicks. But maybe someday it would occur to him to put on the secret movies about relationships. I would never ask, but perhaps he would think of it himself, and then there would be these beautiful women, so sad and mysterious, so gentle and well-wishing.

But Edgars was not at home. On my way back, I for some reason dropped by Eva's. She lived in the cheapest block, practically in a hovel, in one of the buildings known as "kuryatniks." Most of the apartments had been vacated and vandalized. Yet people were still living in some. I ran into Eva in the courtyard. She said:

– Come along! Inga is coming too. She's got some liqueur somewhere.

So I had to go. I am not sure how it happened but, having unlocked the door, Eva left the key in the keyhole outside. As soon as we had entered, I slammed the door, the safety lock latched up and we were stuck inside. We started pounding on the

locked door but soon realized that there was no hope. It seemed to be the only inhabited apartment on this floor.

– What are we going to do now?

Eva's voice was full of despair. She dropped down in bed, symbolizing the powerlessness of man before fate or accident. There really was nothing to do, so I looked at her. From the drop, her shirt had ridden up and I saw her belly, which was flat and firm. The area of bare skin bordered on her pants, the narrow kind that we all wore to distinguish ourselves from the rappers who were gaining in self-awareness as a clan and expressed themselves wearing pants that were as baggy as possible, the so-called "tubes".

Eva's pants were particularly skinny, they were stretched very taut between the two globes of her hips and, suddenly imagining what was under the denim, I grew heavy. And not in my heart.

I sat down next to her on the bed and, to console her in this unpleasant situation, I kissed her. We had kissed now and then already before. But now we were in bed together. I did not forget about Milady, I also did not forget that there was no Future and how annoyed I was by her touching me that time at the concert. But now there was this situation in which we were isolated from the world and which belonged only to the two of us. I was embarrassed to put my hand on her bare midriff, so I put it on her clothed chest.

She shot me a glance that instead of indignation or fascination suggested surprise. This young woman who was eighteen – of course she was surprised. What does a person understand at the age of eighteen? At fourteen, something, but at eighteen – all is lost. She averted her eyes but did not remove herself, her breasts under my hand stirred in a deep valley. The ground under my feet moved with them. I was nervous.

What did I have to be nervous about? What could happen? Only the logical. As had been agreed upon, Inga soon arrived with her liqueur and unlocked the door. Eva rushed to meet her and thank her for the rescue, relating to her the story about the key; I remained in bed with my own hand.

Inga had brought not only the liqueur but also Baiba, a young artist with long blond hair, secretly called Bon Jovi, and another stranger. Soon the liqueur everyone was expecting was pouring into glasses and everyone had fun. I didn't move from the cassette player. I put on Nirvana, Nine Inch Nails, Stone Roses. Eva kept asking for

the Penguin Café Orchestra or some such thing. For some intelligent, artists' kind of music, music from the real, beautiful life.

But enough about that.

Chewing on rosehips, I walked way past the market where the world ends. I looked at trees I had never seen before, at a road with an indeterminable surfacing. In other words, I got lost. I kept walking ahead, hoping that the guiding spirit will return me onto the right path.

Suddenly, I hear a familiar song. For a moment or two, I could not identify it despite the desperate sensation that I was hearing something extremely familiar. Indeed, it was “Sappy”! The only Nirvana song I could do on the guitar. Removing myself from earthly concerns, I kept plucking the strings again and again.

Even though the music sounded a bit strange, I turned in that direction. These were clearly good people, perhaps just a bit weird. Who knows, perhaps that’s where real life was happening.

I came upon a row of garages. The song stopped playing and a Gypsy I had seen somewhere before emerged from the garage. I turned to leave, but the Gypsy said:

– Wait up, bro’, don’t run.

I did not feel afraid, so I stopped.

– There’s some business, bro’.

He took a hold of my sleeve and started pulling me toward the open garage.

– Your mug seems to be asking for it.

I walked into the shady alcove, ready to be stuffed full of fofas and have my organs shipped off to the banana sellers worn out by RAF related melancholy. The garage was full of sweet smoke, yet it still offered a view of an overstuffed bookcase, a child’s sled, a motorcycle dummy, a set of drums and in its center two men who sat on fishermen’s chairs holding bottles of “Health Drink”.

The Gypsy introduced me:

– This is ideal; I looked for a long time and finally found him. This bro’.

One of the seated men looked at me and asked:

– Can you play the guitar a little?

He looked paranormally like Krist Novoselic – Jesus of Nazareth! – it *was* Krist Novoselic.

Insulted, the Gypsy hastened to reply:

– Of course he can. He can also speak German.



That Gypsy was none other than Pat Smear, the one I had seen a hundred, no, a thousand times playing at the Unplugged concert. Dave Grohl spoke up from behind the drums.

– Patty, it’s done!

And he raised his left hand where, between his fingers, an invisible tiny object was sending up a thin curlicue of smoke. Pat grumbled: – What a beast, – spread his hands in dismay and understanding, nodded his head in promise and rushed outside.

– We would have treated you as well, but we won’t because we’ve run out, – Krist said to me.

My confused brain noted somewhere that weed was once again passing me by.

Sadly and absentmindedly, Krist picked up the bass and picked out the tune of “Sappy”.

– Biu, bim, bim, bim, bim, biu. Wanna jam with us?

Dave jumped out from behind the drums and up to me: – Stop fretting, have a seat! – and pushed a carton in my direction. Sitting down, I fell through it, turned a half-somersault and almost started crying expecting to hear laughter. But no, they were just staring at me. I propped myself up.

– Guys, have you not mixed it up? You are in Seattle, aren’t you?

They laughed. While Krist talked, Dave accompanied him with a light background beat:

– What Seattle, are you kidding? We are normal guys from Jelgava, we’ve been at it for quite a while etcetera, so to speak. One time, we tried to enter some competition, but they said: we don’t accept people from Jelgava. So that’s how it all began, we just invented Seattle and then could not get rid of it. Who would have thought that we’d get that far, oh, shit, shit, big shit.

We sat in the garage in silence and I had no thoughts at all. Dave hit the cymbal, I fell again, but again, they did not laugh, they were somehow different, strange.

Krist sadly lit an ordinary cigarette and offered one to me. Dave went into the corner where something like a small kitchen had been set up and exploded open a package of potato chips.

Krist said:

– Now we have to play one more concert. Perhaps the most important one. For our best fans, the ones who have refused to believe that there will be no concert on St

Alice Day, the one promised and agreed upon a long time ago, and we have to play this ghost concert.

Dave added, his mouth full:

– All of that is true, by the way.

Krist nodded.

– And we need Kurt. For this one concert, we need Kurt back.

There was great silence in the garage, save for the crackling of the chips, my heart was pounding and pigeons were howling by the door.

– And we are looking for him. We have found some that fit the looks, but there are two problems – either they are not our kind or they can't play the guitar. Your mug seems fine, you kind of look like one of us and you can, so to speak, do the guitar.

Dave sat down at the drums and hit the beat: one, two, three, four, – as if saying, let's now rehearse, guys.

I shook my head.

– What is it?

– I can't play.

Both gestured in a rock'n'roll kind of dismissal:

– Get outta here. That will be more like a party, a house party, no big deal. We have promised to play “Sappy”, so we'll do it somehow. Pat is here after all. And then we beat the guitars, jump around, then have a snack at the table and – see ya!

I was getting up to go, but my head kept shaking, even a bit of saliva flew out.

– No, I don't know how, I can't, it won't do for me...

Then I hit my forehead: – Oh, that's right, now I remember, I had to... – I looked at my watch, but there was no watch – still, I rushed out and said by way of apology:

– Kittens' eyes are opening at home, I have to run.

Outside, I almost ran into Pat who was coming toward me, carrying something in gently cupped hands, like a butterfly. He jumped aside, saying:

– Hey, hot-blooded!

I started on my way home. I immediately found a familiar street. And made it on time for the TV show “Top of RBS”.

Nirvana was top of the tops. Just like a week ago. Oh, what a beautiful, momentary misunderstanding, I thought. “About a Girl” is a pretty good song. I of course liked the version from “Bleach” where he shouts – and, boy, can he shout! But even in this, the “Unplugged” version, the song was indisputably good. Why did it come in first? That’s what I could not figure out.

The next day, during history class, a tardy “book of memories” was travelling from desk to desk. The section “Your love interest” no longer got my attention (how long can one wait for one’s name, enough). Poems too were no longer very interesting – as opposed to the past pearls like:

Life has no joy

Without a sweet boy.

Now I only perused the section “What kind of music do you like?” And it was amazing. Nirvana and Nirvana again, no matter if the person writing was a criminal or a shy A student. Kurt’s name had been scratched in on all the desks. A good thing, the teacher did not start talking about him in class – thank you, teach.

On Saturday, I went to the market to buy something to put up in a jar and marinate, and what did I see? He was staring back from all T-shirts, blue-eyed, either smiling or frowning. And what did I hear? From all the shacks at the market was heard “Smells Like Teen Spirit” or “In Bloom”, or even “Sliver”. From some came even “Zombie” or “Self Esteem”. DJs cum sellers were fat broads who bounced their hips totally out of rhythm. People were coming and buying from them.

I went to talk to Kārlis. He was not at home, but Pūpols was standing in the hallway eating meatballs. I shared my impressions with him.

Pūpols got all hot and bothered:

– And who told me that Nirvana were morons and druggies and their music was nothing but primitive riffs? That it was just negative music if, for fuck’s sake, it was even music at all?

Indignant and curious, I asked:

– Who?

Pūpols blushed like a pussy-willow at sunset and one third of a meatball flew out of his mouth:

– Who said that it is just some new, destructive fad that will lead to no good? That people should rather stick to the positive and listen to Michael Jackson who is also a better dancer?

– Who was it? Who?!

– And such a person is now all into Nirvana.

I hit my knee:

– That’s what I am talking about! Such people are now pretending to be part of our crowd! A moment ago they claimed that Cobain only knew how to shout, but now they are howling along!

– And they also said that it’s just some teen posturing, the desire to be different, yet it is putting on a new uniform or something like that.

– Who?! Who could have turned the truth upside down? The bastard idiot moron! Who was it?!

Pūpols pointed at me with an index finger that was hard to ignore.

– Stop poking me in the eye! Answer me! Give me the name of the enemy!

His finger came even closer and actually poked my steel gray iris. It hurt terribly and I threw up my arms. One of my hands hit Pūpols’s nose.

Pūpols’s nose was very special. It was forever lying in wait for some impulse from the external world to begin a lavish emission of the red juice. A long, long time ago, the owner of the nose and I met eye to eye in the dueling grounds, the orchard behind the school, and that time I narrowly escaped being trampled to death by hitting this very nose. Blood poured this time as well.

– Oh, sorry! I’m sorry! It was an accident!

He looked at me and saw me crying. My eye was practically poked out. In a habitual gesture, Pūpols was cupping his hand under his dripping nose and staring at the tears running down my cheek.

– Are you a complete moron? Why did you have to hit me in the blow hole? And why are you blubbering like a broad? You were the one who until recently kept yammering how Cobain was a destructive coward and Jackson a dancing humanist.

Strange. I had no recollection of something like that. Well, yes, I did listen to Michael some time ago, even trying out dance steps in front of the mirror and particularly practicing shaking my hand like a bunch of grapes. But that was a long time ago. And I did perceive the beauty of the new school right away. I would remember, wouldn’t I?

Suddenly Gatis stormed in. Seeing us crying and bleeding, he said: “What are you – complete morons?! – and then he threw up. As it turned out later, he had been drinking yorsh in the nearby park with some like minded persons and then of course he felt like throwing up. Kārlis’s house was closer, so he just rushed in and might have made it if we had not delayed him with our strange little skit.

When we had tidied up the place a little and calmed down we told Gatis about our problem and he said:

– Who is not listening to Cobain these days? I mean, what normal person these days is listening to Nirvana?

Then Kārlis came home and threw us out.

Gatis ran off to continue throwing up at home. Pūpols, all puffed up and nursing his nose in his hand, shuffled across the courtyard.

Having quarreled with everyone, I went off alone into the summer night.

I did not have to go home that night. The rest of the family had gone to our garden house in Ozolnieki and left me to my own legitimate devices in Jelgava.

I walked all alone and thought about this time and its peculiar features. What was still missing? We were one step away from breaking out and one step away from falling back, that was totally clear to me. That feeling kept growing stronger and finally it dawned on me: freedom was pouring over the city. No, not pouring, it was coming down like gentle rain that soaks one to the bone.

It is incredible: you can feel distinctly how freedom is raining over the city, yet the city just lies there like dead. It is like standing out in the street looking up at a window behind which there is someone you love and pouring all your love out at that window – impossible for it not to open, no?

I began thinking of Milady and how ill-matched the two of us are; how it’s a good thing she does not like me and has chosen Kārlis’s brother.

If only I had a smoke.

I had wandered down to the palace. Just for fun, I turned not toward my house but went across the bridge to Pārlielupe.

On the bridge, I stopped. I looked over the railing. Anyone who has climbed up on a bridge does this, anyone will look over the railing to feel the lure of a fall and the depths below. When I tired of that, I looked over toward the center and there was nothing there. And then I looked in the other direction, toward Pārlielupe.

A big bunch of people were coming from over there. The dark shadows were approaching silently and quickly, gradually turning into young and middle-aged people, all with their heads shaven. There were very many of them. They were extraordinarily quiet, they neither yelled, nor cursed. And their gait was equally extraordinary – it was very fast, some were even running. My heart seemed to want to leap out of my chest and into the Lielupe – after all, they were closing in on me, a silent and serious army.

I pressed my back to the railing hoping to blend in with it and look totally inconspicuous. What has happened, who has sent a whole army of criminals after me? They were close, very close! Now next to me. Attentive glances, nervous lips, right next to me, then sharp profiles, shaven heads, they were walking past me, row after row. When the last ones had rushed past, one of them looked at me, he looked at me very attentively, yet continued on his way. I looked after them. A bunch of urlas who don't accost you? Who the hell? Urla ghosts?

I rubbed my face, deciding that it had just been some phantom. I should go home. But first I should just stand here on the bridge and come to my senses. I wanted to postpone the possible second encounter with the ghosts before the city has swallowed them up.

I have no idea how long I had stood there, when a car came to a halt right next to me. It was a police car and policemen stepped out of it.

– Don't move! Hands up!

A policeman rushed up to me and pushed me against the railing:

– *Suka!*

Two of them grabbed me by the arms, a third one shone a beam of light in my face. After tonight's adventures, it was all the same to me, I was simply trying not to wet my pants. But something made me cringe. While they were quietly examining my person, I caught the sound of something in the lull of two quiet seconds. "About a Girl" was playing in the police car. Our music was playing even in the enemy's car.

– Not the right one! The hair!

And the policeman pulled my hair. It hurt.

Nirvana was accompanied by an indecipherable voice in the transmitter. The policemen jumped back into their car and, tires squealing, drove off toward the city center.

I did not yet know that the next morning the newspaper “Zemgales Avīze” will warn: “People of Jelgava, be on the alert! Do not open your door to strangers and don’t pick up hitchhikers!” Such a rush of misanthropic feeling must have resulted from the night’s events. Eighty-nine prisoners of the Fourth Colony of the Pārlielupe Prison had escaped through a hole in the wall of the prison laundry room. A world record! Jelgava is truly something.

I did not yet know that the city will stir under the cloak of freedom. A policeman will be shot at from a stolen car. Parents will not let children wander about, finally making walks meaningful. I think these intrepid criminals were but a symbol, a metaphor for our breaking free.

Standing on that bridge, I did not think about it. I felt I was a traitor. No, I felt as if Kurt had betrayed us, so that I could now betray him in order to go on. As if someone had died again, so that our sense of freedom would become even greater.

The fall was near, and cold moon was quivering on the river.

## PART II

### THE MOON

#### 1

The road from Jelgava to Riga is hardly exciting. There are no hills, no valleys. All you can do is to use your imagination. This entire area seems to have been deliberately made for honing your imaginative skills. And once you have been kicked off the train and glance around, it makes you want to tell your friends about it. Yet what use is your sudden poetic mood to them – they know all about it and may be contemplating it at this very moment, so you do the same.

Well, here's the Zemgale plain, flat and awful. There is no place to hide, there is no saving grace. The sun sets the rare birch groves on fire, brings out into the open the graveyards they conceal. Over there, far in the distance is Lithuania. The train stop Meitene, Girl, is just before that fairy-tale land. How great it would be to get there. Eleja, where the famous witch lives, is situated a little closer to us. Then comes Jelgava, no comment there. And then Olaine, the end point of it all, living horror, the capital of Latvian anarchy controlled by the Taliban.

That's exactly where we are.

We are supposed to be for anarchy, just a little while ago we were for it, drawing the letter A circumscribed with a circle. But the Olaine anarchy was more real, it included dark and merciless rules. In his "Breakfast of Champions", Vonnegut was trying to establish where the asshole of the universe was found: in Midland City or perhaps in Libertyville, Georgia. Well, actually it's found in Olaine. All of Jelgava's drug addicts were educated and supplied here. The MDA pills here were produced industrially, on conveyer belts. The police confiscated them by the hundredweight and supposedly incinerated. There was this time when Kārlis with his basket-ball buddies came to Olaine for a friendship game. The bus was pelted with rocks. Sometimes rocks were hurled at the passing trains. I was on one once. As soon as it started moving out of Olaine, rocks started flying. One broke a window at the other end of the car, another almost hit my window. I always have my modest share of luck.

But now we were a much better target in this city. Of course, we were not bigger than a train, but we were not made of metal. Metal was only in our hearts.



And this definitely was not the place for young boys whose hair was longer than the norm. Mine already hangs down to my shoulders, well, almost. But Gatis who, with the possible exception of his mother and teachers, is rarely addressed by that name anymore, really does have shoulder-length hair. He's been growing it longer than I have, yet it tends to become wider rather than longer. He reacts to that fact with aristocratic calm, saying: "That's OK, Tony looks even more like a poodle." It is hard to determine the exact length of Edgars's hair: while definitely exceeding the norm, it just kind of flutters in the air.

Our jeans have shrunk even narrower, and they are always torn at the knee. We all have sports shoes, with tongues pulled out. We all have black shirts. Gatis has one with the inscription *Obituary*. That's our latest cult band. No, the band is old, they've been playing since the eighties. They are from Miami and among the pioneers of death metal. We are into metal. Gatis is particularly into death metal, so his friends now call him Death.

Incredible, I know, but he found that shirt in a used clothing shop. A real miracle. The rest of us rushed to dig through the piles. I even made a list for Mom of shirts that she should buy as soon as she sees them: Death, Cannibal Corpse, Anal Cunt, Brutal Truth, Carcass, Hypocrisy. She did not find any of these, she brought me a shirt with Michael Learns to Rock and pictures of three smiling guys *à la* Zack Morris. My rebellious nihilism notwithstanding, my heart almost broke to pieces, I felt such a surge of affection for her. That didn't mean I could ever wear that shirt, however.

But Death found an Obituary shirt in a used clothing pile and paid 50 santims for it, and still he was not happy. He seemed to be a little superstitious and felt he had bought a disaster in the shape of this shirt (that, of course, did not prevent him from wearing it all the time). So now again he said, 'I told you! I told you! I always have bad luck when I wear this shirt!'

We had just been kicked off the Jelgava-Riga train. For nothing, really. We did not have tickets. Having made comments about our hair, the team of conductors kicked us out, hair flying. The train continued on, whereas we were stuck here, in Olaine.

'What are we going to do, gentlemen?'

Death looked after the train, which had already disappeared from sight. As usual, Edgars had a plan: 'We could kill dogs and sell their pelts!'

He was certifiably crazy, no doubt about it. He lived next-door to Death. Because of his craziness and excessive love of horror movies he got the nickname Zombie.

‘Soon the locals will sell our pelts.’

We trained our eagle’s eye on the town that spread before us, overgrown with bushes. Not a single soul seemed to be around. Yet the bushes looked suspicious.

‘Let’s roll.’

And we started walking toward the highway.

Here the Zemgale plain offered an even better view of itself, the horizon on Jelgava side seemed even more loveable – much more loveable than the much coveted Riga side. We were not interested in Riga, but once you got almost through the city, you got to the Burse. That was *the* place to be in this world. Sometimes it also went by Punk Burse. Mom told me that hippies had exchanged records there as early as the 1970s. It was in the Biķernieki Forest, which could be reached by trolley-bus No. 18. Or was it tram? People gathered in the woods: the outcasts, the ones on the other side of the law, the ones who did not want another place, just gathered in the woods and did their thing, about which the city and the outside world had not the slightest idea.

What did they do there? For now we only knew that they exchanged cassette tapes. That was all we had to know. We needed cassette tapes. Nirvana and Pearl Jam were no longer enough.

Sometimes I still secretly listened to *Nirvana*. More often to the new cassettes, however. I had “Wildhoney” by Tiamat. I had heard it on the radio, in the program “Rockade”. It was as good as a fairy-tale, no, dark as a fairy-tale, sad as a fairy-tale. That bloke roared like a bear and he was joined by girls – in my imagination, they were singing naked. Death got me that cassette through his own channels. Kārlis had “Harmony Corruption” by Napalm Death, a completely different thing, that laid it on with incredible power and speed. Death owned “Wolverine” by Entombed, “Eaten Back to Life” by Cannibal Corpse and “Altars of Madness” by Morbid Angel and something else, I don’t remember what. I am quite certain he had “The Rack” by Asphyx; that he really loved a lot and was looking forward to obtaining the next album by Asphyx called “Last One on Earth” – if he got that, he wouldn’t expect anything else from life.

It was music like nothing I had ever heard before. No, I had not even thought it possible that such music existed. It was a totally different world. It was good to sit here on the asphalt together with Death and Zombie on our way to another world.

‘Tasser! Slag! Dickfuck!!!’

Zombie was cussing in a pure nineties style. Another car swished elegantly by. No matter how attractively Zombie was flailing his arms, no matter how theatrical his poses, hitchhiking was a bust. Judging by the sun (nobody had a watch), this situation had lasted a quarter of an hour. Death had a dire prediction to share:

‘We won’t make it to the Burse. They start at ten.’

‘So maybe you should stop warming your bollocks on the asphalt and get to work? My arm is falling off.’

Though I found it hard to believe that Zombie would ever tire. Now he made himself busy plucking the tallest nettles and whipping invisible opponents with them.

Then it was my turn to try to stop someone. A public transportation van was coming. I lowered my arm, put it behind my back and turned away from the road. After all, we had no money. It was followed by a second-generation Lada; the man kept both hands firmly on the wheel and his eyes on the road while his wife was smiling and shaking her head. Yet their back seat was empty. They looked to be about the same age as my parents, who always picked up hitchhikers. Then a totally indifferent Audi or something like that drove by (I don’t really know the makes of cars, the only one I recognize is a Lada, like my Dad’s). Then came some foreign heap with a polite man inside: he pointed right with his thumb, meaning, I am turning in just a moment, otherwise I’d take you. A brief, civilized interaction. The driver of the next car waved at me in a totally mysterious way. What was that supposed to mean? Grow up, lad, don’t leave the house unless you have your own little Ford?

That’s how I kept conversing with the drivers, and this conversation possessed sustainability and development, whereas for them it was just a passing moment. I was talking to the manifold denizens of the road, having been stopped right here and now, and look, a car blinks at us and begins slowing down, Death is already turning to see where Zombie is fighting his enemies on the field, but it turns out that the car is full of plonkers just slightly older than us, definitely from Olaine; they are laughing and then step on gas, they’d only wanted to have some fun at our expense, so now they’re gone; even they who paid us some attention forget us in two short minutes, after three short kilometers.

‘I’m fed up. They just don’t bite. You try.’

Death came over; sad about the entire world, he sniffled and pierced the space over the road with his hand. He kept reciting a mantra:

‘Stop, you idiot!’

The car was long like a starship, there seemed to be no end to its gleaming side that was sliding by. Then it stopped. Must be one of the expensive cars, very shiny. *Monsieur* leaned out the window and asked:

‘So where are you lads going?’

To Plakanciems, I thought, for some reason annoyed, but Death was all business:

‘To the Burse.’

‘Ha. Biržai are the other direction, lads. In Lithuania.’

‘To Riga.’

‘So where then?’

‘To Riga!’

The driver laughed again.

‘All right. We’ll take you for a ride then.’

Zombie was running out of the field, all covered with green stuff like some demented Lear and received an admonishment before getting into the car:

‘Shake it off.’

The car glided more quietly than a Lada, and beautiful hair cascaded over the shoulders of the other front seat; its brilliance hurt the eyes when hit by the sun, whereas in the shade they took on a romantically blood-red tinge: a metalhead was sitting next to the owner! But no, I looked in the mirror and met the eyes of a girl. Her father stepped on the gas and I pressed my nose to the window to resume my conversation with the road. See, here’s the plonkers’ car, they are sitting there quietly, each looking in a different direction, they are bored without us, and see, I whizz by them secretly flipping a bird at them. Then we overtake the mysterious waver, and he is just as serious as before. And after that it’s the turning gentleman, so why hasn’t he turned? And finally here’s the elderly couple, the woman is turning her head this way and that, then she sees me and again shakes her head with a smile, no, no.

‘So what are the young lads going to do in Riga?’

That of course was a question asked by our kindly driver. Each one of us kept silent expecting someone else to reply.

‘Huh?’

He asked again. Death and Zombie answered at the same time. Death said:

‘We’ll go shopping.’

But Zombie said:

‘We’ll count pensioners.’

No one was inclined to mention the Bourse; for some reason it seemed too vulnerable in this car whose interior smelled of “Wunderbaum” and leather.

‘Ha, ha, funny lads you are.’

There is of course the rule that hitchhikers have to keep up a conversation with the nice driver. So that the deal is to the advantage of both parties. I was about to say something about the nice weather or such, but he was not going to let go.

‘Who are you?’

An existential question. Really – who are we? It was Zombie who slowly answered:

‘We’re boys.’

He did it in a voice that suggested that he is really cracking up.

‘No, I mean, who are you, like you all have this hair, are you from some group or something?’

We just shrugged: whatever.

‘You’re not those crazy metalheads, are you?’

Duh, what can we say, man... We kinda are, you know? Hey, guys, say something.

‘What kind of music do you listen to?’

Death had decided to stop trying to wriggle out of this.

‘*Cannibal Corpse.*’

‘Whaat?’

The owner even turned down his music; it was the most classical of classical music, plus it was mixed in a terrible potpourri. He turned it down and turned to us, whaat?

‘*Cannibal Corpse.*’

‘What does that mean?’

‘To translate: it’s the dead body of a man-eater.’

‘You think I don’t know English?’

And he turned up his Beethoven that had been adulterated with an umpah rhythm. A minute later he asked again:

‘You think I don’t understand English?’

‘I don’t.’

‘Then why are you saying this?’

‘I don’t.’

‘What do you mean you don’t? Your exact words.’

‘I am sorry.’

The man kept on steering. As much as you really need to steer down the Jelgava highway.

‘I, for one, like good music. Do you know of such a thing? Do you know what we are listening to?’

Beethoven’s Fifth had somehow transformed into Brahms’s “Hungarian Dances.” But I kept my mouth shut.

‘You don’t!’

I wonder if that girl next to him, probably his daughter, was still looking into the mirror with her girl’s eyes? I didn’t look.

‘And why don’t you like good music?’

Death had apparently resolved not to say a word, he had even turned off his gaze, he was perfect at that. Zombie gave it a try:

‘Just feel like something interesting.’

The owner of the car just stepped on the gas again. I felt like glancing at the speedometer, so as not to miss the adventure and later be able to tell everyone how we were just flying down the highway in this lunatic’s car, but I didn’t dare, because then I would probably glance into the mirror and there I would probably meet the girl’s eyes. So I turned back to the road. There was a fox, run over.

‘And why don’t you look normal? You know why? I will tell you why.’

The captain was all whipped-up.

‘You simply don’t want to be normal. You think it’s stupid. You think you are smarter than anyone.’

He could no longer contain himself. And we were still far away from Riga.

‘Now you got into my car, and you saw that it was a really nice one. Did that earn me any respect? No!’

Now I was really horrified. Because he was saying exactly what I was thinking at the moment.

‘It is all the same to you if a person has achieved something. You are thinking: so what if this chap is living well, he’s probably a thief or has sold out. But no, you don’t even think about that. It’s all the same to you.’

I felt very uncomfortable with this monologue of mine.

‘This world is not good enough for you. Like you are something special. To live a normal life, to try for something – you think it’s stupid! Let these nincompoops drive you around, let them treat you to a beer! Whereas we must study cannibals.’

He carefully changed lanes to the right one, and then stopped the car by the side of the road.

‘We’re here.’

We looked out the window. That most assuredly was not Riga. It was just a side of the road. The most noteworthy object here was bushes. We must have taken our time.

‘What exactly did you not get from what I said?’

We got out of the car. Did I hear Death saying thank you? That would be exactly like him. The car took off. Zombie was laughing his head off, as if something great had happened. But Death summed it up:

‘I told you, it’s that shirt! Now we’ll be late for the Bourse.’

I stared at the road again, what else could I do? There was the Lada, then the Audi, then the Ford, whose driver once again waved at us mysteriously, perhaps even in a familiar way now, as if we were acquainted, but maybe he had already forgotten about us, because the wave was exactly the same. The polite one, the one who said he was turning, was nowhere to be seen. He must have turned. People were honest then and remembered what they had set out to do. Even the plonkers who must be here any second, surely had not forgotten my birdie.

The school had changed. Of course it had changed before as well. Nirvana had come as a unifying and reconciling factor. The songs about loneliness and pain brought us together and gave us pleasure. Then we were all on the same side. Jurgis liked the acoustic version of “All Apologies”, its serenity and beauty; Kārlis liked the aggressive “Negative Creep” from the album “Bleach” and Milady enjoyed “Where Did You Sleep Last Night”, whose first half is so elegant in a salon kind of way that you could almost listen to it with your mother but, towards the end, dissolves into a scream that could tear a person in half. I too really liked this song.

At the time of Nirvana everyone was fine. But time passed and some of us got restless. If all of us are friends, are these real friends? Placing first in all kinds of tops and commercial success – is this how it was supposed to be? That’s why Kurt shot himself, he understood it all. He did not want to be a star, we are betraying him by making him into one; we are betraying him by not betraying him.

So the world turned different again. It was no longer all bad or all good. Carcass has the song “Polarized”. So that’s what happened: society got polarized. Or it polarized itself. Be it as it may, our kind was once again a minority. We had finally chanced upon a road that was not for everyone.

Consciously and openly, we went where it was wrong to go. There were all kinds of reasons. There were those who joined us because it was the only chance to join anything, to be something. But it was hardly the rule: some whose social reputation at school was considerable, also stayed on our side. Yet most stuck to the correctness of the majority.

With a quiet yet wild pleasure, I observed that Milady also does not accept the other side of us, that she just makes big eyes and purses her lips. She wasn’t all that beautiful, after all.

Actually, I only liked metalhead girls. They marched down the school corridors as if they had marched there always. Long, free flowing hair, long sleeved sweaters, torn jeans or floor sweeping skirts. Heavy boots or sneakers. The boots they probably borrowed from their fathers. But how did they manage to grow such long hair? Tell me, I too would like to know! No, these were the girls who only now let their hair down, who had not yet really lived – as opposed to the ones who shortened their skirts and their hair –, these girls had left their tresses – that joy of their fathers – alone and



now they flowed along with the poetry of metal. Their legs, invisible under the long skirts, were so beautiful. And they were beautiful themselves; I actually wondered why they were so beautiful. I had yet to read Kafka: “The guilty ones are the most beautiful.”

I stood by the john in the lavatory, took out the main vein and prepared it as per usual. All this with my left hand, whereas in my right hand, I was holding the key to our house and using it to scratch the word Asphyx into the chalky wall of the lavatory. It’s a Swedish brutal death metal band and they have an expressive and easy to draw logo. I had observed Death doing it. On the wall in front of me, I beheld the entire world history: “Nirvana, Sakne Is a Bitch, Nine Inch Nails”, and now it was joined by “Asphyx”. Kārlis was in the next stall – we had come in together and now continued to converse. Scratching in the “S,” I said:

- What are you doing?
- What do you mean?
- I get it. But I mean, what are you writing?

For I heard the wonderful sound with which a key unlocks the whitewash to words.

- “Metallica”.
- Why?

That was metal of course, but ordinary, not particularly radical.

- What do you mean, why? A classic.

The wall of the stall provided me with invisibility and thus an opportunity to be impertinent:

- Does Milady like it?
- She does.

Something made me squeeze painfully what I was holding in my left hand. I asked:

- Did you hear Hypocrisy “The Fourth Dimension”?
- A long time ago.

It was hard for me to trip him up. Just like in everything else, in music too, he was ahead of me. But still – is he really all the way in?

I finished Asphyx and, enjoying an artist’s pleasure, let the instrument drop. From my right hand. The bunch of keys of course landed in the john.

- Shit! The key fell into the john!

– In shit?

– No, no. In clear water.

And I put my hand in the yellow water. The keys were precariously balanced on the very threshold of chaos, on the curve of the sewage pipe. If only I manage to save the keys, I will be a better person, I promised. I managed to do it. I grabbed and pulled back to the world a dripping bunch of keys. Now I had to make good on my promise. I gave it some thought and then said:

– Of the “Fourth Dimension,” I too like that first song, the slow one, “Apocalypse”, best.

Kārlis didn’t say anything. I wiped the keys in the toilet paper and continued:

– It’s really normal to like the pretty songs. Have to get over too much. But we must! Once we have begun, we must not stop. We must listen to ever heavier kinds of music and all those who don’t should just go sit on the john!

Actually, it was I who found myself near the john. And I guess I had not kept my promise. So I should just keep it up.

– Kārlis? I wager that I will just throw these keys back into the john? I don’t want to go home anyway! Are you going to take me up on it? I’ll throw them in and flush and then put a dump on it!

He was silent for a suspiciously long time.

– Asshole?

Kārlis was sharp-tongued, he would certainly reply or even throw a shit at me over the top of the stall. But no. I put the keys in my pocket and walked out of the stall. Just like I thought – the door of the next cabin was open and no one was inside. It was an old trick, to walk out of the lavatory in the middle of a conversation, so that the other guy keeps talking to the john. *Dixit et animam levavi.*

When I was little, I just could not make myself remember which one of the two rivers was the Driksa and which one was the Lielupe. They both are next to each other, actually they are even one and the same river, split in two by an island. Around 1265, a castle named Mitau was built there. The “Livonian Rhymed Chronicle” tells us that it quickly became famous: “And all Semigallian men / Came and cursed it then.” It is not clear what it looked like. The castle was rebuilt often and burnt even more often – in 1376, 1625, 1659, 1737, 1918 and 1944.

Yet from time to time, the castle was left standing and was inhabited. And as soon as they moved in, they wanted their life there to be beautiful. Duke Jacob’s bedroom had luxurious wall coverings, made of woven wool. Small particles of wool separated from the wall and the duke breathed them in and then coughed them out with bits of his lungs. For this, the manager of Vecmuiža was tried and burnt to death right there, in the courtyard. If a castle does not burn down, a person must.

When Rastrelli was building the palace in its current form, it took very long to complete, for it sucked the life blood of the duchy just like the pyramids once did in Egypt. The unfinished construction and the lack of various amenities at the Jelgava palace was also grumbled about by a visitor from Provence – a count, who later became King Louis XVIII of France. At the time, he was no king, only an exile whose brother Louis XVI five years previously had put his head under the guillotine without any grumbling. The proud exile had arrived in Jelgava with a whole entourage. Among them was the L’Abbé Edgeworth de Firmont, or Henry Essex Edgeworth, the same Jesuit abbot who had given Louis XVI his last sacraments on the scaffold. Perhaps he entertained the idea that his brother too might benefit from his support, but that did not come to pass, as the abbot died first, still in Jelgava, and Louis XVIII wrote his epitaph. Along was also Louis’s trusted courtier, Marquis Ouissle, a tiny man who preferred to sit on the king’s shoulder. Plus he was supposed to be a hundred or two hundred years old. But here, in the Jelgava climate, this aristocrat caught a cold and died.

Also, Marie Thérèse of France, the daughter of the martyred king, had come to Jelgava. Louis XVIII had no children, so he burdened Thérèse with the responsibility regarding the future of France and married her off – right here, in Jelgava – to her cousin Louis Antoine Artois. Yet the couple had no children.

I stood by the palace, so imposing and red, and was engrossed in these ruminations. Kārlis had invited me here. He had said that some concert was going to take place here and that his brother could get us in. The concert was planned next to the castle, on an island that was located in the archipelago of the Palace Island. There was a kind of an open air stage. None of those who had invited us or who could let us in were there. So I was just loitering by the corner of the imposing red palace and thinking about its past.

Why did the couple not have children? After all, it was the last hope of continuing the genuine royal lineage. Who knows, perhaps there actually was a child but, upon changing the diapers, Marie Thérèse remembered the severed heads of her father Louis XVI and mother Marie Antoinette and what the poor king had written to her little brother: “Should you ever have the misfortune to be king...” No wonder she might have felt a bit queasy and apprehensive. So she took the child, a pile of clean diapers and a golden sword and gave it all to a wet nurse, a kindly Jelgava woman... Yes, that’s how it must have happened!

The kindly Jelgava woman taught the French brat the beautiful Latvian language and properly timid manners. The boy was handsome, just a bit strange (after all, the fathers of Marie Thérèse and Louis Antoine were brothers). He did not ask about his past and neither did his son. So it’s already the seventh generation in Jelgava with the blood of the king of France in their veins. Nobody knows about it. “It will live but no eyes will see it,” as *My Dying Bride* had it. But the heart of this unknown descendent of kings is overflowing with longings incomprehensible to himself. And he always feels different, he has few companions and in all practical matters he is all thumbs. Yes, yes, exactly! *Exactement!* It all fell into place...

So I stood there in my place, fitting perfectly the landscape with the palace, when Zombie walked up to me, stretched out a finger and said:

– Pull on it!

So I did and a rumble was heard. Zombie had fired an air bullet from his skin shotgun. The rumble was outdone by loud laughter, and there they all were: Death, Kārlis, Kārlis’s brother, Šolis and Šolis’s friend. I was happy to return to reality among my own kind in wonderful rye-scented Zemgale, the breadbasket of Latvia. Kārlis’s brother called on everyone to stop procrastinating, saying that we should just go in; Zombie shot back that they would have been in a long time ago if he had not scratched his balls for such a long time, but finally we were shuffling toward the

entrance. Kārlis and his brother actually did manage to get us in by talking to the home-guard by the entrance. I always hesitate to ask how such “getting in” was accomplished, for it would be like robbing the key person of all their glory. It’s just not done. The home-guard was also aware of it and shot us an angry glance that was supposed to indicate what lucky devils we were.

Šolis and Šolis’s friend for some reason rejected this opportunity. They said that they would come later. That seemed strange to me. The entrance fee was one lat!

But who really cares about them – I was inside having forgotten about my shadowy reverie. Already wonderful, broken off yelps were heard, which meant that someone was clumsily tuning the equipment and the live concert, that lively life that I will now live, was about to begin. And friends were at my side. I looked around avidly hoping to find other metalheads, but no one seemed to be around. There were just quite a few girls and stylish dudes. Death also noticed that and asked Kārlis’s brother:

- Who is playing here tonight?
- The Other Side.
- What?

I did not know this band but I liked their name. That was exactly what we were interested in. “Break on through to the other side!” Perhaps not exactly a metal band, a heavier alternative rock instead, but who knows. They were already coming on stage. They looked like normal guys. But metalheads can look like that. They started playing music. It had absolutely, expressly nothing to do with metal.

- What is it?

Kārlis’s brother snapped – not to me but to Death.

– We should support the local scene. Do you have other suggestions for tonight? Just get lost, if you want.

Here our different approach to music came into play. The brothers were true music lovers, patriots and event-goers. Death was more ideologically principled. But Zombie was not distracted by music – he crept up to girls he did not know and bit their asses. That’s simply how he was. In order to get an objective picture, everything I am saying about Zombie should be multiplied by three. I simply cannot be constantly talking about him and him alone. At the same time, everything I am doing here, in this text, should be divided by two. Thus, just as we sat down on the grass, Kārlis unobtrusively handed me two beers that I drank so unobtrusively that two girls

that were passing by greeted me with one smile. Zombie meanwhile had bit one ass and got one foot wet in the canal. Kārlis and his brother went offstage, but Death stepped to the side. I followed the brothers for a few paces but then stopped between the two positions. Then Death called out to me:

– Who cares about them. I have a player.

We sat in the bushes and listened to the player. Death had brought a cassette where he had stuffed a Benediction logo cut out from a Polish magazine. Death pressed buds into my ears and I listened. It was something rather incomprehensible, the wheezing breath of a half-dead giant; the piece was slow and quiet, almost inaudible. Death yelled at me at the top of the lungs, thinking that he had to drown out the music:

– Can you hear?

He had a very serious expression on his face, as always when the talk turned to music. Without waiting for my reaction, Death took my earplugs away and listened for himself:

– Shitty sound. Why don't you say anything?!

He turned morose for a moment, turned both buttons on the player and encouraged me to listen to the next song:

– Check this out!

Now I could hear, they even drowned out The Other Side. It was something really heavy and energetic, it smashed and crushed, kicked and battered. Now I can no longer keep silent and said:

– I had no idea that Benediction was so good!

– But it's not Benediction!

– What do you mean?

I looked at the piece of paper under the lid of the cassette.

– Oh that. I just put it there. Didn't have the right cassette.

That's how people who are not serious about the relationship between object and word turn the rest of us into idiots.

– So what is it?

Death took a bag of potato chips out of his pocket and tore it open.

– Homegrown. Huskvarn.

– Home what?

– The band. Huskvarn.

Latvians playing metal? How is it possible? Yes, punk and grunge are played but metal is something distant and secret. It was like discovering Pluto and then immediately finding out that Pluto is also in the yard next door. And not just any Pluto. The genuine one.

– They are from Jelgava.

Oh, from Jelgava. Then it makes sense. My heart stopped racing.

Zombie ran up to us – he was panting and laughing at the same time while trying to say something. He stretched out his hand, bent down and inhaled.

– Gimme some chips!

Having grabbed a handful, he dove into the reeds. Death continued to ruin my private world:

– We have a bunch of others, too. Heaven Grey, Iron Wolf, Dies Irae.

Who, except me, is innocent in this country?

– And they are all from Jelgava?

– Not quite.

Then of course Kārlis and his brother rushed up to us, and they were indignant.

– What are you doing here?

– Nothing.

– A real Armageddon is taking place! The poppers are pummeling the hairy ones. And you are just sitting there scratching your balls! Oh, I see chips!

They each grabbed a handful and ran off. Death sniffled and said:

– What is this shit? Where have we ended up? We need our own place.

– Yes, we should definitely make one. Somewhere far away.

– Why don't you come to the Junkshop?

I could not reveal that my mom did not let me go, could I?

– I like to be alone.

– Okay.

This had to be supplemented with cool ignorance:

– So when did the last junkshop take place?

– You think it's easy to prepare? Soon there will be one. I have got all kinds of new music.

– We should get to the Bourse.

– We should. Of course, we don't know what it's like there. Rigans are not like us. I have met some. They are, like – say, you have a fiver, and they are, like, let's share it to buy some drinks, and then nothing.

If I ever had a fiver, I would not mourn it, and so I said:

– But it's our place. A crowd of metalheads. And new music.

– Sure, you have my support. The other Sunday we went there.

– The other Sunday?

– Yeah. Remember how we tried to go all of us together?

– I remember.

– The Sunday after that.

So they went to the Bourse without me. Great.

– What is it like there? Is there a point in going?

– I don't know.

Death handed me the bag of chips, that's how friendly he was.

– I don't know. We didn't find it.

– How so?

My voice must have betrayed double satisfaction – that of a fool and that of an envier.

– I don't know. I think we got out at the right place. But there was just a hospital or something. We asked people – there were ordinary people on the street – we asked where we could meet some metalheads. They didn't know. So we didn't find them.

– Maybe there is no Bourse?

– They say there is one for sure.

I returned the bag of potato chips to Death and then we noticed a little group. Four people were standing in front of us and eyeing us with displeasure. One was wearing a vest, the rest were also idiots. We got up unobtrusively as if we just wanted to stretch our legs.

– Deathers?

That question came from the one with the vest. They were old, over twenty, with hands of unskilled workers. I surreptitiously glanced around. There was no one of our crowd to be seen.

He repeated the question, pointing at Death's shirt. It read Sepultura. The question was quite to the point. I replied:



– Yes. Sepultura plays death metal.

I explained everything, thereby ending the conversation – that’s how I tried to think about it. I looked at Death. His eyes said something indecipherable. I asked:

– What do you think, where are our guys?

It was a very subtle attempt at conversation. As if these four were not here, as if this was the most normal of conversations, which, however provided important information aimed directly at them.

– You mean all these crazies?

Death replied in as if the conversation was indeed normal.

– You think I know? They’re probably checking out each other’s sexuality.

Not the one with the vest, a different one, dressed in an athletic jacket, took a step forward and hit. Death did not fall down, just took one step back and the bag of chips fell out of his hands. The athletically dressed one immediately bent down and picked it up. This is why they lived in this world – to somehow obtain a half a bag of potato chips.

The head honcho, the one in the vest, turned to me. He yelled:

– What are you, a professor?

And he grabbed the glasses off my nose. The world sank into an edge softening jelly, but I did get that the man was angry.

– Walk around like a normal person!

He put the glasses in the pocket of my non-stylish shirt. Why didn’t he throw them into the reeds? Why didn’t he hit me? Did he sense a royal descendant? Or was it the fear of the unknown experienced by a child of nature? Who knows under what spell such four-eyes can put you!

But they would not leave Death alone. One of them pointed at the player:

– What’s that?

Death did not answer. He put the player in his pocket.

– Gimme that!

I looked around again. There was no one there. It must not happen, really must not. I glanced at the one in the vest as if waiting for something. He was staring at the canal, staring very intently:

– Wait a minute!

And he pointed his finger. They all looked at the canal obediently. It looked like they had spotted Nessie or something.

Remember – Šolis and his friend did not go in with us. It turned out that they had a bottle and there were too many of us. They saw us in and then went a little to the side, lay back on the grass and drank what was in the bottle. Then they realized that they should get in to the concert and counted their money. Each of them had two lats. Entrance was one lat. They went to the store and each bought a bottle of “Agdams”, the fortified wine, which cost one lat fifty. Having returned to the Palace Island, they walked past the bridge on which a guard stood and lay back in the grass nearby. They drank the wine, a bottle each. The weather was fantastic and the setting sun painted the palace and the canal water in gentle hues. When the wine was finished, they counted their money. They had a total of one lat between them.

They weighed their options. The friend thought that he could take the money, go in alone, find someone from whom he could borrow money and then come out and get Šolis. Šolis was not convinced. He went down to the water and put in his hand. Even though it was already autumn, remember the setting sun, which had painted the canal gentle. Šolis suggested:

– Let’s swim across.

They took their clothes off, tied them in a bundle and swam. It was important to make it to the concert.

This is what the four proletarians spotted: bare shoulders, wild eyes, long hair and bundles of clothes in outstretched hands.

The one in the athletic jacket, betraying mystical fear, breathed out:

– The hairy Rambos are coming!

He let the bag of chips drop to the ground and the four of them vanished.

I did not say a word. Death stroked his cheek and asked me a very tough question:

– Are Sepultura deathers?

– Aren’t they?

– I don’t know. “Bestial Devastation” and “Morbid Vision” may have been death. But now they are doing pure trash.

– I don’t know. I think – I know – that “Chaos A.D.” is pure death.

I was warming up for a discussion.

But then Zombie and the two brothers suddenly appeared. The Older Brother said:

– What’s going on, where did you disappear? There were all these poppers around, but where were you?

– It’s okay, we already had it, – Death answered and spat. Šolis and his friend crawled out of the canal, shook off the water and asked:

– Has the gig already started?

The Older Brother did not at all care for all this lack of organization:

– It’s ended! No one can get their shit together!

And just then some very ordinary people were passing by. The Older Brother spotted them and again tried to do something good:

– See The Other Side? Shall we ask for autographs?

Everyone looked for something to write on, including me. Why? I was not even interested in that band. But that was the way to do things then. Music was important and you had to take everything it could offer.

The band stopped and stared at us. It may have been because Šolis and friend were totally naked and wet. While everyone else was feverishly, like in a lavatory, looking for paper, Death took the manufacturer’s piece of paper with the word “Lazer” out of the cassette and went up to one of the musicians.

– Excuse me, could I trouble you for an autograph?

Death even had a pen. The musician purred something in disbelief, bending down and propping the piece of paper against his knee and asked:

– But what exactly shall I write?

The autograph hunter pondered the question, but not for long.

– Write Napalm Death!

– What’s that?

– A great band!

The musician fell silent, but not for long.

– All right.

And he wrote.

– Like this?

– D-e-a-t-h.

– I get it. Here you go!

– Thank you.

So Death was the only one to fetch an autograph. An authentic one. He put the piece of paper in his pocket and said:

– An ideal gig!

And I, the scrawny little freak, looked at my great friend with hatred and admiration. He had got it all – blows and an ideal gig. And he had gone to the Bourse without me.

Okay, if that is how it has to be, I went to look for the Bourse alone. If the cool dudes can't find it, it will be up to a lonesome boy with a scientific approach. I like to be alone.

At first, everything was fine. I was thrown out neither of the train or of the trolleybus. At the time, I knew nothing of Riga – neither the “Latvija” hotel, nor the university. And I had to find a place that was unknown to most Rigans. A good thing I could get on the No. 18 trolleybus, still in sight of the central railway station building, which then, by the way, was much more beautiful. I had hoped that the trolleybus would be full of metalheads, all on their way to the Bourse and all I'd have to do would be to keep near them. But there were no metalheads on the trolleybus, except me. The city outside the trolleybus windows gradually became wilder and more like Jelgava. Panel housing blocks behind big bushes. That seemed to indicate the right direction – the Bourse was located in a forest.

I got off at the final stop. Here too, no deathhead or even a heavy was to be seen. At the next to last stop, there had been the hospital Death had seen. Here there was only a lake or a pond across the way, the end-of-the-line trolleybus office and a forest behind. I ventured into the forest.

It was rather sparse and it was obvious that there was a road on the other side as well. I looked at my watch (I was well-prepared) – it was already fifteen minutes past ten. Everyone knows that the Bourse begins at ten. Yet there was nothing to see.

Could I be lost in space or in time? Or maybe the Bourse does not even exist? Has anyone clearly stated having been here? All I have is hearsay through friends of friends and legends. Indeed, why should people meet in a forest? Does a forest resemble a music store?

I sat down on the end-of-the-line bench. But for some reason I did not get on a trolleybus. The next one. There's no hurry. The air feels good here. In this place where there is nothing there.

Then, out of nowhere (there was no trolleybus!) appeared two long-haired guys older than I and went right past me. I caught up with them.

– Will the Bourse take place today?

They looked at me but neither surprised or not surprised.

– Sure. But later of course.

Everything I was told turned out to be true. The Bourse did indeed exist. Twenty or so minutes had been enough for me to lose faith, but an instant was enough to regain it.

Restlessly, I kept circling around the terminal, investigating the mysterious lake on which I saw swans. Soon the sight I held in my imagination started coming true, for they were all coming: deathheads, heavies, and girls. Everything was exactly as I had fantasized, only ten times less.

Which is not a bad ratio. After all, our heads hold more than the world. When a child visits the zoo – I mean, a child who has read something and has thought a lot – when this child sees the elephant, he does not say anything but thinks to himself: not so big after all. The child thinks this very quietly because he does not want his fantasies to begrudge life. Yet the elephant is small. Only later, when fantasies are getting to be forgotten and we examine it more closely – the elephant that is grunting softly and scattering straw over his head – when we suddenly find ourselves confronting this elephant we realize – boy, is he huge!

The elephant was gathering itself in the forest, in the same forest that just a minute ago was completely empty. I joined the flow that stopped in a clearing encircled by trees. Finally I had reached my destination.

The time has come to describe this phenomenon, the Bourse, as precisely and honestly as possible. It indeed took place in a small clearing in the forest. About twenty people had gathered. From time to time, someone would disappear in the bushes to be replaced by someone else, but the equation was not always stable. For the convenience of visitors, several paths radiated from the clearing. The largest one led to the terminal. To the left of it, men aged about fifty were loitering. One of them had put some records on the ground – supposedly for sale, but not too demonstratively. I wanted to walk up to the oldsters and check out their records. I liked all kinds of old music. For instance, the Beatles. Before, because they were so famous, now, because they were so weird.

But I had not come here for the Beatles. So I mingled with the next little clump of people, to the right of the path. These people could be divided into three groups.

There were a couple of girls, whose hair was competing with their skirts in terms of length. Yet they did not seem to be the centerpiece of this gathering, no, they had probably come along with someone.

I wanted to belong to the second group. It consisted of young men with long hair and other defining attributes. Leather jackets, long coats, metal bracelets. They seemed to be more genuine than Jelgavites. Every one of them had on a shirt with writing on it: Amorphis, Slayer, Cannibal Corpse, even Mayhem, Burzum and god only knows what else. And the hair, the hair! One of them even had a beard, the longest beard I had ever seen – it mixed with his hair in a falling stream that symbolized a philosophical approach to the world and a rebellious inner exile. This person could have been an illustration to the entry “metalhead” in some dictionary.

The third group consisted of strange people. Totally ordinary people, older than the second group but younger than the hippies to the left of the path. They were wearing canvas pants and patterned sweaters. Short hair. They were the most ordinary people in the world but they seemed organic to this place, embodying some sort of special genuineness and belonging.

The circulation of music, views and anything else took the form of people just standing there and talking. There were no long counters or cassette display cases. As opposed to where the hippies hung out, there was nothing on the ground. I simply walked up to someone to join the conversation and understand what’s going on. I had been forewarned about the mores of the Rigans. So I could safely mix and mingle with them. I had to take the genuine music to Jelgava. Anything for my native town!

The topic of discussion was only metal. Some dude with even longer hair showed up and announced in an authoritative manner that after “Tomb of the Mutilated” Cannibal Corpse had not come up with anything good. Yet he had on a shirt that said “Bleeding”, even though “Bleeding” had come out of “Tomb of the Mutilated”. This man in the mysterious shirt, this man whom I was about to meet, was not an ordinary man. He suddenly asked me:

– Do you happen to have a cigarette?

His voice was weary, almost sleepy. His eyes seemed to squint all the time. Having received his cigarette, he extended his hand:

– Tom. Sinister.

Yes, my friends, I met Sinister just like that. It was the same Sinister whom everyone now knows and who has 1835 friends. But he is hardly the only one I met that day! Cannibal, a.k.a. Gints. So present at all metal events in Riga that one had the suspicion that he might be the mover behind them. Plus, Gints was always sober there and taking pictures of everything. He is also the soloist of the heaviest Latvian band,

Denervation. I don't even know if this band ever got up on stage, it was so heavy. I also met Ēriks, a.k.a. Crabator, who was wearing an Amorphis shirt – he knew everything about music and reacted to all the world events with a melancholy smile, at the same time relating very humorous events in his own life. There was also Venom, one of the fathers of Latvian black metal, who was magnanimous enough to admit that he was put on that path by the man of the mysterious name Sonnenmensch; and Sonnenmensch was also always here, at the Bourse – an awesome music fan who listened to ten new albums every day. A young man by the name of Vodka was also there. He was famous for... Well, I don't remember for what.

I stood next to them in the forest clearing and felt like there was the entire world under my feet and not just pine needles. My new friends would periodically call attention to themselves with some declaration or other:

– I'm really sick and tired of Heaven Grey. Time for them to fall apart.

I could not believe my poor ears. Heaven Grey was the most prominent Latvian death-doom band; they sounded almost foreign. They were our own people at the Olympus, proof that people can fly in outer space! I was terrified hearing the words directed against them, but also a quiet yet heady elation, owing to my natural instincts that were against any authority. Oh, those incredible Rigans!

Was it not incredible that they were so friendly? They had nothing to do with Death's warning. No one wanted to have drinks on my fiver – I of course would allow it if only I had a fiver to spare or a fiver at all. The two lats I had were for other purposes. Understanding this, I was approached by one of the funny group, the one with short hair and in an ordinary sweater. He addressed me:

– What would be this young gentleman's pleasure?

He spoke in that affected manner cultivated by elderly gentlemen, which I found annoying, yet here, in the middle of the forest, it seemed more genuine, as if this way of addressing someone finally meant something again, even though there was of course some irony, too.

I did not know how to answer. Everything! At least – a lot. And then he came to my rescue, proffering a blue binder in whose pages there was row after row of bands and titles, most of them completely unknown to me. A good thing that I knew what to look for. See, "Last One on Earth" by Asphyx.

– And on the other side?



The 21<sup>st</sup> century reader may draw a blank, but I understood that he was talking about the cassette. What should he record on the other side? I hadn't really thought about it. Feverishly, yet slowly I leafed through the binder until an unknown but evocative title caught my eye. This – “Turn Loose the Swans” by My Dying Bride.

That's how this cassette, this strange composite whose one side sported classical death metal but the other the then novel doom metal came into my budding collection. It was an interesting genre. On the terribly underrated Latvian radio program “Rokāde” it was translated as the “grim doomsday rock”. Yet the dictionary stated it clearly: “fate”. Destiny metal. This cassette will contain fate.

Fifteen years later, I read a review of the album and it stated clearly that people with depressive tendencies should not listen to it. Had I only known it then! I would have shown double enthusiasm in taking this recording to Jelgava, the city where depression was the goal of most passionate desire. My dying bride, what a name! The night the guys established the band (beer, there had been much beer that night), they had also considered the possibility of naming it My Dying Child. Why didn't they choose it? Such a name might have caused me to hold back. But to kill the bride not obtained – I could not resist.

Death got his “Last One on Earth” (which he did not like all that much, “The Rack” was better), but doom came to Jelgava, as if there was not enough of it already, and I ended up even deeper in metallic melancholy. I would end up spending a lot of time with this music and weighing the fates of the world.

But there, in that forest, I did not hear it yet. Even the cassette did not burn my hand. The respectable gentleman took both the empty cassette and the money and put them away in his bag without any comment. I did not ask any questions. The local rules were clear: you give them an empty cassette and money (one santim per one minute of recording) and then receive a cassette excitingly full. From then on, I went to the Bourse every Sunday with an empty cassette there and with a full one back, and with a craving for a new need that would be satisfied only a week later. That was a path with no end in sight, for I always went for my bounty with another magnetized void in my pocket. It was like a cigarette, which Wilde characterized as the most sophisticated kind of pleasure, since it gave pleasure leaving one unsatisfied.

Ēriks looked at me with a sad, absentminded smile and asked:

– Are you not that guy who is collecting stuff about bands and writing the history of Latvian metal?

The question was enigmatic and I replied in an enigmatic way:

– What strange beauty this place possesses! The leaves have spots. Are they sick?

And really, black spots were covering the maple leaves like some adolescents. But then my glance was drawn to hair. Beautiful long hair, what wonderful hair this guy had! Any girl would be jealous. And who cares about a girl – any metalhead would be jealous. The whole of redhead Ireland was there, washed in Cuchulainn's blood. That hair reminded me of something. Perhaps something in my metal genes? I did not know anyone with such hair. Hey, that is the girl in that kindly car from which we were thrown out in that first expedition to the Bourse. The same ornament of hair, the same hue, the same intelligent shape of the nape. See, she just turned, these were the same eyes that I had seen only in the mirror! What a meeting! Now she was staring at me and I saw the whole face.

What? It was fat Nellija from our parallel class! I had never looked closely at her hair and eyes. Fat students at best have people staring at their breasts. She had on the new uniform – boots, a long skirt. She looked at me. She stared at me directly, insistently. She could ruin everything. She could come up to me and say:

– Did you do your homework? And why are you not at the Sunday school? Will you give me some Imants Kalniņš to listen to? I know you like him.

Actually, we had never talked but I sensed that she could unmask me, to reveal to all and myself that I am only me who doesn't want to be like that anymore.

– You are that four-eyed nincompoop everyone is laughing at. Hey, all – let's laugh at him! Go ahead, he is afraid of everything!

But she did not say anything. She turned away and continued the conversation. She had someone here to talk to. To be sure, the guy looked quite full of himself. He was dressed in a very sophisticated, yet enviably metallic manner: a long coat, many rivets and much other metal. The look in his eyes was an expression of total sense of superiority while his posture indicated nervousness that any of the surrounding animals might brush against him. With Nellija, he also seemed cautious. But how did she ever get here? Why was she let in? What kind of an authentic place is this if even fat Nellija is at home here? No, there must be some misunderstanding.

I had already finished my transaction. The money had changed hands and was with the respectable gentleman whose name was Didzis, can you believe this? Simply Didzis – and next Sunday I had to be here to receive the goods. The other respectable

gentleman who went by the name Otyets said that I would do well to buy something from him too. I already fit in here. When, after inaudible goodbyes, people slowly dispersed in small groups, I did not walk alone. I walked with Sinister and we talked about the whole wide world. I mean, we talked only about music, and we were of like minds.

– If you are interested in deathniks, I would recommend a band like Torture. Two brothers play in it. One died in a car crash.

Sinister knew how to talk about music.

– Then there is also a good Australian band, Destroyer 666. The lead singer thought of himself as a vampire. His broad did not believe him and so he bit her really badly.

I could reciprocate only with stories from Death. Of course, I could have invented something. Just as Gilkin used to invent movies. “Guys, guys, I saw “Predator 2”. At my cousin’s in Riga. A great movie. Schwarzie is smoking a cigarette and holding a grenade launcher in his other hand. And then he looks out the window and notices...” We heard a detailed plot without realizing that the movie had yet to be made.

But Sinister seemed to be a real encyclopedia and impossible to deceive, so I ventured very cautiously:

– I also like the band Paradox...

I had never heard of one, but the name seemed appropriate. Sinister’s peace of mind remained unperturbed:

– Which of the Paradoxes? The ones with one “x” or the ones with two?

– The ones with two.

– Yeah, they are respectable.

I checked later, paradoxically, there really did exist both Paradox and Paradoxx.

Smoking my cigarettes, we had already walked out of the forest. The terminal building apparently had a little window from which beer was sold. Women were crowding around it. One of them, obviously pregnant, was holding a jar whose label said “Green Peas” and contained beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She looked at us as if we were the jarring elements in this landscape; she even nudged her friend whose glass jar had a label “Mayonnaise”. There were flowers on their dresses.

The trolleybus arrived like a limo and we got on, quite naturally ignoring the whole issue of tickets. I glanced around to make sure that crazy Nellija was not there,

but she wasn't – maybe her dad had come to get her. Her arrogant conversation partner was here, however, and he parked himself up front showing through body language that he preferred to remain alone and despise the rest of the world. Sinister, in his weary manner of speech, was toppling mountains.

– The best thing would be to create a radio, our own metalhead radio. We would talk about the new and the old bands, about the philosophy of metal. Then we would not have to go through all this trouble to get music – it would come to us. From all around the world.

The arrogant dude turned away from despising the world and shot us a glance. He looked like he did not have faith in these plans.

Sinister thought a minute. He began rummaging in his bag where there were very many cassettes and a carton of “Quattro” cigarettes. He pulled out a cassette:

– Mortis, I really like this guy. He had plastic surgery done on himself, making his nose and eyes longer so that he would look like a troll.

Then Toms looked at me, remembering who I was and asked:

– Do you have money?

– One lat. Do you want a drink?

He pulled on his hair and closed his bag.

– No, I don't drink. But we need more money. About a hundred lats.

– I know where to get some.

– Really?

He looked into my eyes, really deep into my head where there was nothing there at the moment and said more softly:

– Then we should start a band.

At the time, there were many such offers. The initiator usually offered one the position of the lead guitarist and knew of someone who wanted to do drums, whereas the bass would turn up on his own. If the initiator was asked what his role would be, the answer was logical:

– Me? I'll sing.

Sinister was more serious. The whole time, he seemed to be half asleep while maintaining a state of constant elation, just like Van Gogh. He talked about the need to say what no one does, what does not occur to anyone; he was saying all those things I was saying in my head. And, he said, we'll need an electric guitar, someone

must get his shit together and get money for an electric guitar. The guitar will translate everything you feel like saying.

But, Toms, what will you do?

He was too indifferent to what everyone else was doing to try to be different.

– I'll sing.

And then he just continued staring out the window in full knowledge that I don't have to say anything anymore, that I was already bewitched, that I already knew everything. I boldly looked straight ahead – not in order to spot a ticket checker – I had visions of an astounding destiny, which we expect and consider well deserved, but which, when it finally comes, we find scary. But not I – I boldly looked straight ahead.

There was much snow and it was cold. My family and I went out in the snow looking for the neighbor's dog. It was a very old cocker spaniel who had never said a bad word to me, and I liked to watch him haul himself carefully up the stairs. But now he was lost during the night, in the cold, and we were joining our neighbors in the search. I found him. He was pottering in the snowdrift, his chin white – it was impossible to tell whether from the snow or old age. The dog lifted his head and said to me in a quiet growl:

– Don't worry. Don't shake. Annoying. Like some pussy-assed terrier.

Then I woke up. Alone. And quite cold. The way it is after a night with too little sleep. After rubbing my eyes I became conscious of the fact that I was not at home. That's right – I had stayed with Zombie. There's the drawing with a gentleman licking blood off a razorblade, there's the grimacing devil, the posters of Diecide, Cannibal Corpse, Napalm Death. So cozy. I got up.

I wake and put on my shoes,

But then I look and I have them on.

My mom taught me this poem, and this morning it was quite to the point. Mom. That's right. I was supposed to go for a visit with mom. That's why I am here. I mean, not that mom made me watch horror flicks with a bunch of metalheads, not at all. But that's why I did not go with the others to the Smilga dacha this morning. I had such a heartache, for it would have been a real metal Saturday. And Death said:

– Maybe you should come after all?

And Zombie yelled:

– What is it with you? Get a grip! I too have to be places!

But I could not make myself disappoint my mom. That's why I am here. What time is it? I walked through the apartment. Not a soul. Even Zombie's mother was nowhere to be seen. I called home. I will not go into detail, but, as I hung up, it was clear to me that I should get home as soon as possible. I got up and walked around the room a bit. I took a drink of water from the earthenware jug that was placed next to the bed and started looking for something to cheer me up. Here was the cassette corner, very small compared to piles of video cassettes. Yet some things were there: Sepultura, Slayer, Pantera – those I had already heard many times. Tristitia "One in

Darkness". That's what I really needed. Tin, tin, tin, tintirintin. Should hear the acoustic intro. No, but the first song as well. One song will make no difference.

Why am I sitting here if I should be rushing home? I went up to the apartment door. It was closed. Zombie's door did not have a latchkey and could not be opened from the inside. He may have said last night that I should leave together with his mom if I am such a traitor. She was supposed to leave rather late. And yet she had left without noticing me. The intro was over and the song was playing – metal always expressed what I felt at a particular moment. "Pray for forgiveness!" Whom must I ask for forgiveness? I needed to go but I just sat there waiting for the next song. I would have even liked to wait for "Hymn of Lunacy" in the middle of the album, but I had to make my way to Ozolnieki.

The balcony door did open. Why is the world so bright? The first snow. I had predicted it in my dream, but forgetting prevented me from taking pride in my prophetic ability.

I looked down into the abyss. The second floor. Two meters per storey, four total. That's nothing. Or was it three meters per storey? That would make it six. That too is nothing much. There is soft snow and dog do underneath. If this were the fourth floor like at home, then it would be okay, then it would be crystal clear that I shouldn't jump. But this was a kind of borderline, of the kind that should be overstepped. Would Zombie not jump? He would, even if he had the key. They would all jump and they will ask me – but why did you not jump from the balcony?

The balcony was full of events, full of life. Pūpols threw up here and neighbor's cat ate the meatballs. Zombie's fridge had died and the meatballs had been put out on the balcony. Zombie blamed Death for their loss – his guests were always hungry and Death was the one who used to go for a cigarette most often. He took great offense, but we laughed.

I stepped over the railing, got a grip on it and let my body drop as low as possible. Not much of a distance remained to the ground. Totally suitable music was still playing. I jumped.

It happened quickly. Once on the ground, I tried to recollect if I had felt anything resembling a flight. Now there was something resembling lying face down in the snow or dog do. I was trying to rise to my feet, but fell down again, and my leg hurt really badly. It not only hurt but also refused to obey me. I turned carefully and lay in the snow on my back. Here we are.

From the balcony I heard "Hymn of Lunacy". So I had waited long enough. Now it was true metal. Broken in the snow. I turned on my side – ouch, hurts! – to get the cigarettes out of my pocket. Even though my lip was trembling, I wanted a cigarette to hang from it, so as to retain dignity on this momentous occasion. But I had left the cigarettes upstairs. I will not make it on time anywhere, mom, forgive me, I am completely alone here, my friends are gone and I am gone, forgive me, mom, come and rescue me and it will no longer hurt.

A pair of feet. Someone was coming. I tried to look unobtrusive, natural. I succeeded, for the feet passed me by without paying much attention, except perhaps moving a little faster.

"Dance of Selenities" started playing upstairs. The last song:

Ethereal, natural,

Leave me your wings

Of dust, of muck, of moon and dirt!

Ethereal, natural, I've never quite understood who you are, leave me your wings, now is the time! It would be great to return home on dirty moon wings. But nothing happened and only years later I understood why. I had misheard the lyrics a little, it actually went like this:

Ethereal Noctua

Leaning your wings

Of dust, of muck, of mundane!

Again some people were coming. This time I looked up. Thirtysomethings, they looked down at me with crooked smiles.

And then the last song was over. But I remained where I was. Now some acquaintance could come. In general, I would not want anyone of my crowd to see me weak, but now would be a good time. Kārlis's father, for instance. Or Pūpols's brother. They lived near here. But the people who did come were unknown to me, a middle-aged couple. They looked like nice folks, so I said:

– Excuse me...

I would say something after that, come up with some sort of an explanation – but there was no need, they passed me by.

I forgot to mention that I was cold. The first snow was insistently expressing itself. My body was melting it energetically, but the snow froze anew and there was



more coming down. I really did not want to be lying there. I addressed the next passersby more elaborately:

– Excuse me, would you please...

I did not have to think what I should ask for – they just passed me by. Students, old hags, intellectuals. I had lost all shame and started saying:

– Please help me... I broke my leg.

The more sensitive among them turned their heads thus helping me understand that I had not become an invisible and inaudible ghost. My leg too felt so corporeal and real as never before, rooted to the ground it made all the steps of passersby reverberate in my head.

– Please call my house, the number is...

Oh, there come some girls! And not bad looking ones... It was my old dream, to be injured in the presence of girls. They will think it very manly, they will bend down over me as if I were a soldier. And they will give themselves to me, or whatever it is they do. There they were, coming nearer, lifting their feet high like a bunch of warhorses.

– Good evening, girls! Could you help me please, I have a broken leg...

– Ah!

One of them exclaimed and jumped aside in a most elegant fashion. She had very interesting looking knees. I promised myself that I was going to remember these knees.

– Don't be afraid, it's only me, my leg broke, could you please...

They laughed – perhaps at their unnecessarily startled friend or at me, I have no idea. I looked after them and just like in the previous life, up there, on Zombie's balcony, it seemed to see a bottomless pit opening before me – the bottom was still here and it too had an interesting shape, but, swaying slightly, it was departing and now there was the bottomless pit.

My lips were trembling from the cold. All parts of my body and all of my thoughts were trembling. What will I do without a leg? If only I could get away from here. I remembered my first time on the Square<sup>1</sup>. One of the first beautiful things I noticed – and there was a thousand of them – was a handicapped person. He was sitting in a wheelchair, he had long hair and a leather jacket and he was holding a

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<sup>1</sup> Bearing the official name of Līvu laukums, the Square is now popularly known as Veldze. At the time it was a forum for alternative existence instead of grazing grounds for British swine.

beer. Others were pushing him this way and that at high speeds, with sharp turns, some were jumping in the wheelchair for a ride and he looked happy. I was looking at him and remembering little Andris from my kindergarten class. One time, I found him in the yard behind the thuja hedge – he was pressing himself against the wall and crying. Little Andris had problems with his leg, it was hurting and he could not run around with the others. I had no pain anywhere, but I also had no desire to run. So both of us sat behind the hedge and rubbed stone against stone. We were trying to make fire. I remember distinctly how little Andris had a red flame suddenly flare up between his rocks.

But now a car pulled over – very close, where cars are not supposed to be. A door opened and Mikhail Krug filled the whole area with his voice. Two people got out of the car and walked up to me. Both of them were wearing patent leather shoes. That meant a lot.

– Hey, why are you lying here?

I turned my head toward them and tried to tell them, but my teeth were chattering.

– Why are you lying here, longhair?

I squealed something in reply. A hand grabbed me by the collar and was lifting up. I tried to stand, but could not. Noticing my disability, the hand let go and I fell back down in the snow. They had a discussion. A cigarette butt landed by my nose.

Someone grabbed me again, I lost all contact with a horizontal surface and was up in the air. The familiar landscape disappeared from the zero angle and a face appeared close to mine. Ho, ho, the face said. It was the kind of face upon seeing which I usually averted my eyes and crossed the street. I had never had a chance to see one up close, but now he was holding me in his arms.

He was carrying me somewhere, holding above the rest of the world. It came to me – if my friends should return right now, I would greet them from the arms of an unknown urla giant. He took me to the car – it was a black BMW – and placed me on the back seat. The other guy, who was short and wide, pulled me by the collar from the other side to stabilize me. The two of them sat in front and we took off. Various dangling good luck charms were jumping around: an icon, prayer beads, a miniature skull and a naked doll. I also saw their shoulders stuffed in leather coats and the shaven heads above them. Both of them seemed older than me.

Mikhail Krug fell silent. The cassette stopped. The short and wide one exclaimed indignantly:

– Hey, it stopped! It stopped!

And he started banging his fists on the front panel. The tall one promised to let out his entrails for him, explained that the cassette player is not at fault and suggested that he put on another cassette. Then he suddenly slammed on the brakes, put his head out the window and yelled in Russian:

– What a sweet Cossack broad!

I didn't even try to look, although it probably was worth it. It was enough to look at them and at times I felt like closing my eyes and ears. Both of them were smoking nonstop and generally fidgeting about nonstop. The shorter one was cussing at the four cassette collection because he could not choose the right one. The tall one was talking about some very murky person who was a "fucking bitch, the fucker, brownnosing the cops, the fucker". It was all so exciting that I didn't even feel like asking where exactly we were going. I stared at the ceiling listening to the music, which they had managed to put on after all.

The enemy will remain enemy,  
Do not break bread with him, don't invite him in,  
Even if the air smells sweetly of peace,  
Even if peaceful, he is an enemy still.  
If his honor's intact just like yours,  
An enemy cannot be former, he will be and is.  
Trust your rear sight, steady your hand,  
Sparing your enemy, you will be killed.

The song was not bad, even though there was no percussion on two kettles and no fused guitar. But there was in fact some ache. Sometimes I secretly listened to something that was a far cry from metal. But even Grishnackh admitted to having sometimes listened to house secretly, in the car. We turned somewhere and dropped the speed. They opened the door and were propping me up and out. We had come to the New Hospital. Why? That will be a great joke – to get beat up here. It would have been even more sophisticated to take me to the morgue.

The gangsters picked me up and carried me into the hospital – to the emergency room, to x-rays (nothing was broken, just some ligaments torn), to first aid. While they were putting me in a cast, they were sitting in the hallway under the palm tree

smoking and playing the national card game, *zole*, having made the orderly on duty their third. When I was safely in cast, they carried me back to the car, took me home and carried up to the fourth floor. Mom had not been worried because it turned out that I had said that I would not be home because I was going to a volley-ball tournament and a poetry reading. Now she thanked my saviors, invited them to have some coffee, wanted to give them meat and money, but they were just waving her away:

– Stop it, stop it! God helps.

They drove off over the shrubs planted in the courtyard. And I could finally lie there on the old couch, my leg askew and ponder: I wonder how my true friends are doing?

On the outskirts of Jelgava, there is a building of interest to travelers. Located on the edge of a park, surrounded by greenery, it seems to ignore the reality of the city. Others like it, for instance, the House of Courland Knighthood or the hotel "Linde" have been thrice destroyed and leveled. But this has remained alive, tangible like an incarnated ghost. A classical façade with four columns, which may be a bit too slender to qualify as pure classicism. The new town seems to have plopped down carelessly on this building dirtying it, yet it carries its name with pride: Villa Medem.

The von Medems were a serious family. Wasn't it Conrad von Mandern or Medem who started building Mitau? Yes, it was. And do you remember sisters von Medem, the wonderful Dorothea and Elise? Was there anyone in the whole of Courland who referred to them in any other way than "beautiful Dorothea and wise Elise"? The beautiful Dorothea became the duchess of Courland and mistress of Talleyrand. The wise Elise seems to have become a poet. She did not even smirk when Casanova arrived in Jelgava. True, she must have been five then. But even when fifteen years later Cagliostro stayed in Villa Medem, Elise did not really fall in love with him. The count taught her to converse with the dead, promised travel to other planets and power that would let her create new worlds herself. Well, it probably did not happen in this building. Cagliostro was in Jelgava in 1779, but this villa was built by Johann Georg Berlitz in 1818 or even 1836. What is known for certain is that Junkshop moved into this building in 1994. It was a metalhead club open Friday evenings.

I had been taking a long time dressing and even looking in the mirror. I had yet to obtain any real metalhead piece of clothing. My jeans were unripped, but at least the shirt was outside the pants and the tongues of my sneakers pulled out. When I arrived at the gathering at Kārlis's place, Pūpols measured me up:

– Normal. I was afraid you'd be wearing your stupid blue shirt.

And none of them noticed that I was limping, by the way.

Going to the Junkshop took place according to a strict ritual. When everyone – Kārlis, his brother, Death, Tonijs, Pūpols, Zombie and, yes, me too – had gathered at Kārlis and his brother's place, we went next door to Zombie's. It may have been because it was easier to have a drink there and the TV was bigger. It was necessary because the arrangement involved watching the RBS TV Top. I had always watched

it, but here and now it took place differently. The situation in music had radicalized; the time was gone when we were overjoyed by Nirvana being at the top of the charts. Now Death was collecting signatures, to get "Don't Care" by Obituary into the top. A large piece of paper with Obituary's logo painted by Zombie and about seventy signatures was sent to RBS TV. The piece of paper was shown and was turned this way and that, but the song for some reason was not played. Be it as it may, it was actually good that there was neither Nirvana, nor Obituary there because now we could knock everything that was in the top. All these Soundgarden and Offspring – pure shit. Half-assed attempts. Bon Jovi – a buffoon, a girls' rocker. For reasons unfathomable to me, Sinéad O'Connor was spared. Yet the higher in the charts was a song, the more fun we had. The alternative course of the majority had stopped, the masks had fallen and pure pop took the places: East 17, Boyz II Men and, number one, Take That. We watched carefully and commented every second. I think that Zombie knew all the lyrics by heart and he sang along in a parodied jelly voice. Others poured out their witticisms and made fun of every movement made by the pop star. The new rock was created by traitors that blew neither hot, nor cold, so we spat them out in silence. But pop was the right kind of world order in which we were destined to remain a minority that laughs at the majority. We saw the guys of Take That dancing in the rain and knew for sure what we must not become.

When the top was over, we could finally be on our way. Streets, turns, bushes, shouts exchanged with other groups of people walking in the same direction; music is already heard, it seems to be Bolt Thrower, and then we are there. The classical façade with the four perhaps too slender columns. I was overcome by a noble and tender feeling. Here was that place and time. Like-minded people were all around, torn pants and checkered shirts, high tops and army boots everywhere.

And in this totally safe place, all of a sudden this same Nellija was coming in my direction together with some girlfriend of hers, much more beautiful than she was. Really, she was coming toward us as if going away from the Junkshop. I was trying to look away, I didn't want to say hello to her. But she did not say hello, she simply exclaimed:

– You're limping?

Without waiting for a reply, she just went on her way. My friends looked at me and Brother said:

– You really are limping. Why are you limping?

Finally I could tell them the story. My story split the group in two. Death and someone else said:

– Are you crazy? Why did you do it? You completely off your rocker? You could have waited a little, watched some horror or porn flick, could have gone to the kitchen to stuff your face – an ideal day. Why did you jump? Did you go nuts or what? What an idiot. What a moron.

Zombie and someone else said:

– I don't believe it.

They were not at all disturbed by the fact that I had somehow disappeared from the locked apartment; they simply did not believe me. Soon all that was forgotten, however, because we had arrived at the Villa. Now everyone was busy greeting acquaintances. Except me, for I did not know anyone here.

No, it was not so bad. DJ and his entourage were coming down the stairs. It was not only poor wretches that had become metalheads – that had happened even to some dark authorities. My heart skipped a beat – remember, DJ used to tease me from time to time. But here he was bound to leave me alone, right? He saw me right away. He came right up to me and said:

– So you too are here? Hi, crawfish.

Then something silly happened. I was such a fragile flower, see, a nincompoop who was used to being on the receiving end of jabs and witticisms. I did not know how to react to anything else. That's why, that's the reason. DJ's greeting was quite friendly, but "crawfish" gave me pause. I took DJ's extended hand and replied:

– Go fuck yourself.

I think he probably did not believe his ears, without any pretense:

– What? What did you say?

My response to his greeting was unusual. DJ in this circle was a cult personality and was considered the axis of any one of them, therefore he found these words unusual. He hadn't realized that an attack is more likely to come from a coward than from some feisty figure. I explained:

– Go fucking fuck yourself.

– What?

It looked like he was going to faint. He pulled back his extended hand and grabbed my throat with it. I was kind of trying to step aside, but Kārlis's brother got himself in between us, and that must have looked like a scuffle, because several others

encircled us – it seems everyone who was in the vicinity. Up mixed with down. Yet there was no blood for now. The most common metalhead way to fight was to throw themselves between two potential enemies and shove them to the side with widespread arms. With everyone using this consistently, the thick crowd was dispersed till everyone ended up on the perimeter of the villa. Two people who had not been involved in the initial events were dangerously close to each other; they were raising their arms and saying: – No, keep quiet and listen to me, – but they were soon separated. DJ ended up at the other end of the square; he found me with his eyes and called out in existential indignation:

– *Bliad*, but what he...

But he was already being guided inside to listen to some music. I was led to the stairs – just stand here awhile, have a smoke. As soon as I sat down on the railing, safely between Kārlis and his brother, some invisible force grabbed us and we all fell backward into the void. Zombie had snuck up to us and was pulling us down – he didn't care for peace. I really thought that I was going to fall to the ground and split myself open to the waist, that, having escaped a great enemy, I will have to die in a friendly prank. Yet we somehow scrambled up and Brother asked:

– So what was the argument all about?

I had to say something, but the story came out jumbled. I would have to tell him too much. About the inner exile, about my choice as a child to read about castles instead of building them in the yard and so on. I mumbled something. He said:

– Well, aren't you a fine specimen. You're here for the first time and fucking up already.

And he was absolutely right. Thank God, Zombie didn't care about anything and he said:

– Some bullshit music here tonight, isn't it?

That was his style, to come to his dream palace and start criticizing it. But yes, some industrial shit was being played. Psychopomps perhaps. Ugo must have got to be the DJ. He was more punk and industrial at that time.

I had somehow made my way to the door, I already saw how darkness flows out of it blackening the city, but I wanted to go inside. And right then DJ with a group came out, Ugo among them – so who is the DJ? – and friendly hands surreptitiously pushed me inside, lest I be seen.



How beautiful it was! A large, dark hall, full of shadows of the dukes. Along the wall, there was a row of theater seats. Someone was lying there on the ground, by the seats. Farther by the wall stood some girls. Isn't one of them Kristīne? In the front, there was a raised area, kind of a stage. And on it were tape decks and amplifiers, but behind them stood my friend Death who had just replaced Ugo. He was holding onto the table, the table was wobbling and cassettes were falling to the floor, but he managed somehow and now "Suffer the Children" by Napalm Death was heard:

Your unflappable conceptions  
Moralistic views  
Never open to criticism  
Your overpowering ruse  
Promises of sanctuary  
In eternal bliss  
With starry eyes and cash in hand  
Pledge all to the master plan

Everyone present was singing along or at least moving their lips in understanding. Only Death resolved to do some headbanging – he had somehow got down from the DJ's perch and was now shaking his head in front of the speaker. The idea behind headbanging is to achieve trance with the knockout method: you attack the very fortress of consciousness, the brain. You shake your head vigorously, making the porridge slap against the sides of the pot, and our inner realm can thus free itself of thoughts and touch existence directly... it's the same as meditation, in short. Of course, it's also an unmistakable reminder to the world that you have long hair – it's like shaking your penis, just in a more sophisticated way. My inner world really needed calming down and that could be achieved by shaking but my hair was not long enough. So I just stood there. Though there was a guy whose hair was even shorter than mine and who jumped out next to Death, shaking his nonexistent mop and screaming up at the empty DJ's chair:

– Deicide! Put on Deicide!

That group was rather popular at the time, for they had a strong beat and they sang of various satans. The entire set of necessary nutrients and vitamins. Somewhere I had already seen this hairless and lawless boy... But Napalm Death songs are short and Death was scrambling back onto the stage to put on the next piece. He had good hearing and a good heart, so what we heard was "Sacrificial Suicide" by Deicide,

moreover, in a demo version. That really is a good piece. The voice was so energetic and hissing, only one word, repeated regularly, was discernible: "Satan". The dude with the short hair kept headbanging like crazy and shouted at regular intervals:

– Death to the holy!

Where has he learned this, I wondered. No one sang like that in Latvian. How did he get to this formula? And then I remembered where I had seen the dude. In church, of course. I think he even served at the altar. Everything fell into place, the world organized itself. One has to be a priest to participate in the black mass. Or a beauty. Some lingered by the wall here, wasn't one of them Kristīne?

As you can see, there was much to see and contemplate at the Junkshop. And that's what I did, only something was bothering my mind, something in the back, which made me look over my shoulder from time to time. I had an enemy here. See, DJ came into the hall and walked toward the stage. Kārlis's brother gestured to me: let's go for a smoke outside. Although one could obviously smoke in here.

I had come to find likeminded people here. How did I end up having an enemy? I looked back – he was talking to Death but looking at me. I averted my eyes, slowly and deliberately, and walked out with the others.

There a mug placed on a thick body came over to me. That was Chirik, a fat boy who always appeared when he felt a potential scuffle in the air. No one had seen him fight. All he did was organize, motivate, instigate; he was a small-time sadist who crawled out of the mud to scare everyone with his strong friends to which he is attached in a mysteriously perverse way. Here he was, scrunching up his little face and asking:

– Someone here decided to jump on DJ?

I hadn't really jumped on him, had I? The fatso was probably talking about some other case. Kārlis's brother replied in my place:

– No, it's nothing, everything is all right.

He was a little older after all and was afraid of no Chirik. He just kept in mind that it's best to not mess with such people. Chirik looked at him with an expression of organic hatred, then looked at me and then squeaked down the stairs.

Normal conversations resumed. I laughed with the rest but did not feel very comfortable. And I did not want to show it to anyone. Just like at those times, when a person comes home a little drunk and the family is not in bed even though it's midnight, and the person smiles at them to show that he is not at all drunk, says

something nice, some joke perhaps, but then he hears how horrible and inadequate it sounds. The person quickly says something else to make the best of it, he starts weaving a sophisticated context into which the stupid words just pronounced will settle like pearls but feels again that he is getting deeper and deeper in trouble and it would be wiser to stop – even if it's in the middle of the phrase, but no, something has to be said and the family members don't say anything and just exchange glances. For instance, Zombie had just told me a normal story about a physics teacher who lives in his closet and I, being in awe of my friend and trying to be like him, said just like him:

– Some bullshit music tonight, isn't it?

Tonijs looked at me and his hair got even curlier:

– But this is Ministry!

Pūpols giggled. He knew that I really liked Ministry and it was the truth. And there came DJ, hugging my friend Death. But Death immediately let go of him and hugged me. Not very steady on his feet, he said into my ear:

– DJ will now come and say something to you, and you just agree to everything, don't pick a fight. He is a psycho, don't take it to heart.

Then he let go of me and hugged a column, one of the four classical columns that supported the fronton of Villa Medem. DJ sat down next to me and asked for a cigarette. He sucked on it and then asked:

– Do you know a band called Unleashed?

That was the main question. Music justifies all. Why didn't he ask me about At the Gates, Brutality or Carcass? Okay, I get it, it would be stupid to ask about Carcass, it would amount to the same thing as asking me if I know what Europe is. But he could ask me about Demilich. Then I could tell him and tell him and he would understand. But I had never heard of Unleashed. I said:

– Sure.

Kārlis helped from the sidelines:

– That bastard Pūpols has two albums.

But DJ was interested in me:

– And do you know Hypocrisy?

What the hell?

– It's Hypocrisy!

My friends helped me:

– Yes, yes, Hypocrisy, Hypocrisy.

DJ grew pensive. Then he leaned over close to me and asked me completely without any rhetoric, softly, as if he hadn't got the joke:

– Why did you jump on me?

I already could not answer this question once.

– I had just come over... and you suddenly...

– What did I do?

– Crawfish.

DJ leaned back and looked around. Some ordinary metalhead was walking by. DJ called to him:

– Hi, crawfish! Give me five!

The metalhead gladly extended his hand:

– Hi, here's all ten!

So that's how it was. Crawfish in fact did not mean anything bad. DJ was no longer my enemy, he had accepted me just like Ugo, but I pushed him away. At the bottom of the conflict was the language barrier. I had to say – I am sorry, I just did not have the metalhead-moron dictionary handy, please forgive me. But I did not say anything.

DJ got up and went downstairs, looking like he had taken offense. He walked toward the street. Chirik sidled up to him and was quietly giving him an earful. DJ nodded loftily, went to the street loftily, took a position in the middle of it and called:

– Come here! come, come!

Incidentally, he was saying that to me. I looked at Death but he had disappeared. He had somehow slipped off the column. I did not look at the others, but there they were, that's why I got up and went down. I limped a little more than ten minutes ago, but a little less than I wanted because my friends should not see me pretend. DJ seemed to not notice it at all, he just waved at me, come, come. He was handsome, famous, strong and dangerous.

I was already nearby when there was a squeak of brakes and a black car stopped next to DJ. Two skinheads stepped out, one was tall, the other wide. The tall one punched DJ in the face and he fell on the ground. The tall one bent down, picked DJ up by his jacket and threw him aside, onto the sidewalk. After all, he had been standing in the middle of the road and the car almost hit him. The wide one looked around grimly to see if anyone else was asking for it and noticed me.

– Oh! Hi! How's your health?

He extended his huge hand to me. Now I replied politely, thank you, I'm fine.

The tall one also recognized me:

– Hi! Nothing broken off this time?

– Everything is where it should be, thanks.

– Let's have a drink some time. *Davai!*

– Ciao!

They jumped into their Bamby and drove off. DJ got up and holding his face went back to the Junkshop. I didn't follow. I was thinking. Are they my new friends after this second encounter? Do I still have my real friends after this? After all, I had rejected the hand of one of ours and shaken the hand of an alien.

That's how year 1995 began. It was a great and horrible year. Do you remember the movie "Terminator 2: The Judgment Day" with Arnold Schwarzenegger in the lead? The movie was shot in 1991, but the action takes place in 1995. The authors had managed to predict the future. That's exactly how this year was, an endless judgment day. I am not convinced that it is over.

In 1995, the very best music came into being, except for the music that had already appeared in 1994 or even slightly earlier. As soon as I turned to metal, the very best specimens of the genre were created, the classics and pure gold:

Genre	Genre classics (band, album)
Year	
Death Metal	Cynic "Focus"
1993	
	At the Gates "Terminal Spirit Disease"
1994	
	Death "Symbolic"
1995	
Black Metal	Mayhem "De Mysteriis Dom Sathanas"
1994	
	Impaled Nazarene "Suomi Finland Perkele"
1994	
	Immortal "Battles in the North"
1995	
Doom Metal	Anathema "The Silent Enigma"
1995	
	My Dying Bride "Angel and the Dark River"
1995	
	Celestial Season "Solar Lovers"
1995	

Moreover, "Symbolic" by Death was released right on my birthday. That's really symbolic.

Yet at the beginning of 1995, I did not yet understand that I have created all this world, that everything is happening because of me. I stood by the window thinking: "My God, what a moron I am. I ruin everything. I betrayed my friends. I shook the hand of an enemy for all to see. What to do?" And I looked out the window. It was deep winter. One of the first winters of the new era about which my parents could no longer say: "This is nothing! In my youth it was much, much worse." Snow was rolling and falling and was not melting, the old snow – sand and shit encapsulated in crystals – mixed with the new, the mixture carpeted the entire ground in an endless cover and thus, plodding through a snowdrift in the middle of Jelgava, I touched Milady who was shoveling snow near the Glūda station; DJ who was sitting on a pile on the side of the Dobeles highway and my friends the metalheads who were building a snowman just a couple of streets away, and I was tied to the entire world with cold, sparkling ties.

The Junkshop, incidentally was thrown out of Villa Medem. That's how it probably had to be. Metalheads have to be dispersed by force, they cannot be allowed to gather. But when I heard about this, I was all shook up. What if it's my fault?

Then, in the middle of the hallway, I was addressed by Nellija – that same Nellija. She asked me point blank:

– Are you going to the Junkshop on Friday?

As if I were some idiot who does not know what's what. I put on a paralyzed person's smile on my face and I replied:

– Of course I will go. Absolutely.

– Me too.

I like it when people are making fun of me. I said:

– It's a good thing you reminded me. I'll curl my hair.

– What for?

An eighth-grader scurried past us spiderlike, her little boots trampling my heart.

I decided to give a refined answer:

– Because at Villa Medem one should have the appropriate look. Do you know that in the Medem family...

– But the Junkshop is no longer at the villa.

– Oh really?

– Now it's at Marshzavod. Hadn't you heard?

– I had!

Marshzavod was a half-dead postindustrial building next to Death's house.

Since when does the Junkshop take place there?

– There in the basement. For the first time this week.

– I know, I know. In the basement. Of course I'll go.

– With your gang?

– How else?

Nellija sniffled, turned and carried herself away.

Why has no one told me about this? I went into the classroom totally dumbfounded. Well, it's clear why they are not saying. It was Kārlis who spoke to me:

– Are you going to the Junkshop on Friday?

Ba ba ba boom!



– But of course. Marshzavod, basement, by the stairs there, a nice little spot.

Milady was standing near by, having parked her butt carelessly on the desk.

– So you are not coming for a visit?

"You" and "coming for a visit"? Don't I know anything that's happening in my life? I didn't even attempt an answer but I was overcome by the sweet feeling of self-denial. Kārlis mumbled:

– We'll see...

The psychotic Edmunds squealed from the other end of the classroom:

– Have the hairy beasts found themselves a new barn?

Kārlis snapped something back at him, something not too funny, but he respected Kārlis and shut up. I could have answered God knows how wittily, there'd be no result. But no matter, there were more important things. The Junkshop had returned.

Marshzavod was a very long building next door to the pet shop. It was the first pet shop in Jelgava. Some wit in the summer had told the loafers of the Other School that the store was into buying newts. In the pond next to the Other School there was a huge number of yellow newts. They all now moved to the center of the town. In bags full of water they were taken to the pet shop. They would not take them, explaining that they didn't need them. The yellow creatures were set free right there next to the shop and maybe to this day there is a colony of small dragons.

Death, Kārlis, Brother, Zombie and Pūpols lived on the same block, so that may have been the reason why no preparations were made for a pre-party at Zombie's. At least I had no knowledge of one. When it got properly dark on Friday evening, I told mom in all honesty that I am going to listen to some music and so I did. In my pocket, there were a couple of cassettes obtained at the Bourse: "Into Darkness" by Winter of course and something else. I also had my own cigarettes, at least a few, to start with.

There was really something happening at Marshzavod. A group of people were stomping on the snow by the door. And look, they were already waving at me, the crazy newt pickers from the Other School. Kachok, Robchik, Eižēns, Salty and others.

– Come here, madman!

That's what they called me. We made a friendly circle and some time passed until all the hands were shaken. We had recently acquired this style; all of a sudden, we all had become grown up gentlemen. I found that a little annoying. And hair on all of them was too short. What if my real friends arrive to see me in such a company?

Actually, they were decent people and they had a liter of vodka "Magic Chrystal", popularly known as "Blue Mountains" or "Lizard's Smile." It was even better that Eižēns asked:

– Has anyone been to the old Junkshop?

I was the only one. I told them about it with dignity, without any gushing, without redundant information, just the most beautiful and most important. I could feel myself growing in stature. They listened to me very attentively. I belonged to some older, more real world. I was given the bottle out of turn. I took a swig to match my status – a little too much. A bit even went down the wrong pipe. Another bit into my nose. The entire system was made kind of ill. But it was hardly the moment to upchuck. Using all of my willpower I pulled myself together and decided that a manly spittle would be enough. I gathered everything in a sizeable gob.

But then a guy I didn't know who was standing next to Salty said:

– But why couldn't there be a metalhead newspaper?

It was a good question, but just at that moment I was leaning forward to spit. The unknown enthusiast exclaimed:

– And also – why couldn't there be...

He supplemented his exclamation with a gesture, swiftly throwing out his arm into the center of our friendly circle, his palm turned upward in the classical orator's position. At that point, I had already leaned forward all the way and was expectorating a rich mixture. Guided by gravity, the spittle fell and landed into the upturned palm of the orator, filling it to the brim.

I didn't mean for this to happen, it really was an accident. I froze with shame and with fear of what might happen next in this evening that had started so well. I looked the unknown guy in the eye, ready to receive a well deserved punch. Yet his gaze contained no threat, just surprise and humiliation. He had wanted to say something constructive to further our cause, but his authoritative comrade had simply spat in his hand (the dudes from the Other School had no idea about my nincompoop past – to them I was just an old metalhead). I opened and shut my empty mouth and then said:

– I didn't mean it.

I may have even said "I'm sorry!", but that was inaudible because the entire gang was laughing their heads off. Eižēns shrieked with laughter running out of breath

and Salty was in stitches. Everyone took it as a great joke. Only I and the stranger were quiet. He was rubbing his hand against his pants.

To think of it, it was a bit funny.

We would have stood there for another year, but there was a little group walking on the other side of the street and they called out discreetly:

– Stay brutal!

It was them: Kārlis, Brother, Death, Zombie, Pūpols and Bread. Insensitive like children are, I dropped my friends from the Other School, perhaps with a distracted "See you inside!" and ran across the street, uncertain of who exactly I was – a member of the great brotherhood or a servile lapdog, a bristly scoundrel or a touching ninny. Having crossed the street, I jumped and scrambled over the snowdrift for Zombie and Pūpols to grab and start abusing me. I even thought – maybe it's nothing, maybe making one stupid mistake after another is my chosen path – see, my friends love me anyway. After adulterating me with the snow they got me up on my feet again and handed me the 0.7 liter bottle of the good "Merkurs" that was barely over half empty and Bread offered me half of a sausage sandwich (that's how he had acquired his nickname – he always had a crumb of two on his person).

– Inside! Inside!

And we went inside.

At the entrance, we were greeted by the first piece of evidence to suggest that the old Junkshop was better: here there was an entrance fee, one lat.

But it was great. A steep metal staircase led deep into the underground where we found ourselves at the door of a bunker with a huge ring for a handle, like you find in submarines. Inside, there was even a TV, if someone wanted to feel some bourgeois domesticity. The TV attracted my gaze. It showed nonstop love scenes with detailed close-ups. Films of this genre were not so frequent at that time. The Junkshop organizers had wanted for the visitors to enjoy the best of everything. True, one could not hear the obviously German dialogue and moaning because the underground space was reverberating with metal emanating from the huge set of speakers. This was an old bomb shelter, which had never been used for its purpose. Now it was our shelter against the silence of the outside world. The concrete enclosed tight quarters seemed filled better than the dukes' ballrooms and cigarette smoke invited associations with an underground paradise. Beer even seemed to be sold here, if there was anyone so stupid that they had not brought anything along. Me, for instance. But I had friends.

There they were. Both brothers were banging their heads against the metal wall. Of course, they simply pretended and made the noise by kicking their feet, but their technique had been perfected to look completely natural. Pūpols was taking the last piece of bread away from Bread. Zombie and Half had turned their attention to the film on TV. Death was storming the DJ's place. I looked around. Well, there stood Nellija with the usual expression of being mistreated on her face. I said to her with my eyes:

– Do you see? This is my gang. We are forever eternally stay heavy stay brutal, whereas you are just a book bag.

Her eyes replied:

– I don't believe you.

In confusion, I looked away. Next to her, there was another girl, an unusual creature with bright yellow hair and brown eyes. She did not speak to me with those eyes, she was not even looking at me. Nellija bent down and shouted something in her friend's ear. It really was very loud here.

At rare moment, Ugo got to the tape deck and put on something of his punks, but generally it was pure metal: a little thrash, a little doom, but mostly deathniks. The greatest hit at that time was "Zero the Hero" by Cannibal Corpse. As soon as that started playing, everyone leapt to the stage (although there was no stage) to shake their hair side by side with each other. It was even a tradition to embrace the people next to you on each side. Such a brotherly habit that also made it easier to stay upright. I too participated, although it has always been very hard for me to embrace anyone. My embracer on the left had some sort of an open drink in his hand that was rhythmically splashing my cheek. I was considerate and did not say anything, just kept shaking my head in the common rhythm and could feel my poor, little brain swishing around in my skull and the world getting scrambled into strange thoughts – here I am, I feel good, I need nothing else, how nice that our world is so compressed. I also thought of Milady and said to her: see, you are not here and that's good. I am not thinking about you. See, Kārlis, too, is here and not with you. I imagined that I should compose a sonnet or a poetic miniature here on the spot. But who needs gentle words if metal is thundering all around us. As each new song had barely begun, Death and I identified it aloud:

– Carcass!

– Entombed!

– Bolt Thrower! (I must admit that I did not recognize the third song and let Death yell by himself; in this noise, he did not hear my voice anyway).

– Konkhra!

– Brutal Truth, no, Brutality!

– Sepultura!

– You stupid or what? Brujeria! (So he did hear me after all.)

Nellijas and her friend stood nearby and I hoped that at least one of them hears at least a part of our report. I looked at them and shouted in Death's ear what new music I had got a hold of at the Bourse and he shouted back that I should finally give him some to listen to. No problem, I have them with me, right here in my pocket! But where did I put my jean jacket... Right here somewhere, oh yes, in a safe place, on the floor by the lavatory.

As I approached the lavatory, I suddenly fell abruptly forward, clearly feeling the ground rise under my feet. Yet it was not the ground that was at fault, nor was it the good old "Merkurs" or "Lizard's Smile". The crazy brothers had banged on the wall of the lavatory and it fell – just toppled over. A rather flimsy partition wall for a bomb shelter. It fell down with a bang, revealing some startled metalheads by the urinals. They tried to quickly wrap it up and hide everything away, except of course Zombie who, crazed with glee, started jumping up and down among the rest the way he was, with his pants rolled down, and no one, including the girls, averted their eyes but rather embraced him and started jumping with him. I felt a pang that people should be seduced only in this way.

I dragged on my cigarette and tried to find Death but he had disappeared in the mayhem; I saw only gawky Edmunds and fat Chirik who were lingering by the entrance. I haughtily turned away, sucked my cigarette to the end and started looking for an ashtray. It was not really required, but I felt sophisticated enough, plus recently the so-called Latvian ashtray had appeared – a plastic glass with a little water at the bottom. A minute ago, someone was holding it. And I found it, it was held by Nellija's beautiful friend who was unperturbed in the middle of the storm. I walked up to her, gave her a smile and threw the butt into the ashtray. I did not hear what she said, for it was too loud; I just kept smiling, for what bad things can such a beautiful creature ever say. She opened her eyes the color of Merkurs as if she was about to demonstrate something and then lifted her glass. It was no ashtray at all, but an ordinary plastic

glass, almost full of some fancy screwdriver. I had just walked up to her and thrown a cigarette in her cocktail.

While I was not all that adept at etiquette, I understood that it was not the right thing to do. I said the words I had already once pronounced today, but again I was not heard. I staggered back, hoping that I looked more inebriated than I actually was. I got entangled in some rag. That was my jacket. I should probably have bought the girl another drink. But I had paid my last lat at the entrance. I put on my jacket. Should I give her some cassette? It could not be Winter, because it was the must have music of winter. Tristitia I also did not feel like giving up. I had just begun to get into this epically strange recording. That will be the real music, it will play only for me who is destined to hurt everyone, to just be a cruel jester. I will just crawl back home and listen to my cassettes all alone.

Suddenly the metal stopped playing. For some reason, the music was turned off. Someone shouted:

– But listen, why are you not listening, I am serious...

That undoubtedly was said into someone's ear, it was whispered to match the background sound, but now everyone heard it. I was afraid to lift my eyes to avoid seeing the spat upon fellow from the Other School or the girl with eyes the color of bitterness. At that moment, the lights were turned on, leaving me like a puppy in a pool of floodlight. Police, real police came out to the middle of the hall – about ten of them, dressed in black, with truncheons and guns.

I am afraid not only of dogs but also of people in uniform. I felt like holding on to the beautiful elbow of the insulted girl, but I got a grip of myself. Perhaps I shouldn't have.

One of the cops shouted:

– Everyone face the wall!

But not everyone listened to him, their ears being dulled with metal, and the police generally were considered a bunch of little devils that everyone sees but no one believes in. I heard it clearly, however, and really wanted to obey the police. But I could no longer do it. At least not before everyone else does it. Or at least some.

The policemen repeated what they had said nicely and then started explaining in action. I was not pushed by anyone, I turned on my own. They also made us spread our legs, but that I didn't like at all, my legs were shaking, but I felt that something great was taking place. They examined us, looking for god knows what (later I got

used to these searching, timid touches), but someone was already used to them and shouted:

– But I have an Uzi in my undies! Look in my undies, I have an Uzi there!

The cops did not find the Uzi, however. After a brief, quiet discussion, they went away. Now we felt exactly as we should. Everyone exchanged glances, burst out laughing as if laughter had been stifled and yelled: "What the fuck!" This time, something had indeed happened. Just like in the old days. Death immediately ran to the vacant DJ's console. The hosts, however, said that the party was over. They turned off the hardware and began rolling up the cables.

It was bitterly cold outside. But it wasn't snowing. I looked around – the city stood there mysterious, all-knowing. On the snowdrifts by the entrance I saw dark patches. Something that had dripped or splashed or clotted. Like a fool I asked:

– What's that?

And Kārlis told me:

– Blood.

Bread said:

– Someone always gets it.

Death thought about it.

– Who got it last time?

– When was the last time?

– Still at the Villa...

– Someone got it?

– Well, maybe not...

– I don't remember.

They didn't even remember what I had been suffering over.

I don't know who had got it this time. There was a rumor on Monday that Chirik's gang had pulled out metalheads and beat them up. It was also said that the cops, arriving and departing, had hit everyone they met at the entrance. Why the cops at all?

An old Irish legend has it that upon seeing a raven pecking at a puddle of blood in the snow, the king's daughter Deirdre had fallen in love with this scene. Black, white and red. Cold, hot, flying. The same with me. The blood was neither Deirdre's, nor mine. We just wished it had been. That's what these king's descendants are like.

I am not sure whether the fresh air was at fault or it was letting go of the stress, but finally the drinks I had consumed over the course of the evening had their full say. My feet and my tongue stumbled, yet I felt great. My own kind were walking with me, their tongues also stumbled and feet lisped; we were stomping on the snow, we were explorers of the Arctic who had found their shelter from loneliness. To be with everyone is the same as not to be anywhere; one has to find one's lonely path to take along with a few, and we had found it. They had forgiven me my horrible sins, they had accepted me, and that really meant that I was a prince, and the girl with the yellow hair and brown eyes had addressed me, whereas I was not at all thinking of Milady. I was free. I was happy in that bloody snow.

Zombie added:

– But maybe some young lady has wrung out her rag here.



On the third floor, there was a door adorned with 23, the ubiquitous number of the cataclysm  $2+3=5$ . On all the doors in Bulgakov's "Master and Margarita" there was also a number the sum of whose digits was 5. Behind this door, was the algebra room. In its bookcase were books that one does not feel like reading even when one is bored out of one's skull. Much more interesting things were at that time written elsewhere, for instance, on the desks that were painted green. We painted them in summer. On the underside of the desks, the paint never dried completely and in the past, one could sometimes see a touch of green on girls' knees, but now they had become more cautious.

There we sat, all 36 of us. Algebra was taught by our homeroom teacher. She loved her subject and, upon entering the classroom, always said something like this:

– We'll be working at three levels: working on the "standard", going over new material and I have also found interesting problems from the math competition.

We had to calculate a lot, in three directions and, from time to time, we even tried. But one day, a guy from the back row, Jānis Labrencis, pushed his notebook aside and said: "I respectfully bow my head in face of this problem." That seemed really witty to me and I too gave up. The rest of our faction had seriously given up a while back. Algebra seemed like a different, abstract world. The adepts from the front row claimed that it existed objectively and they had successfully got in touch with it. For us, the more remote ones, it remained the unknown, the invisible, which, at the end of semester can punish you for your lack of understanding. But at that moment, the end of semester was far off and we felt normal. We sat there in a most cultured fashion and played *seka* – a profaned version of poker, without lies or pretense.

That day I was not getting good cards. Constantly, it was either Charles (the king of hearts) or David (the king of spades). There was nothing I could do with them in *seka*. I folded. I sat there watching my classmates. What characters, what fates! What legs! Diāna, Linda, Gunta. I knew them without having to look higher. There, up in front, where the adepts sat, was she, Milady. Her legs could not be seen. Now she turned, looked at me and smiled. I did not respond. She might have smiled at someone sitting behind me. I looked at the green table top. There were inscriptions not unlike the ones on the walls of lavatories: Death, Entombed was engraved by an unknown hand. Possibly, by Death himself. I had written back Anathema, in addition

depicting the rather complicated logo with considerable precision. The unknown metalhead had to appreciate it, but he did it by keeping quiet. To the text "Hairy morons" I had replied with "You have pimples" and had in turn received an invitation: "Come on out, freak!". I raised my eyes – Milady quickly turned and gave the guy sitting behind her a folded note. Head bent, I read again: Death and Entombed and "Come on out, freak!" I felt the note coming nearer. Very near. Gunta threw it on my table. My neighbor, all doubled up, was staring at his cards.

I picked up the note. It said "Kārlis". I looked at Milady, she looked at me and waved – pass it on! I knew that Kārlis sat right behind me. I threw him the note and returned to my thoughts.

Someone had also scratched in a pentagram on the surface of the table. The one with two points upward. Exactly this type of pentagram is seen in the rosette window on the north side of the Amiens Cathedral. Now it for some reason it was associated with Satanism. Next to it, was a ballpoint drawing of a reversed Latin cross, which was also associated with the same ideology. Actually, it is called the Cross of St. Peter. It is seen, for example, on the back of the pope's chair.

Kārlis threw a note on my table. Instead of the inscription "Stay Brutal!" it only presented the recipient's name. I transferred it to the first row and then drew an equilateral triangle on my desk, with a smaller triangle inside. In the space between the sides of the triangles I wrote "SATIRNE GAN SANTALINI". This symbol should be drawn in bat's blood on parchment and put on a holy stone. After that, the parchment should be put under the threshold. Any girl who steps over this threshold will immediately get completely undressed and dance until she dies, unless somebody takes the parchment away. That's what Grimorium Ferum says. If only I had parchment and a bat, someone would really have to dance hard!

Of course, the symbol must be carried by the right kind of vehicle. The metalheads from the Other School said that the teacher there had noticed someone with a bloody arm. Upon her request, the guy had shown his upper arm with some sort of a deeply carved in symbol. The wound was infected and bleeding. The teacher asked:

— Hm, what do we have here?

To which the student answered:

– Faith.

What kind of a symbol was it? Not clear. So a sect that secret had appeared in Jelgava.

At the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s, Latvia was targeted by visitors from outer space. Without having accomplished much, they went back and now secrets were being sought right here.

Plop, another note landed on my desk. It had my last name on it. Of course I almost immediately noticed that the handwriting was different, so I was not touched by any emotional adventures even theoretically. Inside it read: "What are you doing?" I scanned the classroom. No one looked suspicious, except one who always looked that way and usually it was deceptive.

On that same note, I drew a double circle, drawing two crosses inside in a special way. This symbol is useful to render one invisible. Who wouldn't like that? All you need is black beans, a dead man's skull and, of course, alcohol. So you put a bean in each orifice of the skull, draw the aforementioned symbol on its forehead and bury it at a crossroads. Then you, naturally, take the bottle of alcohol and water the place of burial really well. It must be done seven nights in a row. On the seventh, a beanstalk will have sprouted and the ghost of the dead person will be sitting next to it. The ghost will ask: "What are you doing?" And, naturally enough, he will reach for the bottle. But of course you should not give it to him right off.

– What are you doing, Jānis?

Mrs. Siliņa was standing by my desk.

– Nothing.

I said that with certainty, as anyone conscious of his or her innocence, but this time it must have sounded somehow wrong.

– That's exactly what it looks like. Show me your notebook!

Mrs. Siliņa had a quirk: she insisted that students always follow the lesson and write everything down. But I had not written down anything. I had only drawn a grave. Pūpols taught me. During classes, he killed time by drawing the graves of the people present. Usually these were graves of teachers. "Okay, okay, Līcītis," Pūpols said and drew Līcītis's grave. It was not always because of some particular conflict. I too had drawn the grave of the teacher just because. A handsome cross and tombstone with her name and last name. Pūpols usually added the circumstances of the death, but I did not do that and wanted to point out this positive element to the teacher. But I did not say anything. Mrs. Siliņa put her finger on the drawing of the grave:

– What is that?

Like the true scientist that she was, she asked it with genuine interest. Now she was trying to decipher her name. I felt very embarrassed and wished that it wouldn't be happening.

Suddenly the door opened and an unfamiliar, curly red-haired head announced that I was to go to the principal's office. The principal was very lazy and tended to use for these calls some diligent girl.

I shut the notebook and got to my feet. Some later said that I had blanched. That is a lie. True, even for any natural rebel, just like for the little man, being called to the administration always entails something catastrophic, but this time, I first of all felt that I had managed to slip out of the grave episode, and second, I had attracted the admiring attention of everyone present and, third, I hoped that I would not really have to go to the principal and the owner of the curly head has simply decided to kidnap me.

Not a chance. The principal's office was full of people. Naturally, there was the head of the study department and another woman in some capacity that I have now forgotten. But there were also Cips and Anrijs, my metalhead friends from Lane 5! And also Death.

– What's happening?

But the head of the education department asked me:

– So?

And I replied:

– Yes, m'am?

And she added:

– What can you tell us?

And I asked:

– About what?

And she explained:

– What do you do together?

That gave me pause. We did all kinds of things together, and I was not sure that all of them could be understood by or narrated to the administration women. The principal apparently figured out my train of thought and narrowed the topic down:

– What is this sect of yours?

The head of the education department briefed me on the facts. The four of us supposedly prophesied the end of the world, calling out satanic slogans, worshipping death and disseminating weird ideas. In addition, we drank in the cemetery. Actually, she was surprisingly well informed on our comings and goings; I have no idea where she had obtained this information. A part of it was big news to me. Our base was supposed to be the attic of a residential building near the school, and our leader ostensibly was an aged gentleman with a big beard! These were the elements that allowed me to deny this and be genuinely surprised. My reaction was so natural that the principal said:

– Well, it did seem to me total nonsense. After all, you are all such normal boys!

And the four of us nodded in complete agreement. Now we were happy to be normal. The principal then asked:

– And who is that man with a beard?

By Jupiter, I really had no idea who that could be and the rest of us also looked genuinely perplexed.

The lady in the forgotten capacity then came up with her own hypothesis:

– Maybe you are simply listening to that music of yours a bit louder... Singing along with it... Perhaps some older person hears it and is startled...

Then Anrijs ventured with a light laugh:

– We couldn't even manage to sing along to that rap!

He did that to show how far removed we are from anything dangerous. We never listened to any rap.

– We don't listen to any rap!

That came from Death. He looked unhappy.

– I mean, we are normal, but we do not listen to rap.

The principal was suddenly exhausted:

– There's no need to go into such detail. Go back to your studies.

Cips had a question, however:

– Who told you all this?

– Go to your studies.

And in the hallway she made us disperse, so that we can't discuss it all. I was the last one left and tried to figure out what was happening.

All of a sudden, the crazy Nellija from the parallel class walked up to me and asked:

- What went on there?
- Where?
- There.
- Nothing.
- Some kind of shit?
- Where?
- What's wrong with you?
- Why?
- Are you crazy?

So that's how I finally really got to know Nellija. She said that everyone called her Nele and that we could do so as well. But we did not call her that. I never heard anyone call her that. Everyone called her Mele, Liar.

Where was it better – at the Junkshop or at home, or alone by the tape deck? Was it not the case that the Junkshop was good only because one could then remember all that went on there at home alone by the tape deck? Was it not the case that sitting by the tape deck or sometimes even standing by it, my favorite fantasy was being at the Junkshop?

What is the right way to listen to a song? Should one imagine oneself as the protagonist and try to match the song to one's life? Is the song about me or am I about the song?

There was increasingly less space for math and family problems. These lightweight problems were suppressed by metal. I could no longer embrace and press to my chest my cassette collection all at once. I could engage in the structuring and classifying that are so pleasing to a young mind. There was quite a bit of doom, a respectable collection of death, a minimum of thrash and that other genre that so many of us were into, maybe too much into. I can clearly explain why I was into it.

It started neither at the Junkshop, nor at home. One time, during physical education or maybe ethics class, I was winding a cassette in the player. Of course, it would be normal to do it with a pen or with scissors, but for some reason I was tired. The player was squeaking and clattering like a circular saw cutting a board with nails. Kārlis turned and asked:

– What's that black you are playing there?

I was not yet aware of such a genre, but I was immediately curious about music that would sound like that. Black metal is considered the most extreme expression of metal. For our inebriated brains, this was another bucket of dynamite in a flaming bonfire. It went to the extreme; all black, nothing further possible, we had reached our goal. I had just supposed that doom metal is the end of it all, but now, as Death and I were lingering by the tape player, he said:

– The best doom is black.

I automatically translated this sentence:

– The best fate is black.

Do you remember Immortal's "Pure Holocaust"? Of course you do. And Mayhem? I apologize for this question. Yes, yes, I mean the old Mayhem, not the survivors. I cannot help it, I will now tell you what you already know.

In 1984, Mayhem was formed by a Norwegian boy of Lapp origin, Øystein Aarseth. He played the guitar and called himself Euronymous. We could never figure out how this name should be pronounced, that is, on which syllable the stress was supposed to fall.

Euronymous asserted that his mission in life was absolute evil. When fame had already found him, a journalist asked: hmm, I hear that you, sir, have a very good relationship with your parents. They say you are a very good son. How does that go with total evil? And Euronymous self-critically evoked human nature:

– Christians too do not manage to be only good.

What a great answer!

Moreover, mind you, Euronymous, the band's engine, did not sing but played the guitar. The first soloist of Mayhem was Maniac. Soon he was replaced by a melancholic young man by the name of Dead. He really knew how to create an ambiance. He was the first in black metal who got on stage in makeup (it is called corpse paint). This cosmetic device was reminiscent of the faces of mimes. And it *was* the same thing: the sad jesters.

You see, Dead wanted to look dead. He used to bury his clothes deep underground for a week or a month and then dig them out an hour before a performance and put them on. Fans sometimes got to see a mole-cricket crawl on his concert garb. As Dead performed, he used to slash himself.

One evening, when there was no performance, Dead cut himself and cut himself more, then wrote a note: "Excuse the blood" and shot himself in the head with a shotgun.

Have we not already heard of something like this? A letter and a shotgun. Again the same thing. If we do not take into account the fact that Kurt died in 1994 and Dead in 1991. Our time swung back and forth and rarely remained still.

Euronymous was the one to find his dead friend and he immediately took some pictures for the cover of the "Dawn of the Black Hearts", which they were working on. For everything to fall into place, for what was said in scripture to be fulfilled, there were some who expressed their doubts about what had happened. Our detectives Venom and Slayer did so. Having examined the picture, they voiced their suspicion that a murder had taken place, for "it all looks too nice." And it was nice. According to legend, Euronymous cooked himself a few bits of Dead's brain and took some bits of skull for a necklace, whereas Hellhammer got the femurs for using on drums.



That's how Mayhem lost their soloist. The bass player Necrobutcher left the band because he began feeling that it was not playing with a full deck.

But the legend cannot be stopped. For a while, there was this casting about. Then the band was joined by an intelligent young man by the name of Kristian Vikernes who had just changed this unsuitable moniker to Varg Vikernes a.k.a. Count Grishnackh. What a choice! Grishnackh was captain of the Orks in the Catholic tale "Lord of the Rings". The young Norwegian Ork had his own band Burzum (also borrowed from Tolkien), a one man band. In Mayhem he was entrusted with the part of bass. Blackthorn from the Thorns helped with the guitar. The Hungarian Attila from the band Tormentor was invited to sing. These five people recorded the last real album of Mayhem entitled "De Mysteriis Dom Sathanas", the non plus ultra of black metal. There is nothing to add there.

Euronymous's mom later demanded that the bass track be changed, so that Grishnackh's playing would not be heard alongside her good and loving son... Grihnackh still asserts that his material has been preserved on the album.

When "De Mysteriis Dom Sathanas" had already been recorded but had yet to be released, one night, Vikernes went to visit Euronymous together with Blackthorn. What did they talk about on that freezing August night? No records have been preserved but I think Blackthorn asked:

– Can I smoke?

And Varg replied:

– No. I already told you. No smoking in my car.

– Why not? It's evil to smoke!

– The old Norwegian gods did not smoke.

– What is it with you all? Can't smoke in Euronymous's flat either, for fear that the tapestries will get saturated with smoke.

– I don't care what Euronymous says.

– So can I smoke?

– No.

– What's with you, guys? This non-smoking will not end up well. Believe you me.

– Jews have foisted smoking on us.

– I really want to smoke. Now I'll have to smoke outside like some moron.

– But the legend can't be stopped.

- What?
- Sit, we'll be there in a minute.

When they pulled up, Blackthorn remained outside to have a cigarette. That's how he didn't end up the sole witness to what happened between those two. Venom related the following: after Grishnackh's grim ring, the door was opened by a grim Euronymous dressed in expressly grim underpants... And I think the following conversation took place:

- Good evening, Kristian!
- Good evening, Øystein!
- Did you leave Snorre downstairs?
- Sure did.
- Shall we have a smoke?
- No time.
- Yes. Rock-paper-scissors?
- Rock-paper-scissors.

I don't know the details but Euronymous was stabbed to death. The reasons were much discussed – domination, conflict – love, schmove – what bullshit. Umpteen stabs. "Eternally Euronymous, murdered by traitor's hands". In court, Vikernes laughed, the prosecutor added the burning of churches, possession of weapons and speeding to the charges. You were driving too fast, boys. The maximum prison term in Norway – 21 years.<sup>2</sup>

I listened to "De Mysteriis Dom Sathanas" every day. I actually preferred every evening when it was already dark. If possible, I turned off all the lights and listened in the dark, looking at the wall, which could barely be made out, or out the window where there was a tall smokestack that was black or invisible against the night sky. When no lyrics could be heard – oh, great wisdom of nature, in metal, it's a frequent occurrence –, I thought up my own, thus developing my spiritual life. The family no longer objected. But they did not turn into metal heads either.

As it should be, I soon realized that Mayhem has become a banality. The wonderful band Unholy **b**f**u**r**i**n**t** Mayhem and Burzum discs during their concerts. A genuine subculture provides a person not only with friends but also with enemies. I

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<sup>2</sup> The one left behind, Hallhammer, began playing in a Christian metal band "Antestor", apparently proving yet once more that metal is paramount. Grishnackh came out of prison in 2009.

listened both to the victim and to the murderer, as well as to those that were against both. It turned out that in black metal too there is an underground. All these Abigail, Blasphemy... For the first time, I became clearly aware that Schweik was right: underneath the visible world, there is another one, a much bigger world.

When an earthquake takes place, a butterfly too flaps its wings. Latvia too needed a legendary black metal band, that was clear as the night is dark. There was none at all so far, but we needed a legendary one. That is normal, Venom was both the first metal band in the world, and also legendary enough. That's what we needed. Although... Huskvarn had already played something in the ancient metal style. But Huskvarn have always associated themselves with thrash metal, so we'll stay with that. The person who applied to become the new legend had the same name as the first black metal band, Venom. The aforementioned metal aristocrat with long hair and a sour expression on his face.

He was sharp and dreamy. He liked everything that shook up the good and moderate world. He destabilized the adjective "bad", because all that was bad was good for Venom. He was a strident atheist and nationalist. He liked Pol Pot, Machiavelli, Satan and Greek mythology. He had even rewritten it in his own style: "Arachne crawled out of the hollow tree, spitting out her knocked out teeth." He liked Celtic Frost even better and, can you imagine, he also liked Venom. In fact, he kept praising these really old black metal bands so much that sometimes I suspected that he might be a secret heavy metalhead. He was always slightly skeptical regarding all legends. He wanted to be one himself.

In October 1994, Venom together with Slayer established the group Dark Reign. That took place about two months before the first Alfheim got together. These two were the ones to compete for the honor of the first true evil Latvian black metal band.

But the fight for number one was hardly over. Venom had done almost all there was. He officially changed his family name and spilled his blood. Yes, yes, all according to script. One time, Venom was sitting in Kalinin's Basement (the place where only the really chosen ones sat (me never)) and was in a surly mood because there was water dripping on his head from a pipe. Next to him sat his closest friend and band cofounder Slayer. One thing led to another and Slayer stabbed Venom in the leg. Venom took offense and went outside. This event was discussed by half the public at Veldze. What else had to be done to claim victory?

I understood that some sacrifice was necessary in order to establish a band. One had to either receive or deliver a stab. What to do? I had the idea of poking my eyes out, for the hearing of the blind improves substantially, which would be a real advantage in music. But I hesitated for now, waiting for another idea.

And I was once again late. A step behind the great events again. Is there a point in establishing a band if it was not going to be the first?

But neither Dark Reign, nor Alfheim had made a single recording. And, in my opinion, a band could consider itself born only if it had recorded. Probably because I developed an intimate relationship to metal in the room by myself, hugging a tape deck. For others, it may have been a concert, a sacrificed cat or a hectoliter of beer that counted. But the history of Latvian metal was happening right before my eyes and I had to join the bandwagon. I was about the age of Euronymous when he started. I had Sinister with me – he was older than me and also crazy about metal. He was already drawing the logos for our band (even though we still had to come up with a name). He also found the third member, one who kept talking about axes. We had our chance.

I should also mention the main factor, the Moon. The anthem of black metal was undoubtedly "The Freezing Moon" performed by Mayhem. Before the song was played in a concert in Leipzig, Dead announced it:

– When it's dark and when it's cold, the freezing moon can obsess you.

These words became our personal mantra and explication of our destiny. That's how it had happened. Cold, moon, going nuts.

The moon was evoked by almost all of the black metal groups or metal groups in general – Carpathian Full Moon, "Moon over Kara-Shehr", "Diabolical Full Moon Mysticism", "Call of the Winter Moon", Moonspell, "Behold, the Rising of the Scarlet Moon" and on, and on, and on. Moon, the crazy skinhead, the sun of criminals and lovers, vampire's lantern around which the minds of men are swarming – nothing is more beautiful than the Moon. The girl who attended the Dorothea girls' school and Trinity Women's Gymnasium in Jelgava and later became the demonic poet Aspazija said it all:

Let others have nuts or sweet pies –  
See, we have the moon in the sky,  
It's kindly and round and white  
For others it never shines so bright.

Don't cry, my baby, don't shed a tear,  
I'll tell you something, you don't have to fear:  
We will hitch our tomcat to a small cart  
And up to the moon we will happily dart.

For hundreds of years, everyone had only the Moon on their minds. But I had another reason, all my own.

It happened a long time ago, on a winter morning of course. I was trudging through the Jelgava snowdrifts, but not yet to school – I was still in kindergarten. I was not yet immersed in marveling at my own inner world and was not hobbling like the blind but was rather carefully checking out what was all around me. Up there was the Moon. I was already used to the fact that perfection can only be found in fairytales and that reality should not be taken completely seriously. But there it was, absolutely, totally invulnerable. Like a bullet hole to a better world. The splotches could also be seen – an American Indian had been pulled up there or that Latvian girl with the beautiful bottom – fairytales offered various versions. I found the Moon really moving.

It turned out that everyone had seen it. At the kindergarten, they were crowding around the teacher and speaking all at once:

– The Moon is so beautiful this morning! I saw it!

I was not at all jealous; still moved, I went up to the group and said:

– I saw it too!

But one girl, stupid Sanita, turned to me and said:

– No, you didn't!

I have no idea why she said that. Later I came up with some reasons and thought about it a lot. But it is quite clear, that black metal entered Jelgava on that very morning.

On one of the first sunny late afternoons of early spring, Death asked me:

– Your parents are not at home right now?

And he added:

– As far as I know.

I nodded. My parents had gone to the garden house. Death had understood it all very well. Now he was kneading his face pensively and apparently hatching out some plan. I waited quietly. Are we organizing a party? The first rehearsal of the band? Are we seducing girls?

– There's this guy who has escaped. He needs some place to stay for a couple of days.

Even more romantic!

– Let him stay with me!

Death looked up:

– Yes! That's a good idea!

And he extended his hand:

– Give me the keys. I will see him tonight and give them to him.

– But I can wait for him at home.

– I have no idea when he will come. Perhaps you won't be at home.

I imagined that I really won't be at home, since I won't have keys. But then I remembered that I had mom's set right in my pocket. So I gave Death the keys.

He sniffled when leaving, said "Stay brutal!" and went. I had a date at Rainis Park to meet Pūpols.

We got together right on time, just as people would before the cell phone era. We had a nice get-together, only beer was missing. I thought that he would bring it and he thought that I would.

But okay. We killed time undressing passing girls with our eyes. We started following the most beautiful one. We ended up in some area with kitchen gardens. She entered a small gate and let out a dog. We broke into a run. Running down the gravel covered streets, it suddenly occurred to me that perhaps someone was waiting for me at home.

From where has he escaped? From where do people escape? From the loony bin, for example. Is there a psychiatric hospital in Jelgava? Yes, there is. Some

misunderstood genius. Or no, some oversensitive soul who looks deeper and will understand my genius. Maybe it's even a girl? Really – Death did not say "a guy". So it must be a girl. I will put on My Dying Bride for her, treat her to some meatballs. No, My Dying Bride has been overplayed, they must be playing it even at the loony bin, I should put on something like... Celestial Season? Ceremonium? In the Woods? That last one is nothing special, but the girl should like it.

Actually, I think Death said it was a guy.

And one can escape not just from the loony bin. They escape from prisons as well. No, that's too much. One cannot escape from prison, one is under guard there.

I stopped abruptly. The unassailable logic of the drama told me in no uncertain terms that it is Juris's brother that awaits me in my room, the same guy to whom I refused to lend my tape recorder.

And then I suddenly recalled that I am being pursued by the dog of the most beautiful girl of this evening. And I am simply standing there. And there he was running, ears flapping ominously.

I may have forgotten to mention that I am very much afraid of dogs. Cynophobia. And that I have fear of people in uniform. Like Strindberg. No person in uniform was to be seen, although his inadvertent appearance tonight could come in handy, but the dog, ears flapping ominously, was drawing nearer.

The dog ran right past me, with his left ear even slapping my ankle, and continued to chase the running Pūpols. I hoped that he would escape. But what remained for me was simply to go home.

When I reached my native home, it was twilight. I noticed light in the kitchen window. An audacious, coldblooded bandit is busy finishing off my meatballs. I slowly climbed the stairs. Then I was standing by my door and once again weighing my course of action.

The world helped me. Upon hearing someone unlocking the door from the inside, I ran up to the fifth floor.

From there, I heard someone carefully locking the door and descending the stairs. When the front door slammed shut, I pressed against the stairwell window, but he must have been walking closely by the wall and remained out of sight. A professional, there was no doubt about it. Must have gone to hunt for some child to have for supper.

I unlocked the door and went inside. There was no gun or dagger in sight. I went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. The meatballs were in place. Then I went to the living room. There, in the corner by my table, was a small new pile. Rather shy and compact. There was a shirt that could be said to be folded, some knotted pairs of socks (looked like men's) and a thick book.

I picked up the book. It was fat, pleasant to touch. It had undergone some intensive reading. Perhaps slightly careless. The corner of the hard cover was broken as if the book had been used to beat someone over the head. The cover was black. Like that of the Bible. On the cover it said white on black: "Encyclopedia of Metal". I leafed through it quickly to make sure that it was not some publication dedicated to metallurgy or craftsmanship. No, it was about real metal. I turned to letter "M"—Mayhem, Morbid Angel, Morgoth, let's go further, still further, My Dying Bride. With pictures. I turned to the end – Winter; at the beginning – Anathema. And Brutal Truth, is it there? It was.

There were bands about which I hadn't even heard. Blasphemy. Black, judging by the title. The cover of the disc was also real. The title read "The Fallen Angel of Doom", oh my God, how beautiful it was! It had been recorded at Osmose, one of the most sullen of the black recording companies. Members: Nocturnal Grave Desecrator And Black Winds – Vocals; Deathlord of Abomination And War Apocalypse – Guitar; The Traditional Sodomizer Of the Goddess Of Perversity – Guitar; 3 Black Hearts of Damnation And Impurity – Drums." What Romantics! Now I will know a lot. The main thing is to know, to get is much easier. I should calm down, sit down and study.

Then someone unlocked the front door. And nothing. No one came in, no one took off their shoes, like someone in my own family would do. There was silence in the hallway. Having noticed light in the room, he must be standing there and thinking what to do. He must be thinking who is it in the lit room – some trap or a victim?

Did this situation have a solution? What should happen for either one of us to move? I at least was sitting and I had a book. What would he do?

The phone rang. It was in the hallway. It could only be mom to ask if I had finished the meatballs. Or Death who has understood everything and wants to warn me. Or the police that has understood everything. In any case, I could yell a quick call for help into the receiver. I ran to the hallway where I encountered a young man of my own age. He did not look dangerous. A Sepultura shirt, longish hair.



– Hi.

– Hi.

– Death... He...

– Yes, yes, it's all right.

I rubbed my forehead.

– From where did you escape?

– From home. From school.

– Oh.

I shifted some more and then behaved as my father had taught me:

– Come in. Welcome.

– Isn't your phone ringing?

I picked it up. It was Milady:

– Hi.

– Hi.

– What are you doing?

– Nothing.

– Me too.

The escapee stood shyly beside me. There was silence at both ends.

– Well okay. Bye.

And she hung up.

We entered the room. I pointed to the armchair with the book and caught myself:

– Sorry, I took your book. Just to look.

– Okay.

– Do you have any other things?

– Yes, socks and a shirt.

– Would you like some meatballs?

– Sure.

I went to the kitchen, put meatballs onto two plates, returned, put on Beherit "Drawing Down the Moon" and we ate.

When the Jelgava Junkshop was chased out of Marshzavod as well, it moved into a kindergarten. Behind Tonijs's house, before the turn to my mom's office. During the day, it was a genuine kindergarten, but on Friday nights, when the kiddies had gone home, we gathered there. That was the path of the Jelgava Junkshop: from palace to shelter, to kindergarten.

When we moved into the kindergarten, winter had just ended, giving way to spring. The snow had been taken away and the old grass was becoming visible in its pleasantly green and rusty hues. I was still wearing my winter jacket, just without wrapping the scarf around my neck and letting it elegantly hang down to my knees, and girls were uncovering themselves from both ends. All these spring phenomena caused people to have a smarting feeling of alarm. It was as if something great and beautiful was remembered, something that was missed some time ago and would be missed again, but no one knew what to do. You couldn't even recall what that great and beautiful thing was, just the scent, some scent in the air made you think about it.

That evening I was the first to arrive. Death had said that he would be a little late and right now that was the case. He also said: "Bring some bottle!" And I had done so, the bottle was in my pocket, I stood in the yard and, from inside the kindergarten, this is what was heard:

"Battles! Battles in the North!"

Evening was settling over Jelgava and spring warmth was permeating the air. Guests arrived in small groups, only I was alone, but that did not worry me too much anymore. I was already the leader of a sect and holder of a metal encyclopedia. Standing there alone, I replied to greetings in a dignified fashion. I did not really feel like going inside or talking to anyone. I enjoyed standing here, outside, in a darkening world, on the threshold of some fabulous events. I felt that I was more at home in this landscape than most of the newcomers. But everyone greeted me, that I should mention, really everyone. Even some girls. If anyone should ask me what I was doing here alone outside, I had decided that I would say:

– I would like to wait for the Moon.

And then I would look up at the sky. Well, here came two, the twilight was thick enough for a myopic person not to recognize them, but one of them called out:

– Hi!

And I replied:

– Hi!

The two were the bearded Ģirts and his girlfriend. Ģirts played the guitar very well and that was another reason to feel jealous of him. The girl was one of my sister's students. She had a merciless cleavage tonight. Ģirts dropped his cigarette and asked:

– Why aren't you going inside?

Without taking my eyes off the merciless cleavage, I threw out my prepared answer:

– I would like to squeeze the Moon.

That was a Freudian slip. The girl asked in astonishment:

– What?

I could have told her precisely what it was that I wanted to squeeze but I ventured again:

– I am waiting for the Moon.

– For an entire month?

I gave up.

– Let's go inside.

Once there, I crawled into the corner and took a swig of "Merkurs". This stupid life and the wedded philistines, and the stupid silly moon maidens who needed all this. Life should sting your throat like "Merkurs". That of course is a traditional approach. To assume that the path which you have already taken is the only right one. "Walk the path of sorrow," as Satyricon used to sing. A little more "Merkurs". It went down smoothly, like life. Now I could take a look around.

These premises were not as opulent as at Marshzavod or Villa. There were no metal doors and no columns; it was a small room without windows. Tonight, a concert was scheduled. I would never have believed that such a small room without any signs of a stage could be the venue for a concert. Yet many had believed that it could and arrived in great numbers. Or perhaps they just came over. Liar's beautiful friend trotted by, sensibly covering her glass with her hand. Bread looked after her. Ziedonis carried a big box. Then of course the gang from the Other School showed up. The kindergarten was in their area. Crab, Sīnis, Bucket, Eižēns, the entire elite. Their hair was already much longer than the accepted norm, but much shorter than mine – an ideal combination. They immediately started hugging me and I really was happy to see them but of course refrained from showing it.

Sinis pulled out a bottle of the local gin "Kristofors", nicknamed the Ship. I blanched slightly, remembering its taste, but I drank it boldly, with the juniper berry concentrate making all the evil spirit inside me jump, but Crab immediately handed me an open bottle of tonic. They turned out to be refined people, these friends of mine. I poured the tonic down my gullet and an elegant cocktail was mixed right there. The world became even better, I could feel it clearly. I got the feeling that I wanted to say something, I just could decide what. Just like with that scent of spring.

Zing, the guitar zinged. Zing, zing, zing, zing! What was that? We ogled in the direction of the sound. Some guys were busy there. Ziedonis was unrolling some cables around them, looking very businesslike. Much that I did not like to admit it, I had no idea who they were. Dull Doll, someone mentioned, having noticed the confusion in my eyes.

Oh well. I had heard people talk about this recently formed band. These first zings indicated that they were just starting out on their creative path and had not ended up at the right club. Of course all alternative people are like your own... But not such... Well, what do I care, I just feel sorry for all these young people who had come here for metal. And I felt a little sorry for the musicians as well. Then some semi-familiar boy yelled into my ear:

– Death is waiting for you outside.

There he was, outside, and I understood that I had saved that "Merkurs" for him in vain. Death was swaying so vigorously as if he had decided to hit his head against the ground with all his might but then changing his mind at the last second. It was a wild, out-of-control head bang, supplemented by strange dance steps back and forth.

– Hi! – He quickly ventured at one of the moments when he managed to lift his head, – I can't get in!

Then eyes to the ground, restoration of balance.

– I don't have a lat!

Once again upright, he fell silent and just looked at me. But I too did not have a lat. I went inside to try to talk to Ziedonis. Sometimes he let his friends in for half the price. I was not sure, however, that Death had even fifty santims (neither did I). Perhaps Ziedonis would let him in for free? I did not feel like begging. Where was he anyway? He was standing right by Dull Doll, looking important and turning some button on the sound system. They were finishing up, the public had remained polite throughout, and the soloist said:

– Thank you!

Someone from the public, probably Ğirts, replied:

– Thanks for playing no more!

As usual at such moments, the public began to swirl about: some went outside for a smoke, others moved closer to the stage because Heaven Grey was about to start playing. Meanwhile, poor Death was standing outside braving a storm – where the hell was Ziedonis? I ran into Liar ("Hi!"), Brad, Liar, Ğirts, his girlfriend, Crab ("Can you lend a lat?") and Death. He was standing inside, still swaying, but in his hand he was holding an almost full beer bottle.

– How did you get inside?

– I don't know!

And he gave a silly laugh. It was plain to see that this man was not lying.

– I don't know.

Do you remember what task was given to Afandi by the traveling philosopher Nasreddin? To give a single answer to forty deepest questions. Afandi listened to all forty and replied:

– I don't know.

Over seven hundred years have passed since that time, but no one has come up with a better answer. Death guffawed like an imbecile philosopher and kept sipping on the beer, which somehow seemed to sober him up. It did not matter of course how he got in. Here we finally were, and Heaven Grey began to play.

Nothing new or bad can be said about legends. I really don't have anything bad to say about Heaven Grey. They poured their hearts into the old death style pieces, from time to time adding the new doom motifs, which immediately made me dreamy and, just like at every other such event, I repeated to myself in what wonderful times we all lived, how big music was and how something should be done about that thing regarding the guitar and band. I firmly resolved to discuss all that with Death after the concert. Now I squeezed my way up front. Pressed by other bodies, perspiring and agile, I felt like a part of a large organism, at least that's how I preferred to think about it; like a lone cell in a powerful organism. I could embrace other cells instead of waiting for them to do it, right? But then they launched on their big hit and I could think not about life but only about music.

Time flows, it flows like a river.

Like a rapid, unfathomable river.

And these words seemed to me very deep philosophical questions, even though time did not flow then at all and the point of the lyrics was unfathomable even to their author. But that is nothing compared to the great, grey sky under which I walked out after the concert. Will-o'-the-wisps of cigarettes were aglow all around, and mine was one of them. I was not alone. There was Death, his coat all askew and – what was he holding in his arms?! A girl! And they were kissing like possessed by demons. It was Milady. No, that was not, could not be her, how would she have ended up here. It was Liar's beautiful friend, no, not her either. In the dark, not only all skies but also all kittens look grey. It was an unfamiliar girl with very dark hair. When they relaxed their firmly interlocked jaws to draw in a little air through their cigarettes that were at the point of going out, Death noticed me and said:

– Hi!

He pretended to be completely sober, even though he stood upright only due to the girl's embrace.

She looked at me, then at Death, then again at me and also said:

– Hi!

Now just ask me what I am doing outside. I threw in all kinds of smart remarks about the sound of the concert and the point of metal. Death could even give rather intelligent replies, but the girl was just tousling his hair and laughing. It was a very nice laughter, sonorous and breaking, but I somehow felt a chill from it. Even my teeth chattered. Why? It seemed like it had already happened once. I took a swig of "Merkurs" and shared the bottle with them. The girl drank throwing her head far back, demonstrating for all to see her very long neck and pulsating indentation by the collar bone. For some reason, it annoyed me and I started criticizing Heaven Grey.

– Okay, so they beat, cut and saw. But... is that what metal is for? Isn't it too beautiful?

The girl listened:

– Why? I like it!

– But where is the pain? Isn't metal the other side of the world? Why are they trying to be liked?

Guys from the Other School had gathered around us and were all ears.

– Rejection is what we are all about. They have given in to the Satan of pleasing.

Heaven Grey could not really be reproached for any of this, but I was getting carried away.

– It's time for them to dissolve.

That was too much. Nobody said a word.

I felt embarrassed. I took a swig of "Merkurs", left the bottle with the others and went inside, as if I needed to go to the toilet, I thought to myself. Going down the stairs, I ran into Heaven Grey – there they came, tired, carrying their instruments. I felt like hugging them and asking for forgiveness but of course I did nothing of the kind. Only, when I was already at the door, I looked back after them. Some of those standing outside yelled: "Yeah!"; they hadn't taken me seriously. Right by the staircase stood Death's new girlfriend. I felt a chill again. Standing there, halfway to the basement, I was at the level of her knees. I had seen them before. Knees of an interesting shape and the same boots. And the same laughter, sonorous and breaking – I had heard it too. Now I felt too cold and went inside.

There it was much less crowded. Someone had put on "Sleepless" by Anathema. It was exactly what I needed. As soon as they hit the drums after the quiet part, I was completely convinced that these accusations against myself and others were silly and useless; that it was all in my head and, after all, the snow had melted and the ice broken. But just then some freaks rushed in, grabbed the remote and put on Pantera. Children, children, is this the moment for you to play my first shy experience with metal, one from which I have long since turned away with a smirk?! But the children just jumped and shook as if they had found some fount of joy. My friends from the Other School stood beside me and stared at these youngsters with the same kind of melancholy. Only they of course exaggerated – if I just hissed "jumping morons," they were laughing loudly, caricaturing the movements of the Panterists and shouting ironic slogans. It must have been echoes from my controversial speech. They too wanted to take a stance against something. Perhaps it was a kind of support for me. Be it as it may, I felt embarrassed. And I felt sorry for the young ones.

I went outside supposedly to have a smoke. Or to see Death. But he was no longer there. In fact, practically no one was there. An ideal moment for a lonely or at least peaceful smoke. But, as soon as I set my lungs in motion, I was approached by someone I didn't know:

– Lend me the new Thereon!

That was a good opening, about music. The new acquaintance turned out to be competent for such a little tyke (one grade lower than me). He had understanding, there was no denying it. I kept looking around idly of course, but I had to admit that he made some good points.

– That's how it should be. Most of music is shit. Good things are few and far between.

– Yep. That's how it is. Mhm.

He looked at me. Then he turned his gaze away, toward the other side of the street and ventured:

– Shall we start a band?

I too averted my eyes. So that he would not see my smile. But I did not really understand what I was smiling about. I felt excited and of course did not want to let on. Of course I did not believe in this band, but this situation where two strangers suddenly touch upon a dream, it was something.

I was wondering if I should ask for his name or what he was going to play, when all of a sudden Crab rushed out of the Junkshop and ran past me without a second look. He was closely followed by Sīnis. Both ran out on the street and soon disappeared from view. For a split second, I wondered why they had not put on their street clothes if they had decided to go home in this impolite manner. For they had arrived in black overcoats. They tore away like crazy or as if someone was chasing them.

And someone was. A group of the young Pantera fans ran after them. For the sake of precision, I should add that I call them young only because they had just appeared in this circle. By physical development, they were at our level, moreover, a few of them were very athletic. I quickly understood why this contest was taking place and also, that my friends' chances were not very good. As a good friend, I jumped to my feet and ran after the pursuers in order to minimize bloodshed. Having run out on the street, I saw the Panterists' backs. They were burning up the road, whereas my stride for some reason slowed a little. I thought – how on earth am I to catch up with these athletes? And Crab and Sīnis had made such a good start that they would probably have put quite a distance between themselves and their pursuers and would have reached safety. But I did not stop completely, I continued on in a light jog. A small and rotund Panterist caught up with me. He apparently thought that I was on their side and, catching his breath, said:



– Why does it have to be like this? Why do they have to laugh at our music? I don't understand it, we are all the same crowd, why should Pantera be worse, can't everybody like what others like?

I sped up and moved away; I did not want to listen to all that.

I had lost the ones I was chasing. I turned onto one side street, then onto another – there was only darkness. I went back.

The hunters had already returned, whereas their quarry was nowhere to be seen. From the conversation, it was clear that they had made it. The disappointed Panterists turned to me:

– Why do they have to behave like that? We are the same crowd, why should anyone be made into someone fake?

There was real pain in their voices, and they turned to me as someone who was at home in the ideology of metal. But I kept wisely silent, dragging on my cigarette quite often. They stopped asking. Suddenly the party was over. Ziedonis was rolling up the cables. Neither my new band mate, nor Death was anywhere to be seen. The last guests were putting their coats on and leaving. When the Panterists were gone – they even waved at me as if some sort of a strange relationship had sprung up between us – I went down to the cloakroom. It was empty, except for a couple of black coats that belonged to Crab and Sīnis. I picked them up and went outside to return the coats to their owners the next day – it was doubtful that they would return that night, and the basement was opened only on Fridays. The guard locked up after me.

The snow was gone and the streets looked dark. I felt tired or inebriated. So much had happened. The coats were not easy to carry. I threw them down on the street and sat on top. Sīnis had cigarettes in his coat pocket. So I sat there, smoked and tried to understand what had happened. I didn't get anywhere. My thoughts simply turned to the need of doing something, of having something great and unusual happen. But the street, the houses, the fence and even the trees seemed to be indifferent to my feelings – it was so strange that the branches should not transmit some coded news or that a secret door should not open in the fence leading to another world. I threw my head back to blow smoke up to the sky and noticed the Moon. I had waited and there it was, just like I had said. The Moon was a safe sign, it was so substantial and shiny that it could not be simply Earth's satellite at a distance of four hundred thousand kilometers – it was an unmistakable sign for lonely metalheads. What did this sign say? I did not ask it, I just stared at the Moon's face.

On a free day, I went on a picturesque outing with my friends, the criminals. To be together with metalheads always involved intellectual effort, tension and attention. With criminals, it was easy. I had already accepted the fact that they will not beat me. I could be silly in their company.

The criminals always wanted to relax by nature. The air is sweeter there, said the taller one whose name was Kandžejs. To the broad one, Kroģis, it didn't really matter, it also didn't occur to him that we might go somewhere else. Fresh air, however, was not enough for Kandžejs, he absolutely needed to fish. This time he was very serious:

– Pike can be sold for five lats a kilo. Let's catch fifty kilos and we'll have two hundred and fifty!

But can we catch fifty kilos? Kandžejs swept away my silly doubts:

– Don't you worry, everything has been taken care of.

So we got into the black Bamby and drove. We were in our own car. For me, it was a rare occasion. Well, there was my dad's Lada, but that was different. Bamby offered a kind of portable freedom – you could talk about anything and smoke, and drink. Each one of us had a Tērvete beer, everything was fine, but once we had reached the road to Eleja, the devil loosened my tongue.

– Diāna from my class lives there.

And I pointed to a small private house. How did I even know that she lived there? And why did I say that? Whatever entered my mind was immediately on my tongue – that's how it was when I was with these friends. I still did not give it a rest.

– She's pretty.

And it was true. But Kandžejs braked so hard that Kroģis yelped, because the good Tērvete beer was now on his pants.

– What are you doing, you freak?

– We should go for a visit.

And he was turning into Diāna's yard. I grew pensive.

– You know her?

– She is your classmate, isn't she?

I knew her in the sense that I was aware of her initials, D. M. Like Dark Millenium, a very good band, from the old end. One piece from "Ashore the Celestial

Burden" that I think was called "Beyond the Dragon's Eye" – how good it was! A very gentle beginning and then – let's go! Without much banging on the drums or bass, but that sharp voice just gives you a buzz, singing in the old style where you could understand the lyrics. Unlike now, when a song is done like a hit. It was like in a chamber theater where you are shown strange and dark scenes, so that you would suddenly understand that it is the truth.

Kandžejs was already ringing the doorbell and here was D. M. herself opening it. She must have expected someone else or no one, because all she was wearing was an undershirt and underpants, red. It must have looked very sexy and I became even more embarrassed. Whereas Kandžejs said:

– Hi, Diāna!

– Hi!

That is what she said and looked at me, but I did not say a word. Kandžejs went on:

– Jānis said that the most beautiful girl in his school lives here, so we just had to drop by.

She laughed. Diāna liked such words. I was the only one who felt stupid here and was having great success at playing a tomato. The suave gentleman continued his schmoozing:

– It's such nice weather today and it looks like the evening will be wonderful. We are inviting you to come and cheer along with us by a bonfire. Red wine and pike filet with celery. We will do poetry as well.

Two other girls appeared – I didn't know them and they were not as beautiful as Diāna, but that did not make the *charmeur* hesitate even for a moment:

– The friends are also invited!

Diāna turned to them – well, let's go have a picnic? They just grimaced. Diāna turned to us:

– Okay. But not now, we are doing laundry. Where will you be?

– At Ruļļi, at that bend in the river.

– Okay, we will come.

And she scratched her thigh from which I could not unpeel my gaze. Then goodbyes accompanied by compliments followed, the girls were treated to some beer and then we finally got back into the car.

– Okay, so we've got something to work with.

Kroģis expressed his opinion:

- The friends are quite horrible.
- No problem, put a bag over their heads and have at it.

It was crazy. I was ready to have a leisurely afternoon, without any stress but now we were preparing for an orgy. That of course was a secret dream of mine but brought with it much worry. For there is peace only when there is no chance, at least not imminent.

Having brought us to the romantic bend in the river, Kandžejs took off, he had to return the car to someone. Criminal affairs. We were left with the task to build a tent, some firewood (parquet boards) and a one-liter plastic bottle without a label and transparent liquid inside.

Having partaken from the bottle, which contained authentic Jelgava area moonshine, Kroģis and I put up a halfway decent tent and started just sitting around. The evening was in fact beautiful. If only it wasn't for the girls. No, I would of course want some adventure. But how will it happen? And what if I get one of those with a bag over her head? Kroģis was more practical:

- Somehow a lot of mosquitoes have got into the tent. The girls won't like it.

We crawled into the tent and set to smoking to chase away the mosquitoes. We smoked it up so well that we were chased out ourselves. The smoke was hanging in horizontal layers – just as the girls will like. Then Kandžejs showed up with a very big backpack.

- Igoryok brought me. It seems I got everything.

And he started to unpack it all. The first item was a pair of binoculars.

- To better see the broads?

– No, we have to watch and see if an inspector isn't anywhere near. Here it's all illegal.

Then there was another bottle of moonshine and two white, rectangular sticks. Kandžejs put the binoculars to his eyes, looked around and then lit up the string at the end of one of the sticks.

- Okay, dudes! Let's get us some fish!

Swish, the stick landed into the river. I looked to see what it would do, but the would be fisherman yelled at me:

- Get down!

This truly was a wonderful evening without any stress. I plastered myself to the ground and for the second time today would have preferred to crawl into it. The first time was when Diāna looked at my tomato face.

– Cover your ears!

I obeyed without an argument.

Plop!

A tiny plop was heard from the river. It wasn't too bad. My friends got up, so did I. Kroģis announced:

– It didn't go off!

What do you mean?

– There was a plop!

– The detonator worked, but the dynamite did not explode. Let's do it one more time.

Kandžejs lit up the second stick and tossed it:

– For the motherland!

I plopped down with my face right in a molehill. Gazing into the netherworld, I once again heard – plop. And it was followed by a silence in which you could hear fish laughing.

– Where did you get that dynamite?

Kroģis hated it when things were not done right.

– Well, I won't put it back.

We stood up and stared into the river. Both sticks were right there, swaying among the reeds.

– Who is going to retrieve them?

That was a good question. No one can walk on water. I asked just like Francis Macomber:

– Can't we leave them where they are?

Kroģis hissed in a professional distaste:

– You can't mess the river up with dynamite! Imagine what it will be like.

And Kandžejs had another argument:

– A pike will eat it, someone will catch it and fry it and the pan will explode.

Hm. I was looking at the river.

– Now it will no longer explode, will it?

– Who knows about this shit. If it didn't go off when we needed, then who knows what will happen when we don't need.

Right he was.

– But you're a metalhead, aren't you?

– Yes.

– Isn't it your style? To fish out explosives with your bare hands?

It was. It was as metal as it gets. If Kārlis or Death or at least Diāna's gang were here I'd go right after the dynamite. For that reason, I asked:

– What's taking the broads so long?

At that moment, there was a splash twice as loud as our two blasts combined. Kroģis had fallen into the river. He had stepped on some log, trying to fish out the dynamite with a twig and had fallen in. Now, cussing in real bad language, he threw the damn dynamite sticks on the riverbank. One hit Kandžejs in the back.

– What the...?

And he took his aim back at Kroģis. I pleaded:

– Guys, let's take a five minute break!

They obeyed me and calmed down a little. We lit a fire with the parquet boards and Kroģis took all his clothes off.

– Where are the chicks? I will not feel like dressing for nothing.

He was getting the sludge out of his pants with the same twig. Kandžejs wondered:

– This is what you were using to fish around? I have fishing rods.

– Do you have anything in your head as well?

– I have everything necessary for fishing.

He began digging around his backpack and got all excited again.

– Gentlemen, the girls will be here any minute, but the fish are still alive. Okay, okay, let's get to it, no one is just sitting around!

He took two rods out of his backpack and pulled them to their full lengths. Phew, I thought, only two, so I will not have to do anything. But not a chance – he tossed the fishing rods by the tent to get in everyone's way and started getting out of his bag something horrendous and shapeless.

– *Putanka*, – he explained.

I did not really try to understand. Today they had already done me in. The shapeless monster turned out to be a net. Kandžejs looked it over like a naked Diāna.

– Pike will check in and won't check out. Okay, let's go, into the river. Kroģis, you are wet already!

The two crazies threw the net into the river and stared at it.

– We threw it in somehow wrong.

– But you are the fisherman.

– This is not the right spot, let's take it over there, past the bend.

We carried the dripping horror behind the bend, iron weights banging at our legs.

– An ideal spot. We just have to stretch it across the river and then we can just lie there scratching our balls.

– How are we going to do that?

– With our hands!

– No, how are we going to stretch it across the river?

– I have a boat!

And he really did have one. It was a folded piece of rubber. – There's no pump, though. But that's okay, we'll blow it up by smoking. We'll let smoke inside, smoke rises and will raise the rubber.

So we blew it up.

– We don't have a plug, someone will have to keep the air in with his hand.

We got into the boat, Kandžejs was in front, keeping the air vent shut with his left hand and paddling with his right (there were no oars); Kroģis was in the middle holding the net in his lap, paddling with both of his mythical hero's hands, and I was in the back, holding the air back with my right hand and paddling with my left. The water was rather cold.

Once across, we secured the net in the reeds, blew up the boat anew and went back. When the net was secured on this side as well, the voice of reason spoke through Kroģis:

– Now we could have a drink.

That was really necessary. Kandžejs obtained a carton of grape juice, poured half of it on the ground and replaced the lost juice with moonshine:

– So we have the red wine, practically have the fish, everything is as I promised. The girls are probably somewhere near already.

The sun was setting and it looked really romantic even looking through the wild bushes. Like a cover of an Anathema CD, "The Silent Enigma". The bonfire was going, the wine was tasty and even the girls no longer seemed scary.

– Shall we talk about something? – Kandžejs suggested.

– You think? – Kroģis was not sure.

He was generally not into talking.

– What could we talk about?

– Jānis, you're so smart. Tell us something.

– Like what?

– How is metal doing?

That we could discuss. I sucked some inspiration from the carton and began:

– They say that Grishnackh is writing for a new album in prison.

Kandžejs seemed even interested.

– Where is he at?

– In Bergen, Norway.

– Oh, cool. It's a hotel there. I wonder what album he would write for here. All he could do is write *СЛОИ* on the wall and that would be it.

Thinking that an imprisoned metalhead is dreaming about elephants, suddenly seemed right to me:

– But why *СЛОИ*?

– *Смерть Легавым От Ножа* – Death to Narcs from the Knife. Well, maybe also *ПОСТ – Прости, отец, судьба такая* – *Forgive me, father, such is my fate*. But that's usually pricked into fingers the first time around.

– Unholy burnt Burzum and Mayhem discs at one of their concerts. You see, they are such an underground that these already seem to them like mainstream.

– But what are they singing about? I can't understand.

I gathered my thoughts:

– It depends. Black metal is about the moon.

– Noon? How about a day or a year?

– No, moon, the brilliant one, the one that's shining.

– Sometimes a year can be brilliant too. Or even several if, for instance, Diāna is taken in a gang bang.

– Yes, yes, yes. They also sing about the devil, about demons, about Queen Inanna. About storming through red clouds and holocaust winds. But mostly about the



moon and ice. Sometimes about steel vaginas. Maze of Cako Torments sings in a self-invented language.

– Very interesting.

– Death metal is about philosophical things. Much about various deaths. About eating corpses. The doom sing about broken hearts. They don't scoff at suicides either.

– Glug-glug-glug-ghorr!

Kroģis was rinsing his throat with red wine, thus unbeknownst to himself, singing a good, guttural growl. Then he said this:

– I don't quite understand. You are such a nice person. You don't want to kill fish, for instance.

A nice person. What would Euronymous have to say about that?

– You like all kinds of beauty and birds. Why do you listen about cannibal cunts?

– What do you mean... There is beauty there as well. For instance, Impaled Nazarene, they have this about the iron... Very beautiful.

– I don't know. I didn't like it.

I had of course made them listen to my music whenever I managed to tear Kandžejs away from the criminals' songs. And wasn't it strange – they definitely heard the same thing I did. The construction of their ears could not be so very different. And their hearts were the same – they liked idling by the bonfire. What facts, events, thought adventures accumulate in one's perception and makes it different when facing various identical phenomena? When the impressionists began painting colorful shades, the critics were full of derision: has that model rotted in a swamp for a week and that's why she has a blue neck? Their eyes were the same and now too people's eyes are the same, but now the Impressionists are favored by moms and wallpaper producers. Will the same thing happen to metal? No, it should not happen. Remember Kurt, we have to protect our calamity with disfigured faces and voices.

Kandžejs too joined the discussion on aesthetics.

– Speaking of cannibals, in prison there was a guy who was eating himself. That was no feasting on corpses, it was all live.

And he poked me in the side.

– So he just cuts out a piece of his thigh, fries it and – down it goes! Or he cuts his hand, lets half a liter of blood pour into a bowl, then breaks some bread into it and eats this soup.

That really was something. Carcass or Visceral Evisceration could sing about that.

– Why did he do it?

– There's no why. There's nothing to do, that's why. And also to show that he was a man. Could you do it?

– Don't have any bread.

But Kandžejs exclaimed:

– Where are the broads? Poetry is already coming out of me!

He began to recite:

On a hill above a big cavern

Is where is found a nice, warm tavern.

Every drunken little beast

Is getting ready for a feast.

It was a long poem, animalistic through and through and full of various unexpected turns. I only remember that at the end of it one of the protagonists "took out his dick and took his life."

I too was reciting poetry:

Fall evening of blue silk.

Wind runs up to the glass and stalls.

Anyone with a heart big or small

Drinks eternity like milk<sup>3</sup>.

Kroģis got up and went to the bushes to take care of things. All of a sudden he stumbled on the evening air and dropped into the bushes. Kandžejs shouted joyfully:

– Kroģis is already dancing! All right, all right, it's a party!

And so we too jumped up and started to boogie. Kroģis was in the middle, having forgotten why he got up, why he fell down, having forgotten enough to dance the way dance was originally conceived, waving his huge hands around. Kandžejs performed a tango, filling with his body the entire dance ground, which for some reason seemed vertical instead of horizontal. We no longer spoke in turn, but all

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<sup>3</sup> A poem by Latvian modernist poet Aleksandrs Čaks.

together and the thread of the conversation vanished. Kandžejs opened the next plastic bottle with moonshine and tore open the juice – much of it ended up on the ground, but we knocked it back and made merry, and the grass all around us lay down never to rise again, whereas Kroģis got up again and again, yelling:

– Pick up those sticks of yours!

For he had got entangled in the fishing line. Kandžejs rushed to save some special hook of his and stepped on the roof of the tent, and blue smoke blew out of the tent with force, the same smoke Kroģis and I had so diligently created. That looked very painterly, but I of course could not appreciate it for it was already dark.

– I just hope nothing bad has happened to the girls. They might have got lost.

With these words, Kandžejs dropped down by the dying bonfire. But Kroģis yelled with all his might – and he had good pipes:

– Girls! We are here, by the bottle!

– Stop yelling! You'll just get the police on our backs. Better put some wood in the fire!

Kroģis actually did so, without even telling Kandžejs what he could do with the wood.

– Blow on it, it's going out.

That he did not do, but just asked:

– Where will the cops come from?

– Shh. Now they are crawling about. They are given five hundred lats for each of the escapees they catch.

He spat, thereby indicating great disapproval of this fact. My head suddenly cleared up completely and I understood everything. Where did Kandžejs come from? Why wasn't he around earlier? Had anyone seen him before the April events? He was one of those who escaped from the prison. He may have been among those who passed me on the bridge that night. How strange fate is, how unpredictable and logical is the lineup of events. I expected the escapee to appear at my home, but no, I came to him myself and it wasn't Juris's brother, it was my own.

He asked:

– Are you to going bananas? Why are you braying like a stupid horse?

And indeed, I was overcome with satanic laughter, as it tends to happen at moments of divine revelation. I stopped and lit a cigarette; the wind blew ashes into

my face, they touched me like doom, like warm greetings from hell. Kroġis was talking about some mailboxes, which had helped some Indian get rich.

– I don't quite understand it, but everyone wants these mailboxes. And he's a real millionaire.

I had never pictured myself holding more than fifty lats in my hand. Let alone five hundred – that's exactly how much a Gibson Les Paul cost at the AT Trade store. The original. The Golem of guitars that was the embodiment not only of all problems and fulfillment of all dreams, but also the beginning of the new war. And suddenly it became clear where to get the money: take this friend who's lying around here and sell him to the cops!

– With some fucking mailboxes! He made money with some fucking mailboxes that you can't even make a head or tail of. That's how it's done – make money from shit!

– Well, we do a lot of shit, so far you're right.

All of a sudden I heard a growl next to me. A genuine, quality, wet sounding, from the bottom of the throat growl. Even if someone had a tape player with him, no one could have such a cassette. It was a vision, a sign, a signal for sacrificing.

Kroġis had thrown up. Without ceasing to laugh. He was not too worried about trifles. I too wanted to laugh and throw up. I wanted to be accepted as a human being that can not only be embraced but also hated and feared. But they just kept laughing and made me laugh, they were breaking me but I would not break even though I really felt like being prone.

And then suddenly it was cold and morning already. My first thought was that I had slept through the arrival of the girls. I looked beside me – no, no girls. Only grass on clayey soil. I looked around. There were no signs of an orgy. The tent was empty, no one had slept there. Kroġis was puffing next to me. Two sticks of dynamite were in the fire – the last logs that Kroġis had thrown in without blowing.

By the river, one could behold an unfolding picturesque sight – Kandžejs was pulling out the net. It was a classic motif and the protagonist demonstrated that special beauty that is characteristic of the condemned and the betrayed. In the net there was one fish.

As soon as a person arrives in Jelgava, as soon as he has crossed the two bridges, he sees a steeple. It is not very high and does not have some unusual construction. Our steeple is a ruin. An empty shell that fifty years ago was full of flames. If you made your way inside, a quadrangle of sky became visible. The battles of 1944 had wiped the church off the face of the earth, but the steeple remained, albeit half as tall, empty and pensive.

At one time, it was the St Trinity Church. The first church in the world built expressly for Lutheran needs, if you care to know.

Now the steeple came in handy for other uses. You see, the city government (of course, the secret city government) wanted to lend an unobtrusive support to the metalheads. It was announced that the city wanted to renovate the steeple of St Trinity church and, in order to get money, musical events with the slogan "We for the Steeple!" were organized.

Leaving Jelgava, past the second bridge but before Store No. 9, there was an indeterminate territory. To the right of the highway, looking in the direction of Ozolnieki, there was a goat. It was a rather substantial goat, about three meters high. Using metal pipes, the goat was made by the local artist Mārtiņš Vilkārsis. The cause for it, just like for many other things in my life, was Čaks. He had a poem titled "Jelgava":

The town a tiny mote,  
Its symbol is a goat.

Some scholars came to the conclusion that the poem could not really be about Jelgava. In Čaks's time, our town was not "a tiny mote". The poet must have thought of Jaunjelgava. But was Čaks an idiot? The poem is titled "Jelgava" – what else do you need?! And the goat was there to stay.

About midway between the steeple and the goat, just on the other side of the highway, there was an open-air stage where the festival "We for the Steeple!" took place. On the other side of the Lielupe there was a palace. In order to reach the stage, one had to cross the bridge. Two bridges, in fact – over the Driksa and over the Lielupe. That's how it began.

There was a rumor that this walk across the bridge will spell doom for the metalheads. Scoundrels with short hair had supposedly decided to use this opportunity

and catch us in a tight spot. They will take our leather jackets, work us over and throw us into the river. Yes, one had already ended up in the river. It could be only a rumor, but it was said that this time it was for real.

That evening, I was approaching the bridge by myself. As usual at fateful moments. My real friends said that they still had to meet so and so and take care of this and that, so we'd see each other inside. So I went all by myself, all alone. Only Eva and Robčiks were with me.

Almost all the way we talked about the danger that awaited us on the bridges.

Once we reached the first bridge, the conversation died down. I looked at them, Robčiks looked scared. You know, it was getting to be twilight. Eva said disdainfully:

– You'll protect me like a stone wall!

We used to kiss. But now she's like this. No matter, I had chosen it myself. The world had been lying at my feet (or under them or wherever), but I had chosen to push it away, to walk alone through enemy ranks where the only escape was the waters of the two rivers. I tried not to look ahead or at Eva, or at the road where danger lurked. Gently, like at one time over her belly, I slid my hand over the railing of the bridge and looked over it into the river. Just like that time when I met the escapees here. How long ago it was.

Suddenly the water disappeared. We had already crossed the second bridge! Nothing, absolutely nothing had happened! How silly it was to believe this rumor and keep quiet on the bridge as if we were scared!

We had reached the venue. There were rows of benches in the middle of the meadow and a stage at the far end where something was already flashing and booming. Instruments were being tuned. I still had to get past the guards, the beefy types who took your money. I must admit that mom had given me the money and there was enough for the entrance fee. But then nothing would remain for beer.

– Shall we try to get in without paying?

– How do you mean?

– Well, to somehow get by.

Robčiks tried to think:

– Somehow from the river, through the reeds?

– Are you nuts or something?

I had no desire to wade through the reeds,

Somebody called my name. I turned slowly – it was a metalhead I had seen before, one of the respectable ones. I did not know his name, but he knew mine and both my companions saw that. I walked up to him and extended my hand. But he said:

– Death said for you to wait for him here.

– Okay.

And then he added with great effect:

– There is a way to get in!

I already felt like a different person. I looked back at Eva and Robčiks. The unknown friend hastened to add:

– No, no! Not for all of you. Just one.

– But of course. Of course! Thank you.

– Wait here.

He left and I went to my companions, lit a cigarette and said:

– Okay, ciao! I have to wait for someone here, but you go inside.

Eva turned and walked toward the entrance. Robčiks could not decide what to do. I helped him with my eyes: "Go, go! We'll see each other inside."

I looked over the river at the palace. It was so big that instead of rising it seemed to be lounging. Only one window seemed to be lit. Mrs Anna, the cleaning lady and long time resident of the palace, once in a private conversation divulged to me that the palace is full of ghosts. Particularly its second floor, where the university chemistry department is located. Some home guard had once been guarding there and heard someone playing the piano. He went to look. The door was locked. The guard opened it – nobody there, nobody playing. He closed it – they were playing again. God knows how many times this was repeated. Sometimes the playing did not cease when the guard was inside, but nobody was visible. The guard was already beside himself and yelled: "Who are you?" To no avail. Just playing.

Maybe the invisible pianist was playing at the palace right now but he could not be heard because Frontlines were tuning up. I would like to hear them better. When are they taking me inside?

Just then, my friends walked up, having successfully crossed the bridge. Pūpols, Death, Zombie, Tonijs. We said our hellos and Zombie asked the logical question:

– How are we getting in?

I answered with a question:

– Isn't Death taking us in?

Zombie turned to our friend with another question:

– Oh, is it so?

Death bristled up:

– I don't know.

– What don't you know?

– If I'll manage.

– Come on, take us in, what's with you?

– I should have met Mareks, the plan depended on that.

– Where is he?

– I think inside.

– Then let's go in!

This was Pūpols's healthy conclusion to the discussion. We all looked at the entrance. The guards and home guards seemed to be watching us for a while now.

Tonijs usually had some plan:

– Let's go away now as if we don't even want to get in. Then we'll get in from the side.

We turned and walked away. I was thinking whether it looked natural that we didn't want to attend the concert and had just come here to meet each other. I expressed my doubts. Tonijs had thought it out:

– Let them think that we have to meet someone else. That we are going to meet a girl, yeah!

To make a point, Zombie howled:

– Madara! Madara, little bitch, where are you?

Pūpols was shaking with laughter, but Death who was looking back, hissed:

– Calm down, they are already looking at us!

We were already on the road, but he still kept hissing:

– They are looking, still looking!

That's how we made it across the road and stopped. Perhaps they would no longer see us here. Tonijs told us the plan – sneak down to the river on this side, crawling on the supports under the bridge, get back to the side of the stage and then somehow get through the reeds. This side of the road through which we would sneak looked really overgrown. In the twilight it was impossible to determine the species of the plants, but it looked to me that they were stinging nettles.



But then two girls walked up to us from the bridge. It was Liar and her beautiful friend. They came out of the dark like two ghosts. Incredibly, it was the beautiful friend who opened her mouth this time:

– Did you call my name?

– Us?

I didn't even know her name. No one did. Yet Liar was sure:

– It was you! What do you want?

For some reason, she seemed even more morose than usual, whereas the beautiful friend was unusually happy. She smiled like crazy. But Liar took over:

– We have one extra ticket, do you need one?

We started smiling like crazy. We were at a loss what to say. The friend decided to do us in:

– Here! I am giving it to you!

Everyone stretched out a timid hand, someone took it, but it was not me. The friend continued:

– It's my birthday today!

We were even more at a loss. Someone said "mmm", another said "ooo" until I came to and said:

– So a beer from you!

Oh, everyone laughed, happily and supportively. The birthday girl looked confused and closed her mouth. Liar took her by the elbow – let's go. Tonijs waved the ticket and exclaimed:

– So I will go in, okay, and find Mareks to let you in, okay? See you inside!

And he took off with the girls across the road.

We stayed. Zombie said:

– Let's go!

And he dove into the roadside jungle. We went after him.

After the first few steps, the jungle was over our heads. The ground under our feet gave in.

– I entered the river! – Zombie announced.

We were standing on a narrow, reedy sandbar by the water's edge. It suddenly occurred to me that Tonijs is a traitor. He abandoned us. He was the one to suggest going through the brambles. And Liar is a traitor too.

Meanwhile Death had taken charge:

– Let's have a drink!

Pūpols reached for the inside pocket of his leather jacket. There was an open bottle. It tasted like Riga vodka with blackcurrant taste for LVL 2.05 for half a liter. Death also shared a one-third-liter bottle with an indeterminable chaser. We all lit our cigarettes and the smoke rose over the dark panorama of Jelgava on the other side, where once a synagogue stood but now were just simple houses and the steeple because of which we were here tonight. When the bottle fell into the river after making three circles, taking away the message of emptiness and the last Frontlines chords, we turned to the right and went under the bridge.

I was moving very gingerly along the narrow sandbar. There was some splashing beside me. It was Zombie who had not come out of the river and now was wading in water almost up to his knees.

– Why are you walking through the water?

– No reason.

There was the bridge. We entered under it like under a roof. The sandbar ended and we stepped on the hard but slanting base of the supports. Death banged on one of the concrete columns:

– A very good bridge! Shall we have a drink?

How these words resonated! The acoustics scared us and we drank in silence (this time I did not see who pulled out the bottle). I kept swallowing the sweet beverage, which went down like a river, with a painful glug resonating with the railing. Something huge drove over the bridge, probably the last bus to Ozolnieki. Death was pissing into the river, sounding like a waterfall.

Yet even more impressive was the voice that said:

– Are you complete idiots?

The vodka went down the wrong pipe, but my heart expelled it. It was a woman's voice and it was tearful. Could it not be the White Lady? Mrs Anna had seen her weeping in the palace yard by the big bell. The palace was not very far.

Yet it was no white lady. It was Liar and her friend. Pūpols was understandably irked:

– What are you doing here?

– Nothing. Just wanted to sit under the bridge for a while.

– Do you have any more extra tickets?

– No.

– Where is Tonijs?

– Who's that?

– That guy.

– He went in.

I drank some more to calm my heart. How very stupid it all was! Shouldn't we too be trying to get in?

– Aren't we going in?

– We are. Gimme the bottle!

– Why are you pissing in the Lielupe? Are you stupid or what? – that was Liar.

– It is so uncouth!

I thought that perhaps she was a ghost after all. Then, in the silence, before Zombie started to bray, I heard the sound of a piano playing.

– Do you hear? A piano!

– Where?

– It's coming from the palace!

– It's not from the palace. Deceptive acoustics. And it's not a piano.

Death was always the most rational of us all.

– These are Melancholy Stones. Let's finally get to the concert.

And so we continued walking. It really was Melancholy Stones; we could already discern the lyrics:

Under the moonbeams, my melancholy stones

Bloom like purple, grow like a melancholy flower,

How it opens, how stone seeds pour out

And I'm like a child that doesn't know life.

And now we were very close to the stage. The home guard grabbed me and held me very tightly even though I wasn't even trying to escape. Other guards had surrounded me. The one who was holding me asked:

– What are we going to do? Are we going to the station or what?

That question was not posed to me. But I knew for sure that I had better not end up at the station because then my parents would have to get involved in these events, which had nothing to do with them. Unexpectedly, Liar got involved:

– They were on their way to visit me! I live nearby!

– Where is nearby?

The guards looked at the reeds, they looked at the river. Our little group was approached by three other dark figures. The home guard addressed them:

– Caught 'em. They were trying to sneak in through them there horse-tails.

– But they are with me! My band that has to go on in a moment!

Yes, it was Mareks. Next to him was Tonijs.

All guards looked at Mareks who confirmed:

– Really.

And then he started pointing at each of us:

– Guitarist, soloist, bass player, the other guitarist and manager.

Why, why in the world was I the manager! Why not something else!

But the home guard had a different question:

– But the drums?

Mareks, slightly offended, replied:

– I am the drums!

The guards looked at the one who was neither Mareks, nor Tonijs, but looked more important than the rest of them. That one asked Mareks:

– But, but, but – didn't your band already play?

– Of course not! We're next!

The most important one looked ashamed that he did not know music. He too was hairy, just a little older, and he waved at the guards to, yes, let us in. One of the guards remarked:

– But what did you do there...

Another one had a sudden realization:

– But the girls! But the girls? Who are they?

Now everyone exchanged glances, but the girls just shrieked:

– No problem! No problem! We have tickets!

And so all of us got in. Tonijs said angrily:

– Where did you disappear? We were waiting for you like idiots.

Death asked Mareks:

– Are you really playing after the Melancholy Stones?

– I already played, – Mareks replied and went off, also pissed off.

We sat down on a bench by the stage. After all these trials and tribulations we really deserved to listen to some music.

The music was beautiful. A girl in rather heavy music is an event in itself, at least at that time. And this one was even growling!

Silently the mute earth hurts!

The public was not terribly responsive, however. Only one fan was jumping up and down in front of the stage, a rather good looking blond girl.

Zombie brought us beer in flimsy plastic glasses. I took a sip and understood how good this music really was. Helēna drew out the ballad even more achingly and the blond girl was jumping even higher. I was overwhelmed with feeling and I attempted to unleash some good feeling in Zombie:

– It's nice, isn't it?

– Yeah, the cow is also squealing okay.

That was his way of complimenting.

Melancholy Stones stopped playing and a pause set in, as if we had not just arrived and thirsty for music. We had just sat down, Pūpols had poured beer all over himself only once and the question "What now?" was already in the air when some totally unknown hairy creature rushed over to us and whispered:

– Nose got it in the nose! Let's go!

We got up and followed him. He took us to the very stage and there, on the sidelines, around the corner, had gathered a group of people. Nose was leaning against the stage and wiping blood off his face. He really had his nose cracked open – very impressively: a dark line in the middle of it from which large drops were rolling. Nose was picking them up with his fingers and smearing on his cheeks.

Two young men were standing next to him. These were not my gangsters; they were my childhood friend Anrijs and Savage's brother with whom I got drunk for the first time. Around these three, a group of metalheads had formed a circle. Savage's brother answered a question that seemed to have been asked a split second ago:

– But he pushed me! Well, maybe he ran into me accidentally, I don't know. So what, am I to let everyone and his brother just push me around?

I took a step forward and asked Anrijs:

– Was it you, Anrijs?

He shook his head – no, it wasn't me. Some curly-headed guy, who apparently moderated the negotiations, gestured for me to stop interfering and get lost. It seemed somewhat insulting and I felt like calling out to my old friends: "Since you are going to burn in hell anyway, give it to this poodle as well!" But I kept quiet, though not

getting lost either. Anrijs was not looking at anyone and was slowly moving his hand to the inside pocket of his jacket.

As soon as it looked like something really was going to happen, the home guards showed up. They were angry for some reason. They shot right off:

– What's going on here?

Death motioned in the direction of Nose – see for yourselves. The home guards inspected the nose. Nose just kept wiping his nose and smearing his cheeks with blood. A home guard asked:

– Who broke your nose?

But Nose did not say a word. The home guard exploded and barked:

– Who broke your nose?

I thought that Nose really had lousy luck – he gets beat up and then yelled at. But why is he not saying anything? Death and the curly one and everyone was silent, and so was Anrijs who kept looking somewhere in the distance and swallowing. Nose shook his head resentfully, waved his hand – both gestures were kind of mysterious – and walked away.

In silence and without looking back, we too dispersed. There was a howl from guitars, a very familiar howl that made my skin crawl – what's that? Death and I exchanged glances and ran to the stage.

It was Huskvarn! When it was all new and unknown, they were already ancient and famous (I too had the just released cassette "Bomb Brain Melodies"). Everyone rushed to the stage, yeah, Huskvarn! The drums rattled like a machine gun, they shot dead the night as it had been up to now. The guitars howled again, now much louder. Really, really, the entire world rattled. We quickly made our way to the front. Here more or less distinguished characters had gathered. On the bench closest to the stage, his genius' eyes closed, glasses pressed into his face, lay the famous Joņevs, entirely off in the realm of dreams. Even closer to the stage, Gustavs was jumping – but of course, he accompanied Huskvarn to all their concerts. Then he had no idea that he would become a rapper and would take the name of Gustavo.

Urbix grabbed the microphone and roared:

– Hello in Jelgava!

Without knowing it, he pronounced the greeting that was the riflemen's password in Christmas battles. The riflemen's ghosts should have been stirred (and

they did stir). The drummer topped it with all his might: gadagadagada! On two bass drums of course.

The pianist in the chemistry department at the palace, slammed down the lid of the piano, pointed a transparent middle finger in the direction of the stage and vanished.

Urbix roared again, even louder:

– Hello in Jelgava!

This time, his words traveled far. At the edge of the heath, one of those who lay there sat upright. He was still halfway underground and there was a big hole in his forehead, but he listened. There was a cannonade coming from the direction of Jelgava. "Already by Jelgava!" said the dead rifleman and wriggled out of the soil. Having dipped his hand in the marsh land, he rummaged around and a moment later lifted out a Mosin rifle. He slung it over his shoulder, buttoned up his greatcoat and with fast strides marched toward the source of the noise.

In the meantime, we were throwing heads around. Our own. Now my hair was long enough and I could fully participate in head banging, that wonderful metalhead dance where there was no need to ask a girl and put oneself at her mercy – one could simply whip their asses with one's hair, but carefully, so as not to stick one's nose into something. But all in all, broads were of no importance there. I was a unique spirit in a thousand-headed body. The asses were my asses, too. But I had no need for something like that, only music that was pouring over us, and we were music ourselves and we were falling over everything.

I really did fall. Just plastered myself on the boards of the stage, running into someone along the way. I knew that pushing was not safe here and therefore quickly inspected my victim. These were the legs of a girl. In a split second, my wonderful mind generated a scenario whereby this accidental meeting gave rise to a beautiful and tragic affair. I stood up, straightened the collar of my jacket and looked at the girl. There were two people, a couple, phew, in a firm embrace. From my rough push, they had had to uncouple their jaws and now were staring at me with dumb eyes. It was Death's beloved from the Kindergarten era – when she turned, her unusually shaped knees came into view. She noticed Death and, her lips wet, exclaimed happily:

– I know you!

Huskvarn then poured out an explosive passage in the best traditions of Jelgava thrash, drowning out Death's reply. The girl was looking at him with strange interest,

trying to say something. The dude who was holding on to her, on his part, looked at her in confusion. I stood there like an absolute dolt, not knowing where to look.

Huskvarn took a little break and the girl said to Death:

– You have a new jacket!

I looked at my friend. He had a black leather coat on. Really new? Wasn't it always black? But maybe really, the old one had a ripped sleeve.

But then Death gestured for me to come along and we went away.

I felt sorry for Death. I thought what rotten luck he had. I at least could safely wander around the world of metal, feeling comfortable in the knowledge that I will not find my love here, that she is in a safe place, in my friend's embrace. Whereas Death could not make a step. I would have liked to console him somehow, but at the time I did not know how. What should I have done? Given him a cigarette? Does that compensate for love? Plus, I no longer had any cigarettes, I was bumming them from Death. For the sake of historic truth, however, I must admit that along with compassion, I also felt a kind of joy or relief.

The dead rifleman was crawling toward the stage. He was already quite close, behind the latrines. To get even closer would mean finding himself in an empty field. He was not afraid, just observing the situation. It was not simple. People were senselessly shuffling back and forth. The rifleman was trying to recall operational plans, but they had, literally, fallen out of his head. Only the feeling remained, compacted in place with the native soil.

Suddenly, two people were walking straight to his hiding place. Those two were Death and I. Each of us was holding a bottle of beer in each hand, and we were squeezing cigarettes with our lips. I asked:

– Wr gng?

I could not speak with a cigarette in my mouth. And smoke was getting into my eyes. Death replied:

– T pss.

The rifleman did not understand our language, but, when we put down the beer, he was right in his feeling that we were about to pull out weapons. He put his shotgun to his shoulder, not quite sure whom to get first. For some reason, he chose me.

– Hi, Peter! – Death greeted some simpatico metalhead who was standing in the bushes near us. He replied:

– Hi!



The rifleman opened the shotgun and looked inside. Nothing indeed. The last bullets must have been spent just before the machine gun got him. He had only a very vague memory of those events. He tightened the grip on the shotgun. He still had the stick.

Death exchanged some words with the stranger. I went over to introduce myself but didn't have a chance. Pēteris exclaimed:

- Hey, I have to go to play.
- Where do you play?
- Don't you know? Grindmaster Dead.

And Death turned to me:

- Grindmaster Dead is about to play!

But Pēteris exclaimed:

- Oy!

The rifleman stabbed Pēteris right in the heart. As a ghost, he was emaciated and invisible and his stick too was ephemeral, yet still sharp and Pēteris pressed his hands to his chest.

- What's the matter? – Death asked.

- Nothing.

But something was amiss.

- Let's go, let's go.

And he quickly went to the stage. I didn't understand what happened – was he drunk out of his skull? But what could I understand. It was Pēteris's story, not mine.

Grindmaster Dead's playing was simply great. I could not believe that I heard it with my own ears, as usual when something wonderful was taking place in my presence. Real doom, like abroad. I imagined that I was at a concert in some other country where a band from Sweden or maybe even Holland is playing. It really did have the sound of an authentic foreign band. I could not have known that this was one of their last concerts, that in fact Grindmaster Dead was over that night, right in front of my unseeing eyes.

I looked at Death to make sure that he had forgotten his silly matters of the heart. He looked as grim as usual. I poked him:

- That was awesome, wasn't it?
- Well, yes.
- Hi, assholes!

These were Artūrs, the guy who wanted to make a band with me at the Kindergarten and Čurka, his friend. Strange that I should not have seen them before. We shook hands and they started to tell their story:

– We went to store No. 9 to get it.

Indeed, one pocket of Čurka's jean jacket was weighed down as usual.

– On the way there, it was all normal. But on the way back... There were like six of them. So we fell down right away. Well, I did, anyway, you may have kept upright for a while. I just keep covering my face, lying there, so then I get tired of it. I thought, how long is this going to go on? So I look between my fingers and there is this mug staring at me!

Čurka was laughing as if something funny and pleasant had happened. He always managed it so purely that only girls would call him an imbecile.

– But the bottle? What happened to the bottle?

– Does the bear shit in the woods?

The bottle had really been chosen prudently – it was vodka in plastic. We all took a swig from the intact bottle and the guys were ready to take off.

– We will make the rounds of the territory and then see you on the bridge. That's where the real battle will take place.

Before departing, Artūrs turned to me:

– Have you given some thought to what we talked about?

That sounded great, like we were about to assassinate a duke. I knew what he was talking about, though, and said:

– I have.

Artūrs did not ask me what I had decided, just waved and was off.

But I thought, perhaps I don't really want this. Why do I have to play in a band? What do I need this headache for? And what if we don't manage? And can I even play? I don't need this. I know normal guys who have never thought of starting a band.

Then Death said:

– What if we started a band?

Just like that, just asked a simple question. And I had to say:

– Sure thing. It's about time.

– Do you play the guitar a lot?

– Yeah.

But I too had to ask:

– What are you going to play?

– I will sing, – he sighed. – Actually, I would like to play the drums. But someone needs to sing.

– But who is going to play the drums?

– Well, there is this guy... see, he could get the drums. But then he insists on playing them himself. But I think he plays okay.

– It's fine. It's cool to sing.

– But do you have a guitar? Electric?

An unexpected question. He already knows. Does he think that I would be secretive about a thing like that?

– I do.

– What? Really?

– Not yet. But I have checked one out.

– What kind?

– A good one. A really good one.

It was so good that it could only be shown once it was obtained, there was no point in talking about it.

– But do you have the money?

– Sure. I mean, no, not yet. But I know of a sure way to get it.

Death believed me right off. He apparently assumed that this was an evening of confidences – the world confirmed this, he noticed it and expected it from me. And right he was, I only told the truth.

– Well then, we should begin soon.

Right then Zombie ran up to us, all worked up.

– Where are you always disappearing to?

Out of nowhere, they all gathered around us: Pūpols, Tonijs, Artūrs, Čurka, Liar, Friend, Bread, Ģirts, DJ, a couple of unfamiliar metalheads and a girl who was pregnant.

Zombie shouted:

– Let's go to the dance!

Someone shushed him:

– Shh, fuck.

We went toward the road. The stage was silent. As we were climbing the embankment, I asked:

– Where are we going?

And an unidentified voice replied: – Home.

Our homes were two rivers away. There was someone standing on the other side of the road and he softly called to us:

– Where are you going, dummies? They are waiting for you.

I thought, they probably are, waiting for us at home. Bread shot back loudly and proudly:

– There are thirteen of us!

That must have been quite a sight when the thirteen of us appeared at one end of the bridge. We seemed to have been noticed – some shadows stirred on the bridge, about thirty of them.

Our group stopped and someone, maybe it was Tony, asked:

– How many of them are there?

– We are outnumbered.

– But we have Pūpols, a flourishing Pussy-willow.

That of course was Zombie who never quit joking. No one laughed.

– What shall we do?

– We won't get across!

– They'll throw us in the river.

– But what shall we do?

The shadows organized themselves crosswise on the bridge, all of them had smooth heads and fluid kind of legs (because of the sports pants!), but I didn't care. I had firmly decided that I will do what the others decide – I can go across this bridge, the reversed bridge that now held danger above or I can remain on this side, the side with the silent stage.

Tonijs spat and said:

– Let's go around! Across the railroad bridge!

– That's too far!

– It's not far.

– About five kilometers?

– More!

– Go fuck yourselves!

That was Pūpols. Tonijs did not take offence.

– Then remain here.

And, asserting his independence, he walked across the road. After a dozen steps he looked back and waved. All at once, we moved and followed Tonijs. I lagged a few steps behind, turned to the silent stage, nodded, then turned to the bridge and stood there all alone facing the many shadows. I could not tell whether they could see me, a small lone object on the dark road.

I turned away and broke into a run to catch up with my friends. Again it was off the road and into the reeds, only this time we went forward along the river.

Soon we got onto a rather comfortable sandy path. It was a happy walk, everyone kept asking everyone for cigarettes and drinks, but no one had anything anymore. I deliberately kept my distance from Death – after a closer bond has been established between gentlemen, it is important to cool off. I walked with Liar and Friend, chatting them up and maybe even flirting with both of them at once. And I thought – how come, perhaps it's the darkness that's helping me, for it really was totally dark, everyone kept stumbling and running into one another. But no, it was not the darkness. I now had something big, something of my own, and everything else was minor.

Very soon we found ourselves on the Railroad Bridge. Walking on rails in the dark is not easy. Of course that's exactly where we were walking; we were not afraid of the train. Or anything else. I yelled:

– Let's go back to the other bridge!

Everyone laughed and shouted:

– Yes! Let's go!

But we did not go back, we kept walking forward, back to Jelgava. Finally the river was deep below us, and I threw a rock into it. I felt almost good. I was fifteen years old, I had a few friends, we had found another bridge and it was dark around us.

I had that feeling for a long time. I listened to the latest My Dying Bride and said, no, it's too light. I listened to "Symbolic" by Death and said, isn't it a bit too beautiful, isn't it a bit too self-serving, is it not entering the area of pure aesthetics? I listened to "Wolfheart" by Moonspell and yelled – what is this? *Excusez-moi*, that's not black! That's shit! Shame on you, colleagues!

I was not yelling out loud, however, just to myself. Why should I tell others, I knew very well who I was and what had happened to me. That could not be changed, I had great and exciting events ahead of me, and nothing could be done about that either.

I walked down Catholic Street like some pope and saw signs in everything. Windows, clouds, passersby, everyone was so deliberately ordinary as tends to be the case when the hero walks by. A large, yellow dog without a muzzle and without a human walked ahead of me. I kept about a five meter distance between us. The dog stopped by every tree. I of course could not pass him by, so I too stopped by every tree. Such a humble passage was no doubt leading to big events.

That's how I finally reached the Culture Center. Everyone had gathered outside: athletes, urlas, young people, metalheads, girls and representatives of the press. I walked into their crowd with a complete sense of being chosen and I had to keep myself in check to refrain from waving to everyone or from taking a peek whether workmen are not screwing a plaque onto the wall of the Culture Center reading: "Jānis. Latvian Perkill<sup>4</sup>. Was Here."

But that day they had not yet gathered there because of me. Culture was still awaiting its time. On Barons Street by the Culture Center street-ball baskets had been hung and a competition was taking place. The competitors were high school students and the winners could claim a case of beer or perhaps a weekend at a sauna. Others were just milling around and supporting their team or just waiting for something to happen.

I found my friends quickly. They had chosen the best spot, right by the court; all were holding beers, all had on thematic shirts, sneakers and narrow jeans, except Kārlis and Brother who were wearing shorts. They had an excuse, for they who would

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<sup>4</sup> That's a part of black metal vocabulary.

play for us in the competition. In the other teams, athletic cuts were predominant, only in ours, the players had hair below their shoulders (the third player was Artis, an ordinary guy). While most of us were into a contemplative way of life, the brothers were crazy about sports. In street-ball they usually won. And then, at the triples competition, they also were at the top. This atavistic behavior had persisted since the time when they had not yet gone over to metal and malignancy.

They were warming up and fidgeting when up walked Milady. She did not go around the court but straight across, with her swaying hips almost toppling a basket. Everyone who was warming up there shot at that moment and balls ended up in baskets. Milady walked up to Kārlis and kissed him.

That was beginning to be repetitive. Tedious, banal, uninteresting. Now she came up to us, sat down and even said:

– Hi!

The first game began. Opposite our guys were some lightweights. Pūpols stated right off that there was nothing to worry about, that the enemy did not stand a chance and popped open another beer.

– Hi! – Death suddenly said, waving at someone. I looked to see who it was. He explained:

– Girls.

Yes, there he was, galumphing on the other side of the court.

– How he plays the axe! Cannibals on wood – the sound is like on my tape player. Kind of gropes down there and real solos come out.

Death looked me in the eye.

– Can *you* do it?

– No, you know what? I can't.

However it sounded, I told him the truth. I couldn't do solos, just weird tangles of sound, which I could replicate only rarely. I would have stated as much, but certainly not here, in everyone's presence. Our musical project was a secret after all.

What's wrong with this world? I had come here blessing all and everyone. And what did I get in return? So I squatted there, hiding behind my beer, and wished that I was elsewhere.

– What solos *can* you do? – he just would not let go.

– I don't know if there is even a great need to get carried away with solos.

– What?

– It's just empty flaunting your technique, if you ask me. In black there are no solos at all.

– Mayhem has them.

True, Mayhem had awesome solos. I wish I could do something like that. The ball rolled over to my feet; I took it and threw it to Kārlis.

Death seemed to be saddened by this:

– I would simply like to hear and do good music, okay?

Great, that's how he called over some interested parties.

– Do you now have a band?

She was the one to ask that. She did not sound terribly interested. I tried to close the topic:

– There is no band. Yet.

But then the devil loosened Zombie's tongue:

– Do you perhaps need an accordionist?

That's exactly what I needed – for someone to laugh about it all, yes, go ahead, don't be shy.

– I can play the beginning of that My Dying Bride piece where that Jesus is walking by the sea.

He meant the "Cry of the Mankind" intro that was played on a fused violin, a motif which I personally held very dear and about which I did not feel like joking.

– But I really can!

He almost shouted. As if this time it was not a joke.

– You know I have an accordion!

But I didn't. Zombie yelled at an older friend, Kārlis who was playing in the court:

– Don't I have an accordion at home?

Kārlis turned to us for a split second, but then continued to pay attention to the guy he had to cover. Death decided to help out:

– You do, Edgars, I know you do. But an accordion is no good for metal.

I too softened:

– Why not? It could even be interesting. An MDB cover with accordion!

Death shot me a heavy, expressive glance and asked:

– Did you get that guitar?

– Yes!



Death turned to me. The others however did not react much.

– What kind?

– A Gibson Les Paul.

It was not the right moment to think small.

– You're full of shit!

That was a cry of awe and admiration, without a shadow of a doubt or question.

Çirts had approached us.

– Did you buy it at AT Trade?

– Where else.

– It's outrageously expensive.

I know, Çirts. Five hundred lats. As much as they give for one escaped prisoner.

– One can do everything with an axe like that.

Yes, Çirts, one can. If one knows how. If one has that guitar.

– But that's a bit much. What can you do with one guitar? For that money, you could get an ideal Ibanez Death Metal pedal and still have enough to get a set of drums from Mareks.

Why are you staring into the pavement looking dejected, Death? Have I been to Riga after our conversation? How did I manage to save all that money for a guitar? Don't cry, your day will come.

Kārlis came up to us, grabbed a beer and drained it.

– What are you yelling for? I missed the one I covered, a good thing that bro arrived.

– Aren't you playing anymore?

– We won. Now the next ones.

– When will they win? I am running out of beer!

Pūpols was getting irked. The sun was pressing into my eyes. There were strange creatures swarming before them. It was not easy to sit there.

– Those, then "The Left" and then "Clearance".

She even knew the names of the opposing teams. Yet she looked somewhere up in the air. He was not at all beautiful. But that's exactly what I needed, to love a girl that's taken and ugly. Okay, so she was not really ugly. Okay, so it was not exactly love.

Then the public started shouting:

– Where are you going?

- Hey, idiot savant!
- Guys, get off the court!
- Freaks!
- Assholes!

I turned to the court and oh, yes, there they came, my friends, the gangsters. They were in their element – anywhere in this world they moved in their own world, this time it meant ignoring the borders of the court and disturbing the game. As a result of passing the ball that concluded a rapid advance, Kroģis was hit in the right shoulder. He instantly swung left, looking for the culprit. That is the way children and bandits act – they will come at you from the left and hit you on the right. But this time, there was only the post supporting the basket on the other side and Kroģis kept going, without really comprehending why the forward who had not received the passed ball as well as the public were yelling angrily at him. Kandžejs was not much better, even though there was a kind of an attentive and cunning expression on his face.

Looking at them, I understood everything. Crime is not the result of sophistication but of ignoring reality. Probably he had robbed a store thinking of it as a bed of radishes and escaped from the prison thinking that he was going to the showers.

But now they walked up to me and sat down. I was the target of their beeline.

- So how about some billiards?

I had played billiards a few times with them at the Cultural Center. At those times when I didn't have anything to do and the true friends had disappeared. By the way, I play quite decently.

It was clear as the day was long that they had been circling around the Cultural Center, gradually losing the clear of the day and kind of wondering why people had gathered here until they saw me in a crowd of horrifying strangers and came to call me to a game.

- I can't, I have to watch street-ball.
- What's that?
- The game that's taking place here.
- Basketball?
- Something like that.
- Why? Are you a basketball player too?

- No. Friends are playing.
- Friends stay here and we play billiards?
- I can't.
- What can you?

I looked around, very cautiously, only scanning the immediate vicinity. They were staring at me with eyes of metal.

Unexpectedly, Kroģis had a reasonable suggestion:

– How about we get some beer and come to talk to him then – then it will be more fun.

– Okay!

And the two of them rushed off, once again across the court.

– Who were they?

Didn't they remember?

– Well, just guys.

– No, really?

– I didn't think there were ones like that.

– From the country?

Indeed, no one remembered that they were the dangerous ones that time by the Villa.

Kārlis came off the court breathing heavily and asked two questions:

– Who are these morons who walk on the court? Is there any beer left?

And he sat down on the ground, without waiting for either answer. I asked:

– How did it go?

I never asked: "Did you win?", so that the person would feel comfortable even if the opposite was the case. But he replied:

– We won.

Milady squatted next to us. She said something about the game, very calmly, in her style. She was always so calm that it made it hard to believe:

– That third guy is a good player!

I was annoyed that she was pretending to be an expert in everything that was of interest to Kārlis. He agreed:

– Yes, very good. We have played a lot together.

– I think he shot more times than you did.

– Probably, it went well for him.

What was her game? Was I the only one to wonder? Well, so be it, it doesn't really matter. I said:

– It's only a game.

Kārlis turned to me:

– But you have to know how to do it, anyway.

And she agreed:

– I like people who are masters at something.

I don't know whether or not she told the truth – that was no longer important, for it was a quote out of "Master and Margarita".

– All life may be a game, – Kārlis said. – It's possible. What's wrong with me wanting to play decently?

– Nothing, – I replied.

– If I play better, you'll get some beer, right?

His brother was calling him from the court – it's time. Kārlis got to his feet and went into real life. I stayed on the sidelines and decided to watch.

But I had yet to see something when all of a sudden Kandžejs and Kroģis plopped down in front of me with a lot of clatter. The tall one immediately passed out beers to our entire row. A couple of strangers got some too. Everyone was opening the bottles any which way – with their keys, a ring, a lighter. Someone got a lot of foam and a hissing puddle spread far onto the court. Kandžejs sucked down on half a bottle and turned to me:

– Shall we go?

– Where to?

– To play some billiards.

Touché.

– We still have to finish our beer.

– We'll finish it.

– My friends are still playing.

– Don't you want to play, too?

All around me people fell silent or continued to converse as if such a question had not been asked. I felt Death's gaze in the back of my head and Milady's gaze on the left side of my neck.

Suddenly she poked me on the shoulder and just as unexpectedly asked:

– I heard you knew some criminals?

I didn't say a word. Actually, I felt a tiny bit of pleasure. Yet the criminals were sitting right here next to me. Kandžejs was blowing into the bottle like a child. He no longer was wearing a black leather jacket, but a stupid striped shirt. His head was no longer clean shaven but overgrown with ridiculous curls. Kroģis had finished his beer and was playing with pebbles on the pavement and, what's worse, was humming a jazz sequence. They were no respectable criminals at the moment. I understood that they were trying hard not to be that, that they were wearing masks, but this time that was not right for me. I was ashamed of them. They had let me down.

I did not reply to Milady. And I couldn't reply – they could hear me, they were sitting right here. And she did not ask a second time. I was looking at the ground, whereas she was watching the game.

Kārlis rushed, did not put enough spin on it and it hit the back of the hoop and bounced out. Their tall guy picked it up and immediately passed it to their sniper. Artis jumped, almost got it, touching the ball with the tips of his fingers, yet it reached their sniper, Artis fell, their unblocked sniper took aim and got the basket.

Now they were ahead by eleven points. It is a lot in street-ball. Sometimes that's how much you get in an entire game. It was not clear how they could be ahead by that much.

Only a couple of minutes remained in the game.

We did not notice any of it. Only Milady watched carefully but did not say anything. Her eyes were shining and her lips were slightly parted.

Kārlis threw the treacherous ball desperately and angrily under the backboard. Brother caught it, threw it over the tall man's arms and the ball spun into the basket. Minus ten.

They started a slow, self-assured endgame and made a royal mistake: the dribbled ball hit the dribbler's leg and rolled off along the pavement. The always hawk-eyed Artis grabbed it and returned to the perimeter to start the teamwork of passes. The other team immediately arranged themselves to cover our guys. Artis's guard remained by the foul line to block. But Artis did not move forward, he just jumped right there and did a very long shot, hitting the backboard and on rebound, the ball went crashing through the hoop. Minus eight.

The other ones had good teamwork but did not score. Our team moved quickly back and Kārlis too did not score, but then got the rebounding ball and gave it to his brother. Minus seven.

They were not nervous yet, did a witty pass along the perimeter, but Artis figured them out, intercepted the ball and advanced. The author of the erroneous serve, some redhead, rushed after him, did not want Artis to score, but Artis was already doing the two-step, raised his hands to throw while Rusty was a couple of steps behind his back. Yet he jumped too and rather brutally hit Artis on the arms.

The ball flew into the crowd and hit me on the forehead. Plop, and glasses fell into my lap. Everyone was laughing. I threw the ball back in a restrained manner.

Of course, two foul shots. Artis arm even showed red fingerprints. Minus six, minus five.

How much time remained? Wasn't it supposed to be over already? No, still about a minute remained, the guy with the stopwatch and whistle replied to Rusty. This time they launched their moves cautiously, the sniper threw from a very safe position, almost without jumping, so Brother could block him rather easily, jumping for the ball himself; so did the sniper, both ran into each other, the sniper fell and said: "Foul!" But there was no foul, Brother threw the ball down the end of the court to Kārlis, then rushed under the basket himself and immediately retrieved the ball. A light shot from under the basket and the ball fell in even though the sniper managed to run up and push Brother already in midair. It was totally unnecessary, yet he felt insulted and pursed his lips in a nasty premonition. Brother scored the foul shot as well Minus three.

They did not panic. To get three points in street-ball you need at least two possessions, but the ball was with the other team and the game probably had to be over. Just take it easy. The tall one understood that it was impossible, that they will not score another basket and that there was just nothing to do, but the sniper kept shouting at fate – no, no, this would be too stupid! Rusty tried not to think at all. Our guys all had the same thought: "It's only a game. If we lose, we lose." Rusty advanced cold-bloodedly. Artis ran up to him, breathing in his face, trying to snatch the ball away. Rusty hated the close covers. He bounce passed to the sniper who even received it fine, but hesitated to throw and passed it to the tall one. The tall one froze, thinking that he was wisely pausing, but Brother beat the ball out of his hands. Everyone dove after the ball on all fours. Brother did not try to pick it up but hit it with his fist. The ball bounced to the end line. Kārlis picked it up and threw it into the basket. Minus one.

Rusty's hands started shaking. He thought perhaps he should hug the ball, wrap himself around it and dive to the ground. Let the sniper do it. When the sniper raised his arms to throw, the guy with the stopwatch and whistle began counting:

– Three...

The sniper jumped back from the cover and threw. It probably was the worst throw of his life. The ball bounced against the backboard quite a ways from the basket. Kārlis had not expected a hit when he dove for the rebound. The ball hit him right in the nose, so forcefully that a hundred droplets of blood immediately shot out of both nostrils, covering Kārlis's shirt in a fan. Yet he did not let go of the ball.

The guy on the sidelines said:

– Two...

Kārlis jumped and over the tall one's hands threw it to the end. Artis was there, grabbed the ball in midair and threw it back.

The ball shot through the hoop like it was oiled, the net flapped like the most summery skirt of the most beautiful girl. Plus one!

And the guy on the sidelines said:

– Time!

The other team did not understand what had happened. Our guys were jumping up and down like crazy and hugging each other. The other team's fans were quiet – they were quite normal fans. Our fans were quiet too because they were abnormal and had not followed the game.

I thought why does she need the criminals, is she in some kind of trouble? Now she embraced Kārlis. No, girl, I'll keep the criminals. I turned toward Kandžejs. He was not there. From the other end of the street, a police car was slowly moving in our direction.

At night, I went to the crossroads with my guitar. At home I told them that I am going to visit Zombie. I had actually made arrangements to visit him. I hoped that the conversation at the crossroads is not going to be too long. I did not quite believe that it would actually happen. But I wanted to try. It was something really irrational and black and not too hard. Moreover, to quote Niels Bohr who was asked why he keeps a horseshoe above his door: "I've heard that it helps even those who do not believe."

All I had to do was to find the crossroad. After all, I couldn't sit with the guitar at the intersection of Rainis and Catholic Streets. True, it would be safer near a church, but some acquaintance might be passing by. It also could not be the intersection of Traffic and Tractor Driver Streets where it was swarming with urlas. People I feared more than Satan. I went to the intersection of School and Spring Streets. A good place, significant street names and few people. Artūrs did live nearby, on Plum Street. But should I run into him, I could just say that I am going somewhere to jam.

So the intersection of Spring and School. It was very dark there, the only dim light came from Post-Office Street and a little bit from the TV in a nearby house. I sat down at the crossroads exactly as the legend teaches us. There was even no pavement. I took the guitar out of the cover sewn by mom and just sat there. But I had to play. If I don't do it now, right away, then I won't do it at all, I thought. It's no big deal. Very quietly, and no one will be the wiser. I started playing "Sleepless" from "Serenades" by Anathema. I knew only about six bars but these six were repeated almost throughout the entire song. Where a solo should be played, I tried to improvise and got lost. What should I do now, play "Sappy" or what? No, "Master of Puppets". Also not too long. "The Freezing Moon", yes, if only I could do that solo part. But someone was coming, I had to be quiet for a while. But he stopped:

– What are you doing?

– Nothing.

– You are not playing?

– No.

He lit a cigarette – at night all faces look black, don't they?

– They don't let you play at home, so you have to come out and play on the street?



– No, it's okay.

My reply was incomprehensible. I wanted to get up, so that I wouldn't be sitting in front of the stranger, but my legs would not cooperate. He put down the box he had with him and sat down on top of it. The cigarette lit up his fingers which looked like they were painted black. Like Death's new leather jacket.

– But I just slaved away at work all day. I'm a welder. Didn't even have a chance to wash up, all black. And still have to get home. But that's at RAF.

– Shit happens.

I replied to him like I would to a human being. He looked at me.

– It happens to you too? Weld all day and have to drag yourself home, and there's a crazy woman waiting?

I'd rather that he would treat me to a cigarette. I hadn't noticed how awfully cold it was. There is not much warmth from a cigarette but it allows you not to think for a few seconds. But he just kept moralizing.

– You must have it tough.

Strangely enough, he said it in a voice that seemed to be totally devoid of sarcasm.

– Play something!

– Now?

– Why not? We're sitting here, relaxing. A little music would be nice.

I pressed a cord, strummed the strings. Maybe "Freezing Moon"?

– Go ahead, play. Don't you want to play?

I did and I played as well as I could. The situation was right, for it really was freezing, unnaturally cold and perhaps the cold light was not even coming from the TV but from the moon.

The welder tossed the cigarette butt in his mouth and stretched out a hand:

– Isn't your guitar really out of tune? Give it here.

I handed him the guitar.

– Well, well. What do you play?

– Black, death, doom.

That's what I whispered, honest.

– What's that? Black doom?

– Well, yes.

The welder rubbed his black cheeks.

– I am actually more blues oriented. Don't you want to play the blues?

– No, metal.

– Oh, heavy?

And he plucked a kind of a Malmsteen style solo.

– No, no. Heavier.

– Pfff!

He put the guitar down.

– For that you need a different kind of guitar.

– Yes. I know.

– You know how to get a guitar?

– Yes.

– If you get that guitar, it will just flow.

– Yes.

– You already know everything. Why did you come here?

– To learn to play.

– When you get that guitar, we'll talk. That's the game. Nothing for nothing. Do you know how to get money?

– Yes.

– So what then? Choose! Choose who you want to be!

– Okay, – I whispered.

The welder got up and went away.

It finally had to be done. There had to be some movement on the matter. I needed a guitar and here my friends the criminals finally had to become useful at last. Time to do business. It was all very simple. I simply had to call the police, tell them that the villain had been located and go to collect my money.

Finally I was home alone. I squatted down by the phone, picked up the receiver and put my finger into the dial. I had always been fascinated by all these forbidden numbers that had to be called only in an emergency. Sometimes, when I was alone, I had picked up the receiver and almost dialed the entire forbidden number (that is, I dialed zero and stopped), conscious that only one movement separates me from the extraordinary. One should not muck around with these things. True, my bolder buddies had done it cold-bloodedly and without any consequences. The one who reported a bomb in the school building was caught, though. I don't know what happened to him. But no matter, I was not going to do anything bad. My mission was honorable and worthy of a reward.

I picked up the receiver and dialed 02. Busy. Ridiculous. And what if I am being stabbed to death? I dialed again. I felt a little more confident. It seemed that this number just had to be busy – all kinds of stuff was constantly happening in Jelgava.

But no, this time, they picked up right away.

– What's going on?

Was the voice familiar? Had I somehow reached a friend by dialing a two-digit number?

– Yes, hello?

Something had to be said, otherwise I was just breathing into the mouthpiece like a girl. If I put it down, he would think that some girl had called, but that was not the case, so I said:

– Hello!

As if they had called me. And he said:

– Yes, police here.

So, after all. But I decided to make sure:

– Really?

– Really! Police. What's the matter?

He seemed ever more irritated and more familiar. It was interesting. Even my heart stopped racing. I had to say something, so I said:

- No, no, nothing.
- What do you mean, nothing? Who are you?
- Me?
- You!

It was a strange policeman. True, I did not know other policemen with whom I could make a comparison. Yet this one knew me:

- Well, hi, what's going on?

It was Šolis! But I asked to make sure:

- You?
- Who else!
- What are you doing there?
- I work here!

I had not known that. But come to think of it, once, when I was sharply criticizing the police, Pūpols I think said that the great metalhead Šolis, too, was a cop. I didn't believe him, ridiculed him and erased the information from memory.

- How come?
- How come. I graduated and went. So they would not enlist me in the army.

Think not?

What did I think? I thought nothing. These problems were still remote for me. To make small talk, I asked:

- So how's work?
- A mess! Just a minute ago, Hugo calls – oh, you know, a disaster, Gints was just picked up. For avoiding. Taken to the station. They call me and ask me what's happening? Why? What are you doing? But I was not even on duty then, you know?

- I understand.

– You see? So now they go: get him out! What can I do, I don't understand. So I go over there – yes, the dude is there. I ask him, what do you want? He says – black tea!

Wait, I too had something to tell him:

- Death recently saw Morbid in Riga. They're both sitting on a bench, not saying much. But Morbid goes: "Still need a centimeter and a half!"
- Where?

– Death asks the same question. Morbid says he's growing a stomach ulcer. Eating all sorts of pure pepper, drinking vinegar.

– That's nothing!

I really hated it when someone made that kind of comment to my stories! But I did not say anything, let him go on, couldn't be much.

– Tontons had to join the army. He decided that he needed a broken arm. But how to do it? Asks Ernests for advice. So they both come up with a plan: Tontons will put his arm across a toilet bowl, Ernests will stomp on it from above, so it should kinda break, right? Okay, so they both go into the john. Tontons puts his arm out. Ernests takes a few steps back, charges and stomps. But Tontons has his instincts kick in and he pulls the arm aside. Ernests comes down with force and breaks both the toilet and his own foot!

This story really was better than mine. I tried to remember something else:

– But there was this dude who...

– Okay, ciao, I have to work some, too. Ciao! Metal.

– Ciao.

I remembered that Unholy also had problems with the army. During the band's holiday, guitarist Jarkko Toivonen had done service in his Finnish army for which his brother, guitarist Ismo Toivonen threw him out of the band. Or was it Ismo who joined the army... All I know is that one brother said to the other: "There is no place for traitors among us." No, why would he say that? He said: "There is no place for a slave among us!" What do traitors have to do with it? Why did I call Šolis? Oh yes, business. That's okay, I'll call some other time.

Many people, in fact maybe everyone, have a day to look forward to. Some count days to the Easter break. There are others who are even into birthdays. For us, the concept of holidays and free days was very relative. We were looking forward to something else, for a particular day of the week coinciding with a certain date, that is, Friday the thirteenth. In vain do the believers try to convince others that this day is no different from others. It was, every time. Every time that Friday fell on the thirteenth, a great metalhead holiday, called Black Friday, took place. I was all excited already on the eleventh and much more so than before my birthday, which around that time I had learnt to ignore emotionally, to avoid the inescapable feeling of growing old. Time has no real importance, time does not exist in and of itself, it is only a relation among objects that move at different speeds. From these objects and speeds, time hangs at an oblique angle. What year was it? Ninety-five? Or perhaps ninety-six? I no longer know. And I didn't know then. It was of no real importance. How much time had passed since Kurt was killed by a bullet? Much more than from my birth to that moment. Finally, massive objects had appeared that moved at a different speed and time acquired a meaning but lost its moderate flow. Only Friday the thirteenth could be determined with precision.

Death, Zombie and I set on our way in good time, right after school. Black Friday was celebrated in Riga, at the Robinson Club. Everything went smoothly, there was no ticket control and we got off the train in Riga.

There, we had the first significant event. An old man was sitting at the Station Square. He was sitting right on the ground. He was stretching out his hand asking for money. Unexpectedly, Death pulled out twenty santims and gave it to the oldster. Zombie asked:

– Are you stupid?

– No, just really weak now, – the old man replied.

Zombie jumped as if he could not believe that such a gray little pile could still speak. He apologized:

– I'm sorry, I did not address you but this here benefactor, – and he pointed to Death.

The latter replied only after we had gone a few steps:

– I don't know. I just suddenly thought that I may be like that at some point.

– Moron, – Zombie concluded.

I felt that Death's act was very noble and the explanation deep. I thought that that's how we really might end up. If nothing extraordinary happens and we do not die young, then we will be such old men sitting on the ground all alone. We will issue no orders and have no possessions. When someone gives us money, we will immediately go to an alcohol store and give it all up.

That's exactly what happened then – we went to the "Latvijas Balzams" store, the one right across from the train station. At that time, it was safer to buy alcohol at an official place. If I am not mistaken, we once again purchased the 0.7 liter "Rīgas degvīns" with black currant flavor. By the way, we were twenty santims short for the chaser, even though we had calculated it all very precisely on the train... Zombie was very pissed off.

Then we sat in Death's dorm. Yes, yes, he had just become a university student. "Rīgas degvīns" really stung the throat and Death himself had doubts about his actions and thought out loud:

– What is life trying to teach me with this?

Zombie was ready to be of help:

– That you are an idiot!

But when we went to Robinson's right next to the dorm, the drink had already turned soothing. Just like the drinks that the metalheads arriving from all corners of Riga shared with us. There were ones we knew and didn't know, and all of them treated us from their bottles. At the entrance, this generosity became clear. The guards embraced us each separately and introduced us to the rules:

– If I find a bottle, I will shove it up your ass!

Everyone emptied what they had brought before going in and arrived in quite a normal state of mind. Us too.

Finally, I had made it to Robinson's. All the legendary fortresses had toppled one after another in front of me and now it was the turn of this one. At that time, however, Black Friday was yet to become legendary. But I understood that it was the greatest of what we had and it was not that the world did not know anything about us, it was that we knew nothing of the world.

The place was full of people. Before getting into the hall, there were dozens of stages and performances on view. Checkered shirts and patterned sweaters were few and far between – the colorful personalities outnumbered them. There was a young

man by the name of Peksis, no one knew him but he still sat leaning far over and recited:

– What are you looking at? Haven't seen any punks? What are you looking at? Haven't seen any punks?

Next to him sat Morbid with a black and crooked beard. Behind him was an unfamiliar, beautiful girl. Next to her was Sinister.

Death and I rolled up the right sleeve and started greeting acquaintances. I soon felt that I was losing. Then I noticed the guy who always was mumbling something about the middle ages and supposedly was about to start playing bass in Sinister's band. I went up to him and extended my hand. He took it, shook it, everything was fine, he was even smiling. I asked:

– So how are the swords?

For he was always yammering about swords or axes. But this time he pretended that he did not understand anything. He was making excuses saying that he was Paulius from Kaunas. But he looked exactly like that sword guy. The same kind of long hair and a funny beard. They had come to watch Nahash. In 1993, the Lithuanian black metal leader Nemesis had split into two bands, Nahash and Poccus (a funny name, I said in Latvian). Both apparently were doing mean metal. He said I should come into the hall and sit with friends.

In the hall, it was much darker, but the Lithuanian was guiding me confidently. I thought that he would introduce me to one of the bands or all three, but no. By a column, a very cozy shelter had been set up – leather jackets, a lot of beer and a smiling girl. Her name was Živile. A funny name, I said in Latvian. Paulius asked me to watch his beer and the girl while he took off in an unknown direction.

So suddenly I was sitting on the floor with Živile. I drank the beer and she in turn smoked my cigarettes – so that it all would be fair. I was particularly touched that before finishing off each cigarette, she showed me the remnant and asked if I accepted it being thrown away. Never again have I encountered such refined manners. She was really nice from all sides and we talked about the important things using a mixture of several languages.

– Have you heard Nahash?

– Some.

– They are super, – she deciphered my lies easily and without any judgment, – they sing about the witches. Do you like beer?



– I do.

I felt that it was now my turn to ask something.

Yet I was not good at taking the lead. So she took it back.

– Do you play in a band?

– Yes.

– Black metal?

– Mhm. It's kind of avant-garde.

– What is it called?

– Perdelterrier.

– Oooo! Fantastic.

Just like that, my dreams had been fulfilled. Even if I did have a band, everything would happen just like it just had, talking about it to a strange girl. Everything was exactly as I had dreamt. I was flabbergasted by this sudden, phenomenological revelation. I sat there staring at Živile's lower lip.

Then Paulius returned and I turned the shift over to him and said good-bye. Živile seemed to half laugh, half smile, she nodded in my direction and said to Paulius in their language:

– *Metalo viltis!*

Some clattering was taking place on the stage and I went over there. Heaven Grey, they were easy to recognize, for they had a cello.

I pushed to the first row and started pondering Živile's words. Lithuanians are our brothers and we should be able to understand their language. "*Metalo*" could mean metal in some case form. "*Viltis*"... Must be our "*vilks*". A Metal Wolf I am in the eyes of our Lithuanian brothers. Jānis of Jelgava, called Metal Wolf in Lithuania. Slightly banal, but what can you do. But perhaps not a wolf? Perhaps it was something *viltīgs*, something cunning or fraudulent that she had in mind. Metal Fraudster? There was something I didn't like about it, but I felt I had intuitively come closer to the actual meaning. Metal disappointment? Metal liar? There was a pang of pain in my heart. I really must be crazy. What do I care that some Lithuanians have managed to unmask me? No one can take away what has happened to me. But nothing had happened and nothing probably would. It was all in my head, all was just fancy and fraud. The stronger fancy and fraud – from iron. After all, I only imagined it all. I pretended to everyone. Even now I imagined that I was some sort of a spy on a secret mission looking for some sort of a mysterious sense to it all. No matter.

Heaven Grey began playing. The audience pressed me against the stage. No one was indifferent here, everyone got excited hearing the very first chords and the most genuine head banging took place. I held on to the stage for support and kept the rhythm with the others. Now I was like everyone else. My hair probably hit my neighbors in the eyes. They didn't know who I was. I could have been a genius. Or a murderer. Or some sort of werewolf. Who cared. Perhaps someone next to me was a werewolf. Perhaps everyone was pretending. Who cared, it was metal.

I went a bit to the side. I got dizzy. It would be good to find my friends, I thought. They are all alone, I thought. But right then Venom walked up to me and said:

– Well, hi and hello, old man!

– Is Dark Reign also playing tonight? – though I knew full well that they weren't. Venom confirmed that and grew morose. I asked:

– Why not?

Venom really bristled. He looked me in the eye.

– I think they are trying to get rid of me.

– How come?

– They say I am too rough. I refer to Satan too much.

He looked even deeper into my eyes.

– I made it all there. But I feel that they are going to betray me. I just feel it.

I didn't say anything. I must have kept quiet in some exceptionally understanding way, because Venom offered me his glass of beer. I took a long swig and thanked him.

– Don't take it too much to heart. Metal ain't for pussies.

– We'll see who ends up on top, – Venom sniffled and went off.

Soon someone else came up to me and said:

– Remember me?

– Of course I do!

But I didn't.

– I once slept over at your place.

Oh, that was the guy with the metal encyclopedia! The one who had run away from home. Before I managed to say a word, he asked:

– Are you fucked up?

– No.

– I am.

That's what he should have started with. I rushed to participate:

– I am too.

– So why do you say you aren't?

– I don't know what I'm saying. I'm fucked up.

That seemed to satisfy him. We were standing face to face, not saying anything.

Misery, a pretty good group, kind of like Carcass.

– Why did you betray me?

That gave me a real start:

– What? How did I betray you?

– But you wanted to!

– What do you mean? When?

Now we both looked perplexed.

– What do you mean – you were talking on the phone and didn't say anything because I was there?

– Y-yes?

– And someone asked you if I was there, didn't they?

– N-no.

He scratched his cheek.

– Didn't it seem strange to you that I was suddenly gone next morning?

I didn't even quite remember what exactly happened. I had not paid attention.

– I thought that you simply went away.

– I ran away.

– Are you constantly running?

– What do you want?

This question was unexpected. I knew the answer, many answers in fact, but did not know with which to start. He took a sip of his beer and asked:

– So you are not a traitor?

– No!

– Well, okay.

He shared his beer with me, then took back what remained.

– Ciao!

And he went away. But I felt that it was no beer but something strange. I felt sick. Not from all the drinks but from all that information. I thought that I should go

and find my friends. That was something of the statistically absurd – I kept running into strange conversations and strangers, but could not find my friends even through systematic search. I tried to walk randomly, but that didn't help. Moreover, I almost couldn't see anything. Because when the next band went on, I once again went to throw my hair around and my glasses flew off. I went down on my hands and knees to find them but it was dark, full of jumping boots and broken bottles and I could see almost nothing. I got up and rubbed my face. It was so good to rub my face like that, without glasses. Now I was completely free. I would never find anyone. I also could not show my face at home, for the glasses were quite expensive. Tonight I'll run away, I'll go on my big journey. Like him. Yes, yes.

I will just sit down before I hit the road. I dragged myself over to the wall and sat down on broken glass, leaning back against the wall. Better already. I was still trying to hear who was playing. The same Misery? Or Paradoxx? Or Perdelterrier? I could not tell, I just fell asleep. Like a child or as if someone had hit me over the head.

Meanwhile the concert, my dream concert was going strong. Dzelzs Vilks played, they played well – then it was true music instead of the whining of wind in socks hanging out to dry. Dieas Irae and Infrogness and Apēdājs played. I did not analyze and did not determine genres – I slept and all this metal was a lullaby.

Death and Zombie in the meantime lived to the fullest. They saw how Skyforger got on stage. It was a significant milestone in the history of Latvian metal. Pēteris, who that time was stabbed by the riflemen in the heart, had put aside all thoughts about foreign knights and had turned to the fallen soldiers in the fields of Zemgale. Grindmaster Dead was disbanded, giving rise to Skyforger that played black metal and developed only Latvian motifs. In an instant, they occupied the place coveted by others and overtook everyone else.

Pēteris had a real sword on stage; he raised his arm with it and the blade sunk into the low ceiling, making plaster rain down; his voice itself was like a sword, a deep, guttural falsetto, like a brook from the throat of a stone gnome; it cut you, threw you into the current and took you god knows where to then throw you down where guitars, noble and heavy, were falling all over you. Once in a while one could understand a word or two, like "black" and "clouds", and "blessing" – it was concert sound, the way it was supposed to be – dirty and true and then it was followed by the perfectly decipherable refrain "Signs cut in stone!" How wonderful, it really exists, that mysterious world that is not taught at school and not written up in books.

That's how Skyforger announced itself, and it was destined to become the most famous Latvian band of all times and all worlds. And I did not hear it and did not see it. Later I did become a real fan of course and told everyone and myself about this first concert. I did not tell anyone that actually I was drooling and having a silly smile on my face while sleeping and dreaming about the twenty santims, the gray dog of our neighbors, a girl with Milady's body, hair of Liar's friend and her own mysterious eyes.

Before the last song, Death found me. He was shaking me and saying:

– Get up! Skyforger is playing!

But I would not get up. He said:

– Please get up! I beg you!

That moved me and I said:

– It's okay.

But I still would not get up. It was so nice here, by the wall among cigarette butts and bottle shards. I understood that the concert was the most important thing and I should get up, but it was right here, at a distance of one step, one second, one flutter of eyelids away and I could cover it any time, so why not stay here a second or two longer. So I waited to the end of the last song, till the forgers left the stage accompanied by the craziest of ovations. Then I opened my ears and eyes and said to Death:

– Hi! What's up?

Afterwards, I think, it was Apēdājs who played. But everyone went out in the hallway and talked about Skyforger.

– A bit like Immortal, no?

I nodded my head in agreement and even Zombie, who actually did not care for music much looked impressed.

– It was fantastic! – Liar breathed. When did she show up here? Her eyes were full of tears, really nuts, and yet she saw:

– Where are your glasses?

And then I remembered that my life was ruined and the world was wrapped in fog. Perhaps there were no tears in Liar's eyes, I could not see. But then our attention shifted elsewhere.

– My band will be better!

Just like everyone else, I too turned to that impertinent bastard. I knew him, I just did not quite understand who it was. But I had seen that silhouette for sure. Someone asked:

– Will you have a band?

– I already have one. Just have to clean the ranks, throw some out.

– What do you play?

– Black metal, of course. But a unique kind.

He had no problem with shyness, this unrecognized acquaintance. I went closer, very close. I absolutely knew him! In my confusion and because my sense of distance was troubled, I came up so close that both he and the rest fell silent. That must have looked strange even there – how I stopped half a step away and stared in his face.

My hair failed to stand on end only because it was too long. He was I. I was staring into my own face. I saw long hair, glasses and a crazy expression on his face. The glasses – they really were mine! Hence the misidentification! But behind the glasses was him, the cocksure Rigan whom I first encountered at the Burse. As usual, he was all dressed up, in a long coat with a high collar, adorned with some sort of glitter that I could not quite make out. It was clear that he had put on my glasses just for fun, because they matched his original image. He may have found them on the floor himself or perhaps they had been handed to him by that beautiful girl next to him or someone else from his coterie whose members were now all staring at me. I said:

– These are my glasses!

I didn't say anything witty, but all of his satellites burst into a crazy laughter. I did not understand why, but I did understand that they were laughing at me. I realized that the world had turned back a whole eternity and I was once again the silly little four-eyes.

The haughty one and his coterie turned to go, but there, as it turned out, was Ēriks, leaning against the wall. He too had glasses and he knew everything and understood everything; he also had the prestige of an old metalhead and he took pity on me:

– Give him back his glasses!

The haughty one thought about it, decided to take pity on me and gave them back. He became a knight in shining armor and I thanked him humbly. Yet he had not had enough. He asked:

– You too have a group?

I answered in the way he had expected:

– No.

And I adjusted my glasses. He would not give up:

– But you are putting something together?

– No.

– But you would like to, right?

I wanted to say: "Do you know what I have done for this band? I mean, not yet, but what I will do? Could you become a traitor because of your band, could you betray a friend? Or have you already done that perhaps? You think I am like you?" But I said only:

– No, we would not!

Zombie summarized it all in his own style:

– We only put together group sex!

And we poured outside, where it was really dark, and we kept running into each other. There were really more of us, some girls were coming with us as well. They were the ones to give us money for alcohol that was hidden away in a lone kiosk and then we were sneaking back into the dorm. We had to get past the monitor who was nicknamed Terminator, so we spruced ourselves up to look nice and legal. A girl gave me a hair band to tame my shags. We walked past the Terminator holding our breaths, without looking her way, and I could feel the scent from the hair band. Once on the stairs, we broke into a run like crazy, still running into each other, and Liar's friend dropped her matches. She bent down to pick them up, but I ran into her and whispered: – No denying it now! – and dragged her along. Death dropped his key several times, but finally we were in. We dropped down around the table and laughed. It is not clear about what, but the laughter was heartfelt.

Death started hitting the table. He was a drummer, after all. In spite of everything, he actually was a drummer. We too beat the table, perhaps we were not keeping rhythm, but we beat the table so hard that the lamp toppled over and broke. It was really dark now, but Zombie solved the problem – he lit his hair and started shaking it. The flame was going out, he poured vodka over his head, then it was burning a bit better, but there was quite a stench.

The door swung open, and there was the superintendent. She demonstrated her steely disposition by not paying attention to anything and just asking a question:

– Did all those who do not belong here leave their i.d. documents with me?

– Yes!

That's what we all said right away. But she said:

– I don't have anything like that downstairs!

She paused for effect and then turned and went away.

What was that supposed to mean? What were we supposed to do now? Await arrest?

Be it as it may, we quieted down a little. But it was dark because the hair had gone out, the table lamp was broken and a ceiling lamp was not part of the interior design. Our conversations turned darker as well. It did not take long for Liar to whisper:

– Would you like me to recite a poem for you?

I said:

– No.

But Zombie said in a tiny, whiny voice:

– It's black Friday, black things will happen, I sense all kinds of black creatures coming over to us!

I added in the same spirit:

– For seven years, we will now have to slave!

And some girl whom I had not even noticed before said in a naturally tiny voice:

– You know what? I am a witch.

That was truly spooky. Perhaps because it was so unexpected. Liar was the first to plead and we joined in:

– Stop it, please stop it!

And the girl laughed:

– Okay, okay.

Death managed to interject his usual:

– Shall we go to the woods?

I liked the thought.

– Maybe we really should.

But there were no woods here. Death also thought the same thing and did not say anything. Actually, no one had said anything for a while now. It had got lighter outside. Or perhaps my eyes had simply adjusted to the dark. The short-sighted see a



little better than others in the dark. I saw that Death had fallen asleep on his chair holding the unfamiliar witch in his lap – also asleep. Zombie of course had fallen asleep on the floor and Liar's beautiful friend was next to him, her head on his shoulder.

Only Liar sat there all alone. And me too. She was sitting at the other end of the room scowling at me. Suddenly I felt sorry for this annoying fool who had fallen in love with me. Could she not leave this silly business to someone else? I addressed Liar gently:

– Recite a poem!

But she did not reply, just kept staring at me with vacant eyes. They had no pupils. With a habitual movement, my hair attempted to stand on end, but the very next moment I understood that her eyes were closed and it's the dawn illuminating her eyelids. Suddenly, I was the only one alive. Why were they all asleep? Of course, they had not had a nice rest at the concert, unlike me. It was a bit spooky, like being alone in a wax museum, nor was the dawn full of hope – it was deathly bluish. I decided that all I needed was a cigarette and everything would be fine again, but I saw no light anywhere. A girl had dropped matches somewhere on the stairs, but I was afraid to get up and walk over there. What if they all jump on me? Death and the witch and all of them.

Death suddenly spoke like a true somnambulist:

– Are we really not starting a band?

I had to run my tongue over the dry roof of my mouth to be able to reply:

– I guess not. It seems I can't get that money after all.

He said:

– That's okay.

And he fell asleep again.

The light outside the window had grown bigger and warmer. I already dared to turn my back to them and look out the window. Really, it was almost light. I turned back and looked at them, my dear friends, how they slept there, really like the children that they were, and there was no one better in the whole wide world.

I turned back to the window and saw the yellow grass of *Çi̇psala*, the mud through which we would soon walk to the station – Death, Zombie, the girls, none of them mine, and me. Death, silent like a desert demon, forever mysterious, unknown to himself; Zombie at a gallop, despite the fact that we would walk very slowly, he'd be

galloping, the restless spirit that he was. We would go across the canal, but not over the bridge but rather over two fat pipes that were laid across the canal next to the bridge. And this time, we would walk like that again, despite the wobbly legs and dizzy heads, but that would not at all be because of fear, it would be a pleasure, to walk across those fat pipes. Once over, we would stop. No one would want to go anywhere. The ducks in the canal would look straight at us. Zombie would shout:

– I don't want to go anywhere! I want to stay here and feed the ducks!

But we would have nothing to give them. And not a santims in our pockets.

I will remember that place. The mud, the canal and the pipes, and those ducks with reproach, tenderness and mystery in their eyes. Every time I go by Ķīpsala, I will feel the same sensation.

But I could not understand that feeling while I sat by the window looking into the future. I really could not understand if I was happy or unhappy. I don't understand it now either.

That's how the best Latvian metal band did not happen.

This is the end of the history or our metal.

PART III  
AFTER THE APOCALYPSE

1

It was dark only because I kept my eyes closed. The sun had long since arrived, I felt it through my eyelids. But I would not open. I had just woken up, for a moment, I didn't even know if and who I was, but a moment later I remembered everything and also that a big party took place the evening before. It had continued to the very moment of falling asleep, imperceptibly overlapping with dreams; there was laughter and conversations about the important things and staring at the sky through smoke – I remembered it all very well, I just did not yet know where I was. I had not yet opened my eyes.

I did not feel like opening them. I can for a moment not know where I am, can't I? I had the usual feeling that it was somewhere far away. Now I will have to understand, come to, exchange greetings, converse, have breakfast and then make my way home, probably across the entire town, on the bus, on the tram, for it was already late enough that taking a taxi would be silly. I could not imagine where I could have ended up, probably in the deepest nowhere.

I opened my eyes and – I was at home! Really at home. My bed. Here was the familiar ceiling. The familiar trees were outside the window and the sun behind the trees. It was no morning really, it was already day. Right, that party was at my place. My birthday party. I remembered it all, except for going to sleep. I got up and made the rounds of the apartment.

First, I should look if the bookcase is in order. A cursory look did not reveal any damage. Nobody had dared to touch the shelf with old books. I pulled out one to see if it was still as old as it used to be. 1695. I felt better already. It always worked. I found comfort in these centuries that were lying in my arms so quietly bearing witness to the fact that time is of no great importance.

But someone had pulled out "The Jewish Plan for Global Domination" by Jānis Dāvis and put it back backward. Who could it be? This was probably the most intriguing title on this shelf, a bibliographic rarity. But who had needed "Là-bas" by Joris-Karl Huysmans? The book was put back in crooked. But maybe it just had been

pushed by an accidental shoulder, who knows, perhaps moved by a kiss. Everything else seemed untouched.

That could not be said about the rest of the room. Although not much had been disturbed. A black jacket that was not mine was hanging on the back of a chair. There were empty bottles and glasses on the table, on chairs, window sills and everywhere else. The wine had been all kinds of New World Zinfandel and Cabernet Sauvignon.

The view was more hopeful in the kitchen. The ashtray was overflowing, forming the so-called hedgehog. The table and floor were copiously soaked in red wine and the midday sun made shards sparkle here and there. The wines were a bit better here, a decent German Riesling (even though the white wine season was yet to begin), various Pinot Noir and some imp had even unearthed my Corton-Charlemagne that had been intended for a much smaller crowd. Perhaps even to me alone.

Significantly, there was hardly any liquor in sight. There was just one ordinary whiskey and a Bombay Sapphire gin. And they were only half-empty. What was wrong with us? Quite recently when Kārlis and I lived together, the view in the morning was quite different. Then the apartment was full of empty booze bottles and unknown women and, in the very least, one friend. Kārlis had at the time just broken off with Milady. Thirteen-something years and – *basta*. We were once again alone and crazy.

But he must have tired of the beautiful life. And probably me too. Everybody gets more reasonable. Only wine remains. And only a few broken glasses. And everyone home in a taxi. How many had they been? There were more uninvited than invited guests. There was even one with a big moustache and a pair of lesbians. And for all that, there were just a few broken glasses and a book put in wrong in the bookshelf. Nice to have such guests. Nice to have had these years that have made us so nice and wise. With the mustachioed one we discussed grammar. There are too many commas in Latvian orthography. I countered with an explanation of the construction of the royal house of France. Dauphin in France is the same thing as the Prince of Wales in the United Kingdom. He didn't ask me, but I explained it anyway.

In the kitchen it was said that a thinking, intelligent person in all likelihood is unhappy or at least sad or depressive. I objected – girls, it's possible that we are each in our own way thinking, but are we wise? Socrates after all said that a truly wise person is happy. Don't you respect Socrates? But do you know any really smart person who is also happy? No, I don't. Much too late it dawned on me that I had

insulted everyone whose only sin was to be happy. Yet they would not give up. You rely too much on authority. I rely too much on authority? Me? And what do you rely on? We see things for what they are. Oh, I see. But I see things the way they are not. But what do you think – all these fools who are telling you how to live, do they too think that they don't see things for what they are? No, they are convinced of being right, but they are misguided. And how are you different? Nonsense, they said. I asked how old they were, the two of them combined. What does it matter? We are not getting married. Ok, ok.

Then I started thinking how old I was. Me alone. I remembered everything clearly except how I went to sleep and how old I had become. I remember how the wine was spilled: it flowed in a wide, dark stream and the guests flinched, but I looked mesmerized how the wine spread out along the edge of the table and then streamed down, dripping in fast, then slower sheets. I said to the guests that everything was fine and it was the truth. But now this liquid memory reminded me of the main reason why I had got up from the bed.

When it was done, I felt relieved. I tried to flush, but I was not successful. The handle obeyed, but there was no waterfall.

Then I remembered – the night before, the system had failed. All the partygoers could only make wise cracks, but I took upon myself to fix things. Even though I was still not good at practical matters, I did manage to do something and some parts even turned out to be redundant. Yet the solution appeared not to have been permanent.

What should I do now? I did what I usually did on such occasions. I went back to the bedroom. The girl was already waking up and I asked what I should do. After a moment's reflection, she gave me the number of a plumber.

Ideal. I only had to make the call. But not now when I had to rush to work. And I went out on the street. It was the first day of spring and it was the thirtieth time.

The plumber arrived Thursday night, just as we had arranged. There he was, an ordinary man, only his hair was tied in a pony tail and a bandana was wrapped around his forehead. He took earplugs out of his ears, said hello and then asked:

– Where is the john?

I showed him and told him what had happened. He took off the lid of the water box, looked inside, in that ocean that was unfathomable to me, and chuckled. He said:

– Well, well... I'll try to do something.

I thanked him in advance and left him alone. I went to the kitchen and sat down on a chair. As if nothing had happened. But it had.

Some ten or fifteen years, nothing had happened to me. I studied, worked, made acquaintance, parted company, traveled. I don't remember much of all that. Something had happened to him, to my plumber who was now shaking metal in the toilet. I knew him. It was Pēteris from Skyforger and no one else.

Since my early youth, I had not listened to that music anymore. At the academy from time to time, but then ever more seldom and finally not at all. I did not follow them, forgot them, I cut my hair. Nothing really remained – Dzelzs Vilks had devolved, Schuldiner got heart trouble and even Grishnackh came out of prison. Only Skyforger and Pēteris held fast. He had not given in, he was still doing good metal. Sky I still listened to from time to time. I particularly liked their album "Latvian Riflemen". Had I known that I was right there when Pēteris's relationship with the riflemen began... I only knew that he was an idol, a monument and a cultural hero, the last pillar of Latvian music, the most famous Latvian musician in the world and to me personally, a counterargument to the burden of the world.

I had not known him personally. That time I stood in the bushes near the stage next to him and afterwards just saw him only on stage or in the press. I had heard that he was working as a plumber at Daile Theater. And upon hearing it I thought, what a paradox – he is working at an institution that he far outperforms in terms of fame. But it had never occurred to me that he would also get to my plumbing.

I thought what I should do. My thoughts were uncommonly clear. The young me from the old days would of course have liked to talk to Skyforger Pēteris. For that reason, I should not avoid doing it now that I have broken all promises and turned into

a slave, hypocrite, liar, fraud, pretense and snob – everything I had not been then. I could not pass up an opportunity to talk to someone from that world.

I opened the closet and pulled out one Pouilly-Fumé and a normal Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The weather was such that the gentleman could choose either the white or the red. I blew out the ashtray and put it in the middle.

I just wished that he would not think of me as a nutty fan who has broken his john just to meet a famous musician. Crazy, I thought like a teenager, even I had not been one for a long time already.

But there he came. Instead of a sword, he was holding a towel; drying his hands, he said:

– I fixed it more or less; it will work.

And probably added to himself: "Shit without problems!" That encouraged me to ask:

– Would you like some wine? White or red?

– No. I don't like wine.

I understood that there would be no conversation – I had forgotten to converse, I could only talk to my own kind and now I was different. Yet he asked me nicely whether he could smoke. I pushed the ashtray in his direction and, after a smoky moment of silence, asked:

– Do you remember that time when you, still as Grindmaster Dead, played on the Jelgava open-air stage?

For a moment, he just smiled.

– In Jelgava... it's possible. Stage... what kind of stage?

– Right across from the palace. On the other side of the river.

– I don't remember. But possible.

– That was one of the last Grindmaster concerts. Then Skyforger was launched.

– Who can remember all those concerts.

– What year did Skyforger begin?

– In ninety-five... So what?

– Nothing, nothing. I too was at that concert. There are times I remember the nineties. Like, at that time... It was different then.

He was nodding and I thought – what is it that's different for him, for him, everything has remained the same.

– Remember how you were pissing in the bushes and Death greeted you?

– That I don't remember.

– But how about a beer?

– A beer might be okay.

He had a peaceful smile on his face, as if he had predicted such a turn of events.

We drank quite a lot of Valmiermuiža unfiltered beer, practically all that I had at home. We smoked a lot and talked – it happened very easily. Just like other true underground stars, for example, Dambis or Šubrovskis, Pēteris too was kind and open, like a true king. We discussed the ethnic origins of the Balts, the causes of the Second World War, the deficiencies of the metric system, but most of all – music. I stared at him through the smoke and foam and thought – see, he did it!

How did he do it? How was it possible not to say "no" that morning in the nineties? Perhaps I got scared that time? Perhaps I was lazy? Proud? Why did I leave and he stayed? No, I also had not left – the world had ended! Or hadn't it? See, there was that world sitting there and it was not over. He told me that now they had their own club, Black Friday, where the most extreme foreigners played. Top notch. Metalheads in Latvia even had their own open-air festival. I had imagined it at one time! Had they listened in on my thoughts? True, I had envisaged the festival in winter, in the forest, on tamped down snow; but even the one Pēteris was talking about did not sound bad – in summer, by a pond.

I asked him:

– Are the bands as good as then?

He again gave me his calm smile:

– No, they are not as good.

And he got deep into thought. I wanted to say – of course, I understood that one band is still as good, you don't have to say it, rifleman. But he said:

– Maybe them... Tabestic Enteron. They might be as good.

– Really?

– Kind of. Listen for yourself.

– Okay.

I wondered where I could have listened to them.

– Do they have a recording?

– No, that they don't. Go to their concert.

How am I going to do it – just like that? Get up and go? But he fanned the flames:



– Don't you know them? I think they are from Jelgava.

How was that possible?

– Will they play at that festival?

– In Blome? I think they will.

– And when is Blome?

– Tomorrow.

And again we talked like we had not talked all our lives, about the riflemen's battles and how the fallen riflemen are still there, in the Jelgava district; how Pēteris changed his beliefs at one time, and how I changed mine, just not clear to what. I talked less and less. I tried to remember something. Pēteris also fell silent and for a while we sat in silence. The beer was not finished (but not much remained), but Pēteris got up and said good-bye:

– I have to ride my bike home, you know!

And after a warm handshake he was gone. I went back into the kitchen and had a sip of beer. I sensed that the beer was making me do what beer usually does. Right, my toilet was working again.

I went in and jiggled the handle. It worked – a little waterfall responded to my movement. As a child, I was very much interested in waterfalls. What was the name of the world's largest waterfall? I pulled the handle again. That helped – yes, the Guaira waterfalls. Pēteris fixed the toilet. Pēteris from Skyforger. All our friends gave in but he didn't. No, I will not do in this john what I had intended. I took a key out of my pocket to scratch the name of a band onto the wall. What was the name of our band? I could not remember. I threw the key into the john and went out – of the toilet, of the apartment, and I slammed the door.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I did not know that the Guaira falls or Seven Cascades has long since been destroyed. It no longer exists. The poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade wrote: "...seven ghosts murdered by the hand of man, owner of the planet...Seven falls passed us by, and we didn't know, ah, we didn't know how to love them, and all seven were killed, and all seven disappeared into thin air, seven ghosts, seven crimes of the living taking a life never again to be reborn."

I decided to go to that festival. After all, I had nothing planned for the weekend. I felt like something different. Something that I haven't had for a long time.

Friday after work I went to the bus station. I decided to forgo the car this time. Actually, I don't even have a car. I just could not learn to drive. Always, it was someone else driving and kindly asking me to get in. Only this time, nobody drove. That was fine with me, I went to the bus station and asked for a ticket to Blome. That's when it started. It turned out that there were two Blomes in this world. Which did I want?

– Where are they located?

As if the answer could be of any help.

– Approximately in the same direction. One is closer, the other, more distant.

– Let's have the more distant one.

Satisfied with my selection, I went to the platform. I had been right: a couple of groups of long-haired, gangly guys and black-dressed girls were hanging around there. They sat on sleeping bags with tents on their shoulders. Maybe I needed something like that as well? It had not occurred to me. After all, that was not the most important thing. I was going there to do research and not to sleep.

As soon as I got on the bus, a group of three girls asked me almost in unison:

– Excuse me, is this your seat? We have five, six and seven.

I waved at them, go ahead and sit, and moved to the back. So this is what I'll be researching. Uniformed nincompoops. Sheep that cannot find their seats without asking. To think that at one time we fought for the likes of these. But now it's: "your seat". With the formal "you". I was used to hearing this address from businessmen and professors. From the police I demanded nothing but. If, however, a taxi driver or a worker doing repairs said "*tu*" inadvertently, I did not take offense and actually felt a little pleased that I have something of youth remaining in me. But now youth addressed me with "*jūs*", the formal "you". And what youth it was! There was no point in going. But the bus was already taking off and I did what I always do when I feel confused and/or a vehicle was beginning to move – I pulled a book out of my pocket.

The book unfortunately turned out to be uninteresting. I looked out the window and imagined the events described in an interesting book rolling over these

landscapes. A character we cannot see is sneaking behind the bushes – he is chasing after someone on our bus. At the bus stop sits a man not looking at us. What is he thinking?

The group behind my back became increasingly noisy. I had noticed them already as we were getting on. The same metalheads. Two black girls and two long-haired guys. What is it about putting on uniforms? Fear of being alone? They were not all completely the same, however, I started noticing a kind of pattern. The impudent group of girls up front sat quietly, their backs straight. They probably were going on such an adventure for the first time. In the middle of the bus, there sat a lonely, thirty-year-old metalhead with glasses whom I probably resembled, only he was fat, had retained a long pony tail and a defiant look on his face. He had participated in many things, yet was still introverted and sticking to a very narrow group of friends of whom there was none here. Finally, behind my back – the loudest group that kept getting louder. I did not even listen what they were saying, but one of the girls suddenly said:

– Come sit with us!

I waited for her to call me again and wondered how they had managed to figure me out. I had long since lost the relevant external signifiers and was holding a boring book. I had slipped unnoticed by the brigades up front but not by the oracle in the last row. I sat down with them. Signe, Ella, Ilmārs, Justs. Strange names and they said that they were already drunk. Ella was the only one to deny it, but Signe said to her:

– I know, now you are saying that but as soon as we get off, you'll fall down. I know how much we have drunk.

And they showed me just how much. 0.3 vodka, with a drop still at the bottom. For the four of them. I figured that my travelling companions had to be really sweet. I mean, really young. They could not drink any more vodka, so they asked for my help, and I finished it off in four seconds.

Ilmārs remembered that he also had a 1.5-liter suds with him. With my help, that too went down quickly. The girls remembered that they had wine. Oh, I said, oh! What kind of wine do young metalhead chicks choose? By Jupiter, it was Martini. This is no wine, girls! But I did not say anything and drank politely – what a repulsive drink – but then that was finished, too. That was too bad, for I was just getting going and was getting very fond of my new friends. They really liked me. Signe put her hand on my shoulder. I was just getting going and we still had a festival ahead of us

and nothing behind us, nothing at all, only us, meeting one another along the way, in an ideal human relationship – almost strangers who do not need anything from one another. I felt so at one with our world, the true world, and also so self-confident that, having accidentally caught the fat metalhead's gaze, asked him to join us. We exchanged names – Imants – and he had a small "Riga Black Balzams" with him.

Some lady asked if we were not supposed to get off in Blome. Everyone on the bus already knew where we were going. I already felt like a leader and replied that there was no reason to worry – we need the more distant Blome. But this had been the more distant one, they said. How come we did not notice? Imants said that he had known for sure but also had missed it. But the other passengers just kept insisting:

– Yes, yes, you have to get off!

We asked the driver to stop the bus and spilled out of it, to the side of a ditch. There was only the road, forest and ditch, but that was enough. Imants said that he would get us to the festival right away; he called on his cell phone and said that a car would come right away; we believed him and laughed and knew for sure that we would get on time wherever we needed to go.

We really did get there. In an instant, I lost all of my new friends. They had to put up tents and God knows what else; I was alone and without any luggage, so I of course was slower. I reached the entrance barrier. It was hard to tell if they would or would not let me through – some long-haired guys did go in but some were sent back by the guards and they turned back without any further ado and went to the nearby meadow. I got it – it was forbidden to bring alcohol into the territory of the festival. The ones not let in took out their unsuccessfully concealed bottles and set about emptying them. Some ended up blacking out. This meadow seems to have been created just for this purpose, I laughed, suddenly remembering that I too had a bottle of whisky in my pocket. I wanted to go in, but the guards looked serious, twice as wide as in the old days. Even though then too I would not have been able to deal with them. But what did that matter if I was simply a respectable person. I went to the meadow.

I sidled up to a group, took a restrained sip and offered the bottle to others. The first metalhead took my Jack Daniel's carefully, looked at me and asked:

– Are you going to some VIP sector?

Very funny.

The whisky was drained quickly, but the conversation was stalling. I asked:

- Whom are you particularly looking forward to at this fest? Which band?
- I guess Tiamat.
- Ha, in the nineties, there was also a band under that name. A good doom.
- It's the same one.

I laughed:

- No, no. They could no longer be alive.
- It's the same guys!

I let the matter rest. Young boys, they don't understand the weight of time. I asked a different question:

- What are the Tabestic Enteron like?

There was a variety of opinions:

- Them?
- A piece of shit.
- No, but...

Some girl even woke up and said:

- They are some sort of lunatics.

I felt a pang in my heart and I continued my interrogation:

- Where are they from?
- From the loony bin.
- From Jelgava or something.

I wanted to know more:

- From Jelgava? Who is playing there?
- You know Faun? You know Pussy Grinder?
- Oh. Yes, yes.

But I did not know them. I did not know either Faun or Pussy Grinder. Another person woke up and asked:

- Are you from Jelgava?
- Yes! – I gave a sincere answer.
- Do you know Jana?
- Jana... tell me more!
- Well, she is sixteen...
- No, I don't know Jana.

Jack Daniel's was also done for. The nearest metalhead pulled a bottle from his clanking sleeping bag and handed it to me. It was Hektors. How sweet. Sweet as

youth. Quite as cloying, quite as detrimental for the rest of one's life. Having drunk some, I went to the festival.

Metalheads were swarming around, but I did not know a single one. It was natural, after all, I had been gone for more than ten years. But okay, I looked around with a purely anthropological interest. First, girls were uncommonly numerous. In the nineties, only a rare individual would get involved with the alternative society. Whereas now there was some mass parade of models. And before, girls dressed like us, in torn jeans and an ordinary shirt. Or in long skirts... But now it was like a carnival ball! Black lace, costume jewelry, glitter, powder!

It was clear that I would not know any of them. I looked at the guys – they looked about the same as before. All had long hair, heavy boots and colorful shirts – Burzum, Amorphis, Skyforger and many bands I was not familiar with. I searched their faces – yes, this one looked like Digit, that one like Nose, but no, it was not them. Perhaps all of them were dead already. Or no one was coming here anymore. One guy looked like Peksis, but it could not really be him, could it? The Mohawk on this one was more spectacular and he was kind of fatter. As I was watching, a girl came out of nowhere, waved at me and strode confidently right to where I was. This one I seemed to have seen before. A long, long time ago, but these memories are so alive that it seems like yesterday... Oh, but that's the drunken Signe from the bus, we met only an hour ago! She wrapped her arms around my neck and shouted:

– Where did you disappear to? Where did you disappear to?

Really, I thought, where did I disappear to? What did I do all this time?

Signe and I walked somewhere. I think she was leading me. I did not say anything, but she asked:

– What's your guess, how old am I?

I looked at her, carefully. I am never successful at guessing someone's age. I guessed:

– Eighteen?

I was thinking that it's best to give a lower number – girls always like compliments. Signe laughed proudly:

– Ha, I'm always given more. When I really make myself up, sometimes they say twenty.

I shook my head and for some reason felt younger than her. We had reached the beer tent.

– A great idea, Signe, just great.

– Isn't it?

I got four, so that I wouldn't have to stand in line again and we sat down on the grass. What to do now? I put my face into the mug, but how long can one stay there? Signe stared bright-eyed into the distance. Who knows what her kind might be thinking about.

– What are we going to talk about?

– What do you think?

A witty comeback. I have never understood what one should say to something like that, and this time was no exception.

I had completely forgotten why I came here. But then I saw – fuck, it was Venom! Really Venom? Yes, it was him, only sans hair. And he seemed to have put on weight. But he had the same morose face, no one else has such a face. There was no place for anything from the normal world. I said to Signe:

– Excuse me!

And I went up to Venom. He recognized me! Or he was simply used to strangers accosting him from time to time. We did not hug and he asked me right off:

– So how do you like it?

– What?

He waved in the direction of the stage. I strained my ears – no, it wasn't bad. I would even say it was in the old style. But they could not be My Dying Bride, old man.

– Not bad. Who are they?

– Frailty, of course.

What that was I had no idea. I had already stuck a foot in my mouth, so now I could continue a normal conversation:

– Are you still doing anything in metal?

– Yeah, now I'm doing journalism. We are going to do a film on Skyforger, with three cameras. I am also writing for a magazine. Something like that.

– Cool.

– But I have left all the nationalist organizations. There's no discipline, nothing.

I got sick and tired and got out. From all of them.

Then he gave me a firmer look:

– But I am feeding my tiger. And you?

I really liked that expression of his. But he persisted:

– And you?

– Me?

– Yes.

– Nothing.

– I see.

Both of us fell silent. I thought about my tiger. What was it? How should I feed it? I said to Venom:

– Okay, I should return to the broad.

But Signe was no longer there. I looked for her by the beer. I bought a mug and a whisky and looked at all the girls. Too bad, all I saw was asses and tits, how could I recognize Signe? Before it was easier to recognize girls. Didn't I actually have to be home with my girl? The phone vibrated, she was calling me. I did not hear anything, for it was too loud there, but I said in the mouthpiece:

– Everything is fine. Everything is fine. You know me.

Everything was indeed fine. I just went a couple of more times to the bar. I felt so peaceful that a couple of times I dozed off right there on the bench. Some guys told me that I could go and rest in their tent, if I had none of my own. Was it already time to go to sleep? I refused:

– Excuse me, guys, I am used to a certain level of comfort.

And I immediately fell asleep where I was. In my dream, I heard wonderful music. I seemed to have heard it somewhere before – like it seems about anything beautiful. I did not want to wake up ever, just so this music would go on playing. There was this singing:

Do you dream of me?

And I murmured through my saliva, yes, yes, yes.

Strange – I had fallen asleep on the bench but woke up under a tree. Right there in the festival territory. Some girls were walking by and they asked:

– Where are your glasses?

I ran a hand over my face – really, where were they? My head cleared up instantly – these were Dior glasses, after all. I looked up. The glasses were hanging from a branch. The old knack was still there. I put on my glasses and ambled to have breakfast.

Some people were there already. I ordered a big omelet and greeted everyone:



- Good morning!
- Good morning!
- The morning's good, how's the greeter?

Like we were old acquaintances, although I did not recognize anyone. One of them asked me:

- So how did you like Tiamat?
- Mm?
- It was cool, no? Great that they played things from the nineties.

Oh, I see. Like in that old song: "You awake – and it's true." It really was good old Tiamat, still very much alive, and it was them I had heard in my sleep. It was not a dream. I did not have to fear waking up. All I had to do was to open my eyes and dreams turned into reality.

But nobody around me was interested in my dreamy tragedies. Despite the early hour, there were quite a few empty beer glasses on the table and songs began to be heard, softly. They sang nicely, sincerely, without any excesses, but their knowledge of lyrics was poor. I finished my omelet, finished my beer and joined in, modestly and in good taste, at first making myself heard only at the moments when the choir forgot the end of the line, but soon they were all following my lead, for everyone of course wanted to sing and finally there was someone who at least knew some of the lyrics. Almost anything would do. Once we had sung

My brother was fallen in the war,  
But at night I hear him riding...

the guy next to me, my unknown brother without a shirt and with a long beard, wept. I looked at him in amazement – the crusty iron man was crying because of a schmaltzy tune. But he just kept wiping the tears while the table next to us finished the song – yes, they were behind us almost by a whole stanza. After wiping off his tears he hit me on the shoulder. I too felt moved and treated him to a mug of beer and some toasted garlic bread. Unexpectedly, they were feeding us pretty well here. My omelet was quite passable and the toasts were good and garlicky.

And then I felt it was beginning. I was already being tempted with a feeling of rejection, with a macho role, with respectable acquaintances and a wise guy status; all these things were in my way so that I would not find what I had come here for. And now I also felt a great temptation to flaunt my money. It started innocently – what can be more innocent than paying for a weeping stranger's beer? Even Schweik did that.

Yet in his case, it was his last money and then it's good to do that. But I still had enough. And I wanted to flaunt it. I had escaped from the underage girls and now I was surrounded by singing gentlemen of approximately my own age, yet I did not have long hair, I did not have a thing. I was a stranger, even worse, I was a traitor who had served the enemy for many years but now had arrived at the festivities, hopelessly pretending to be one of the crowd, and now I threw on the table the most despicable of weapons that only someone inferior would brandish: see, I can buy toasted garlic bread, toasted garlic bread and beer all around!

Theoretically, there may have been a tad of solidarity there, of the return of the prodigal son. Perhaps that was the reason why I recognized so poignantly how disgusting it all was – the fear of the boss and joy because of a commendation, and all that money. I had to get rid of it. Our table got covered with empty glasses. Here the wonderful habit of not taking the empty ones away persisted – that way, people could see what they had accomplished. I had fallen silent in my traitor's self-awareness and I was concentrating on drinking, yet I seemed to sober up with each mug. Shit happens. The others, on the other hand, were getting tipsy and were turning from songs to conversation. Some Russian guy put forth the national question as a topic. Usually it is them who start it all. Our guys sometimes do it on the Internet. But now it was taking place live and he said, already in a raised voice:

– So what that I am Russian?

– No problem. No one said it was anything.

I tried to be the voice of reason. No one really had said anything.

– So know that my great grandfather participated in the battles to protect the independence of the Republic of Latvia!

And he looked each one of us in the eye. No one said anything, for what was there to say? But I of course had to add:

– Very nice. Honor and respect to your great granddad.

Everybody joined in – yes, yes, of course, exactly right. But then someone from the other end of the table addressed me directly:

– But who are you?

I did not hear, I was deep in thought. Not really in thought, though, deep into view would be more accurate. On the next table there sat a girl. She was wearing a T-shirt and a string and she was sitting with her back to us. She really fit the landscape quite well and perhaps it was this quiet, unobtrusive presence that pulled me into an

existential contemplation. I looked at her ass as a collision of two distant planets. Or like a fool. And then again that question:

– Who are you?

I jumped, disturbed, caught, embarrassed. I did not know the answer to this question. I was sick and tired of this question. I scratched my forehead with a two-lat piece and replied:

– I don't know.

I got up and went for a walk. Who indeed was I? Without hair, without a tiger. There was no ad guy or French aristocrat who would recognize me. But didn't Signe know me? She did not ask me who I was. What did she see in me? Where was she? I could not find her. And I still could not remember something. Something was itching in my still intact frontal lobe. Who was I? What was I doing here?

I noticed that people were beginning to run into me from one side only. There was some sort of a movement. Everybody was pushing me somewhere. Or perhaps they were going somewhere and I just happened to be in their way. And then some music started playing. Hey, that was really good music! Again something of that kind? Morbid Angel or Demilich? Here anything was possible. And now I was rushing in the lead. I elbowed my way to the stage. No, completely unknown freaks were on it. Ordinary guys, just dressed like jesters. One was in a dress, another in a leotard and the guitarist stark naked, except for a red string. I am serious. That's how they looked. But the music, the music was incredibly good. I did not believe. I said: "Brain, this time you are not going to bamboozle me. What's that music?" I listened to the lyrics:

You could not digest our fecal balls,  
Yet you have a taste of rhubarb in your mouth.  
Sooner or later, I will be your astral whore.

It was not bad. Not bad at all. Somewhere, there had existed poetics unknown to me, incredible as it might seem. And then came the last stanza:

You will massage my tiny pink balls,  
You will be my boyfriend, we'll walk hand in hand  
To the place where the sun won't set and birds are whistling Judas

Priest.

I only want to be happy.

I almost started crying, honest. Just like that unknown metalhead by that song about brother. The final solo was also perfect – tiu-riu-tiu-tiu! After the song, the audience shouted the name I had already guessed:

– Tabestic Enteron!

– Tabestic Enteron!

Wasn't it what I had come here for? I guess it was. Now I looked at the freaks completely differently. My gaze was particularly attracted by the guitarist in string. It was not the clothing that attracted me. The guy was... It was Artūrs from Jelgava. Absolutely, no doubt about it. The same Artūrs who wanted to start a band with me. He had started a band. Why did he not wait for me? I understand, Pēteris started Skyforger without me, he didn't know better. But Artūrs, why didn't he hold on?

When it looked like the concert was about to end, I abandoned my spot in front and snuck to the bar. I pushed the loiterers hanging around there out of my way and did not even glance at the girl who was still sitting on the edge of the table. I got six beers. Five for Tabestic Enteron and one for myself. I wanted to share it with my friends, the great musicians. I had forgiven them. I was a great enough artist to value art higher than myself. There they came, unnoticed by the audience, discussing the concert among themselves.

I walked toward them with my bouquet of beers. I gave it to them and said:

– Accept this, musicians, from an old fan of metal!

By the way, there was a very beautiful girl walking with Artūrs. She looked at me, then back at him and asked the same question:

– Who is that?

But Artūrs, meaning, Pussy Grinder, looked at me and replied:

– This is my friend! Always older and wiser than me.

You may think that I calmed down after Blome. No, there was no calm. The wound was once again open and I could not sleep. I still had not found something, I could not remember something very important. It was the past, the main thing is always the past. But the past is a mystery. In Plato's "Theaetetus" there is that cool part about the bird cage. Remember, Socrates and Theaetetus are talking about memory. Is it like a wax tablet on which the events from our past are imprinted? Some imprints are deeper, some less so; over time, the imprints lose their sharpness, are leveled out and we no longer quite remember how it was. How many people attended Black Friday in 1996? It looks like it was 800, that's how it's been recorded. Yet the eight is so much like a three... No, says Socrates, our memory is rather like a birdcage. And the birds are no chickens, they are wild, untamed birds. You put your hand in the cage and they go frantic, throw themselves against the walls, flutter up and down. You can try to catch one but you don't know that it will be. You pull your hand back and look to see if you've caught the mysterious girl or a fall in shit. You try to catch another one, the birds are not only moving, they are also fragile, they can be hurt and then they will never be the way they were, they can even be killed quite easily. The fiercest ones bite your fingers and now it is you who runs. The beautiful ones are the hardest to catch. Tired of the bites and desperately trying to catch what you want but cannot see, you press your face against the door of the cage, you lose your vigilance, put your head inside, entering the realm of the birds, and they attack you and tear at you.

I did not know how to continue my detective work, but then I got a call from Kroģis, that same old friend, the gangster. I had had no idea that he had my phone number, but was not terribly surprised – he may have ways of getting it. He announced that Kandžejs had returned for a while from Ireland. I started to remember – yes, he went to Ireland some ten crazy years ago. Well, he must be running from something, I thought. Kroģis had run into him and they had had the idea that the three of us could get together, play a game of zole and such. The sleepy, calm world of today was showing some ripples.

Incredible as it may seem, we really did get together and were sitting on the terrace of a lovely café. The sun was shining, Zane was smiling (that was the waitress's name). I had chosen the venue, not being Rigans, they supposedly did not

know anything here. And here they sat, these people that were so mythical that at times it seemed to me that I had invented them. It was so strange to see them sitting on chairs by a table, elegant glasses in hand. Kroģis had not changed, perhaps he had only become a little thinner. The look in his eyes was just as grim, and some gentler visitors were giving our table a wide berth. Kandžejs had expanded a little, but he too was very real, drinking unfiltered beer and yammering without a pause:

– Get one for yourself, I'll pay!

– I already got one.

– You don't want another one? Here's money, get another!

– I am not even done with this one yet.

– Go ahead and drink! I have money, we can get more. And you too!

Kroģis did not reply, he had become a quintessence of his own qualities and seemed to have done away with talking altogether. But that was okay, Kandžejs had him covered.

– In Ireland, I drink Guinness, but you can't get it here.

– Sure you can!

– Here?

– Not here. At Andalūzijas Suns, in Irish pubs.

– There are Irish pubs here?

– Aren't they everywhere?

– Shall we go there? Let's take a taxi.

– I don't want to go to some horrible Irish pub. And I don't want Guinness. Can you do without it for a moment? Soon you'll be back in Dublin and will be able to drink it to your heart's content.

Kroģis opened the new set of cards and began to separate off cards for *zole*.

– I don't live in Dublin but in Limerick.

– How interesting.

– I can tell you how I decorated my house.

– Yes, that I'd really like to hear.

– I also started a garden, I planted roses...

– I was kidding. I don't want to hear about it.

– What then? Shall we play billiards? Shall we take a taxi? Guess what, in Dublin I played in a pub with O'Sullivan? I lost one to three.

– I don't believe you.

– That's okay.

I waited for him to finish letting off steam about Ireland. After the second beer he calmed down a bit and I asked:

– Remember that time in Jelgava?

– I do, I do. We got lost in the nettles and stole a boat, sure I remember.

– No, I mean that time when we sat and watched our guys play street-ball.

– Perhaps, I no longer remember.

It looked like I still had to wait. I concentrated on the game. I made very many mistakes and I had to enter minuses for myself. I was always the one keeping score.

– What are you doing in Ireland anyway?

– Nothing! Now I have got an Irish job, which means that I am doing nothing, just receiving money! I play "Unreal Tournament" at work, and I have already reached Level Five.

– I am playing Tetris at work, and I have reached Level Thirteen.

My God, I thought, what are we doing here? We are boasting and comparing who has the easiest job. Kandžejs and I, being real friends, had always competed in something, but now I thought – enough. He called *zole* in his characteristic way, by shaking his head and repeating: "What risk I'm taking, what risk I'm taking!" Actually, he had quite decent cards, he won and treated it like some incredible heroic deed. I really wanted *zole* cards, then I could show how it's done: without a word, without moving a muscle, but I was getting real shit for cards and I kept making mistakes. Kroģis already took my measure with his heavy glance. It was he who had taught me the art of *zole* and now was watching my actions with a sportsman's displeasure, probably thinking that I have wasted all these years on degradation. I really wanted to make him happy, but I was simply not getting the cards, which Kandžejs was, and so I finally asked him angrily:

– Why did you get hitched that time?

I had to finally find out. But he simply beat my card and asked a moronic question:

– Hitched? Yesterday? But she knows you, by the way.

– No, I mean why did you end up in the walls in the nineties?

– Where?

– What do you mean "where"?

– What do you mean what do I mean?

– I mean, in prison, in the Pārlielupe Prison in Jelgava.

– Sixty-two.

He was of the annoying habit of counting points during the game and immediately announced his victory. Then he turned to me once more:

– What are you saying?

– What's the matter with you? I am asking why did you end up in Pārlielupe Prison that time?

– Oh, in prison?

– Yes!

– For beating you in *zole* all the time.

– I am serious. Please tell me!

– What do you want?

I looked into his eyes and noted complete confusion there.

– Well, you kept talking about the prison... folklore, stories...

– Yes, I liked that theme, the music... You kept talking about metal, were you metal?

– Yes!

– Hey, metal, can you finally start playing like a normal human being?

That was Kroģis hissing at me. I had made a totally idiotic move. He threw away the wasted cards and added:

– He's been in no walls, what are you – crazy?

Kandžejs even snorted:

– What, did you really think I had come straight from prison?

– Well, no, not exactly... Yes, that's what I thought.

– How old was I then? Fifteen?

– Older... You were older than me.

– Maybe seventeen then.

– But how... you were driving!

Now they were both guffawing openly.

– You thought that I was a brutal gangster but would never try to drive a car without a license, right?

– But the car, that black...

– That was Igaryok's car, my sister's boyfriend's.



They kept shaking with laughter. I took the cards, shuffled them and started to deal, but Kroģis grabbed my arm. I realized my mistake, picked the cards back up, shuffled them again and put them in front of him to cut. I tried to concentrate and continue with the world. But that was not all. Kandžejs put out a cigarette he had barely started smoking and said:

– Uh-oh. She is coming. Let's look sober.

A really smashing woman was coming our way. She came up to us and greeted everyone like an old acquaintance. I looked at her face – really! It was Liar, the same old Liar. Both she and I had changed enough for me to say to her freely and truthfully:

– You look great.

– You mean I am no longer fat?

Some things never change, and this question was in her old style. As was the explanation:

– I used to stuff myself to annoy my dad. He really wanted a beautiful daughter.

Now he had one. Only the right places were suggestive of her previous size, and I could not take my eyes off these places. It really was her, who would have thought that! I turned to the former gangsters:

– Do you know each other?

– Oh yes.

Kandžejs gave Liar an ingratiating lecher's look. She commented on the acquaintanceship in cool tones, as if everything were completely normal:

– We've been seeing each other lately, whenever he deigns to appear.

– But when did you meet?

– Wasn't it you who introduced us?

– Was it?

I frowned and pressed my hands to my cheeks. I had no memory of it, but maybe. It turns out that anything can happen. Kandžejs said:

– Yes, yes, that one time, remember? I think so. That time in Jelgava – and the thought made him very happy again, – Nelliņa, can you imagine? This dude thought that I had escaped from...

I raised my arms:

– Stop! Stop! Pause! Freeze!

I turned to Kandžejs:

– Did you pay for the beer? Here you have to pay!

So he immediately ran inside and up to the counter, pulling out banknotes as he went. Now I addressed Krogiš:

– Don't you need to use the toilet?

He approached everything with equal seriousness. Now too he thought about it and said:

– Yeah, I suppose I could.

Now it was just the two of us. She immediately became sulky, just like these many years ago. I don't think she put on a mask. I too sat there fidgeting, also just like at that time, despite the fact that I, for one, am an honest person. What had happened in the meantime was the real mask. Even if it wasn't – we were simply the same as at that time, without any pretense. I said to her:

– What's going on?

And she replied:

– What's going on? Nothing.

– How did you meet him?

– Whom?

– The wannabe prisoner.

– Whom do you mean?

– Kandžejs.

– But it was you who introduced us. Not long ago, we ran into each other by accident. There's nothing there, really. I simply remembered that time. I suddenly wanted to return there, if only for a while, at least somewhere near there. At that time, I was really in love with one of your company.

And she gave me this very bright smile. I got a pang of regret over the lost opportunity. How could I know that she would become so beautiful? She had cheated me. I said:

– I knew it.

She was not too surprised:

– Really? And Gatis also knew?

– No. I did not tell anyone.

Her smile was demonic:

– Too bad. Now it seems it would have been better if he knew.

I was once again confused.

– Why?

So was she:

– What do you mean – why?

I concentrated really hard:

– Why should he know...

– But I wanted him to know. But how can you say it. You remember the way I was.

I concentrated even harder:

– Whom were you in love with then?

– You said you knew.

– I forgot.

– With Gatis of course! You called him Death.

I laughed.

– Why are you laughing?

How could I not? The two honest citizens returned and sat down. I asked them:

– Who are you? Who am I?

They ignored such questions, which they were used to since that time. But then I used to understand much better what was going on.

Kandžejs and, okay, fine, Nellija was getting ready to go somewhere and began to say a polite goodbye. But Kroģis suddenly thought of something:

– Wait... I remembered something. Who had it happen to them?

– What exactly?

– Or who told about it? Jānis, you?

– What?

– About those two dudes in the dump.

– What are you talking about? Calm down.

– Someone was telling me about it...

When something occurred to him, he just could not be moved. We sat back down to listen.

– It went like this... This guy had a pistol.

Kandžejs seemed to be about to add something but thought better of it. Kroģis went on:

– One evening, he went to the old Jelgava garbage dump to practice shooting. Usually there is no one there. He came early in the morning, no one was there. He pulled out his gun and noticed a man. And he was the same kind of person. He also

had a gun and he had come to the dump to practice. And so they see each other! And they jump! Both had wanted to start shooting – they were very particular kind of people, and now they see there is someone coming at them with a gun! So they both duck. They fall to the ground and freeze. So the other one would not see them – you never know what kind of a person that is. He may want to shoot you. You can't move, as soon as you move, they may shoot. And the other guy thinks the same. So they just lie there and don't move. For a long time. For what can change there. No one is coming. It's an old, abandoned dump. So they lay like that for the whole day.

– And they are still lying there!

Kandžejs could not resist. Kroģis continued unperturbed:

– So they lay there until the evening. Both tried not to fall asleep and could not figure out what to do. Both thought, oh fuck, oh fuck. Perhaps I should yell to the other guy – peace? Let's get up and go? And what if he then shoots? But then another person came. Without a gun. Some girl. Some girl who wanted to learn to play the flute or some such pipe. And she was embarrassed to do it at home. So she came to the dump, did not see the dudes, sat down between the two, took out the flute and started blowing. I think it was the craziest concert there ever was. Who told me about this?

– But why are you telling it now? – Kandžejs asked. Kroģis cleared his throat; this must have been the longest speech in his life:

– I don't know. No reason. Okay, let's get up. I have to go to my wife and children.

Kandžejs glanced at the zole scores:

– You don't have to pay me my winnings, that's okay.

Kroģis also looked. And then he asked me:

– What did you write there?

I was still mesmerized by his story. I looked at the list. They all had done me in so bad, what else did they want? Usually I wrote everything down very accurately. But this time, the emotional background turned out to be too much. I had written pluses for everyone. Everyone had won. Kroģis shook my hand:

– Bye! Learn to write!

– Bye!

– Bye!

– Bye!

If we are now getting into something like this, I decided: before all the important things that have happened to me have turned out not to have happened, I should write them down. I wrote for seven days and seven nights. Several years passed.

When I had finished, as far as it was possible, I had to check if I haven't got it all confused. While the ink was drying, I went to the department of rare books and manuscripts of the National Library. Not having found what I was looking for, I corrupted the librarian with a kiss and penetrated the department of secret literature, the so-called special depository. There I found a volume entitled "A Full Catalogue of Metalheads". It was not difficult to locate Death: both his last address and telephone number were listed.

We sat on a terrace on the riverbank. It was some guest house in the Jelgava area. Death put aside the last roll of parchment and slurped some tea. He pondered what he had read for a little while and then said:

– It's the truth.

I nodded in accord; he was right. Death, who once again was called Gatis, put aside the empty cup and asked:

– But for what? It's all over. Have you been to Jelgava recently? There is no Gypsy house by the Shitket. The Pārlielupe prison has been condemned.

– But it's not just the physical that matters.

– What else? The metal stage has been successfully destroyed. Your Tabestic also has come to an end while you were writing. Must have really been good. Now there is nothing. No ideas, no mission.

I shook my head without knowing why:

– It all can't be over.

– It may be that it can't be.

He walked up to the music system and put in a disc. John Coltrane's "My Favorite Things" started playing.

– I only listen to jazz now.

Then he looked over his shoulder at me and added:

– And sometimes to Meshuggah. Meshuggah is too good not to listen to.

I wondered what it was. Thrash? Death?

– Thrash, – he said. – But we too have changed. Haven't you?

Goes with out saying, dude.

– But why didn't you write about First Frost?

What is it that he wanted?

– What's that?

– You don't remember? Really important. For many, it was kind of a cornerstone.

No, no. Wait a minute. I was beginning to remember... It was already after the end. When we had given up on the band. Right?

– It was the concert by Sinister. The first first-rate death metal concert in Latvia.

Yes, I did remember. Strange that the memory of it should have been lost... We went to that concert. Just this last time, because it's Sinister.

– Ask. Then it seemed that if we don't make the concert, nothing matters. We had to be there.

– It was snowing terribly, even though it was only October. I was waiting for you all at the Ozolnieki station. You were late like hell.

– It was snowing like hell, we were going as fast as we could. At the Sugar Plant station, we were stuck for almost an hour. We had already finished half a bottle of "Merkurs".

Meanwhile, I was standing on the platform in Ozolnieki. The station house was closed and I kept getting covered in snow. The train was late, perhaps it would never come. I was alone on the platform. Perhaps I should just go home. But I could not do that – what if the train comes and I am not here? The event should not take place without me. I think I felt almost happy spotting a tunnel of light through the psychotic snowflakes and a train attached to the tunnel. I got on. I walked through the cars and snow was dropping off me as if I were a piece of the external world that has entered the homey, rattling rooms. They were in the next-to-last car and Death called out to me:

– Come and have a seat, take a load off.

I sat down on the seat right above the heater. They had saved it for me. I could not sit there for long, believe you me. But for now, it was exactly what I needed. I did not have to sit there long, however – when the snowman that I was began melting into a waterfall, they decided they wanted to smoke, so we went to the vestibule.

We smoked and had a drink, but we didn't go back. Death said that he didn't really want to return to people and we remained where we were, between cars. The train stopped in Cena. Death leaned out to see if ticket controllers were not getting on and Zombie of course pushed him out. He barely managed to get back on and got a bit sulky. As the door was closing, Zombie pushed it back open with his foot. Death asked:

– You're going to throw me out of a moving train?

– No, just to have some air. We will smoke some more, right? Although, it might not be such a bad idea...

Snowflakes were flashing outside the open door, but that did not worry me anymore. We were going to a Sinister concert and the world was left behind. Everything was all right, no one will throw us out. Just as I had this thought, Death announced:

– Control got on in Cena.

– What? Why didn't you say something?

– There was no time, you were trying to kill me.

Zombie took a look inside the car.

– They're not coming yet. Let's try to make a run for it.

Death was grim:

– Next stop is Olaine. The worst station of all. If we don't make it to Sinister, I will never smile again. We should have bought tickets this time.

– Stop pissing and moaning.

Zombie was looking inside the car but they arrived from the other side. But it was not the ticket control, it was five skinheads.

– Oh! What do we see here!

We did not reply.

– What's going on, hairy ones?

We did not reply.

– You have to get out – see, the door is open!

– After you.

– What?

And he hit Zombie. Even though it was me who said that. Zombie jumped on him, but another guy, a really broad one, grabbed him in some sambo hold and threw

him to the ground. An awkward silence set in. To keep up the conversation, Death asked a simple question:

– What's your problem?

– What?

– What's wrong with you? Why are you wandering around creating problems?

No one wants you. People are disgusted to look at you. You are the real outcasts, is that what you want?

He hit Death as well. Then he motioned to the others – let's go! He looked insulted and they went away.

Zombie put his finger into his nose, pulled it out and looked. The finger was red.

– What happened? Did we get it in the noggin?

I lit a cigarette and explained:

– That's how it's supposed to be. We are their enemies. We can't be any different. It's our only chance, to be their enemies.

Death said:

– I don't think they're gonna make it. A dying breed.

Zombie was bitter:

– I think you are full of shit.

Then the door opened and I jumped, but it was not them: these were with pliers and official hats. There was also a woman who said right away:

– There's no smoking here.

I made an attempt at rescue:

– Please forgive us, we will take care of everything...

But the men yelled in unison:

– Tickets!

Again, we did not reply.

– Tickets!

– We are only going to Riga.

– Out!

The train stopped. It was Olaine. Death said:

– We can't get off. We have to make it to the Sinister concert.

– Out!

And so we got off. The woman shouted after us:



– Cut your hair!

They watched us to make sure that we would not get into another car. Other groups were getting out of other cars, cussing. Then the doors closed. The train shuddered, threw us a bouquet of blue sparks and took off. Was it worth it to wait for the next train in this blizzard, on this special night? We had no idea. Death nodded toward the group at the other end of the platform:

– It's them. Our friends.

– What friends?

– The ones who punched us in the nose. They must have been thrown off as well.

– Let's get lost.

And so we started walking.

– They are coming after us.

– Go, go, go.

Where were we going? It was not clear. There was some twenty kilometers to the concert. But we didn't care, we just kept to the rails. Walking was difficult, the rails were slippery, and the spacing of the ties did not match our strides. Visibility was bad, I mean, we could not see anything. Probably because at the fork we chose the wrong track. That is, we did not choose anything, we just continued to walk without saying a word. Zombie soon got bored;

– A good thing it's not snowing!

Of course, it was snowing, in cataclysmic proportions. No one laughed at his joke. But he continued to amuse himself:

– It's pleasantly cool, at least my lip is not smarting!

Genuinely, really, genuinely concerned, I asked:

– Did you get it real good?

– Acceptable.

And then he added these fateful words:

– Only you never get it.

– What do you mean, I don't?

– It's true. You never get really deep into shit. Isn't it right, Death, he never gets it?

Death nodded.

I stopped in my tracks. It was awful. I had gotten out of the habit of being insulted. I no longer knew how to be second rate. And now, out of the blue, in the middle of the night, in the middle of a storm I get it from my own friends. It was not the right moment for a serious discussion or adequate behavior. I did what I would not have done before. I turned and started walking back. With great strides. It was difficult to walk on the track, the ties broke your step, just like walking in the opposite direction. Only snow now hit me in the back of the head instead of the face. And I was no longer running into someone all the time. I walked alone, again, finally, as usual. All this time, all this time of Nirvana, of metal – death, doom and black – I walked together with them, without lagging behind a single step but, see, I turned out not to be authentic. In order to be that, I had to walk alone again. Completely alone. Even the icy moon could not be seen through the squalls. Somewhere in front, ever closer, were my enemies, whereas behind me were my friends, ever more distant. Death's call reached me through the blizzard:

– Hey, moron! Hey, moron? Where are you off to? Now we really won't make it to Sinister!

As if we could still make it somewhere, as if we had not got hopelessly lost. And even if some train were to still come in this blizzard, we are not even at a stop, we are going in some wrong direction, we are going to freeze to death, do they not understand it? Am I really the only adult here? The only rational one, the only cautious one? Meaning, the only coward? Among us who will never grow old, one had already snuck in, he has actually been there all the time, this little wobbly oldster. How could I have organized a band? Enough, enough, I must walk into this black fate, into this doom, to be finally completely born. And so I went, the snow no longer pelted my face and I could more or less see what was happening in front of me. There they were, like small threes against the background of vibrating white.

Here my memory got a little foggy again. I asked Gatis:

– What exactly happened after that?

– How would I know? You took off like some imbecile. It took us a while to even understand what was happening. I still don't quite understand.

Exactly, exactly, I walked off alone. I saw some people, there they were, like small trees. It occurred to me that maybe they are not the skinheads, we could not see clearly in the dark after all, maybe these are completely different people, friendly and familiar ones. But as I came closer, I saw that it was them and they bared their teeth as

they saw me. I didn't say a word, I just changed my gait slightly, putting my left foot forward and approaching them in half strides, like a boxer. They did not understand anything yet, they simply knew what was to be done. The head honcho, the one who had already delivered punches, raised his arm to punch me in the face. But my face was no longer where he punched, I made a left half-step to the side, bringing the rest of me along. His fist hit only four snowflakes, whereas I – bang! – punched him with my right. He went down, his legs twitching in the snow. Then another one was coming at me, but he was already afraid, holding his fists in front of his face. I punched him in the liver; this sponge soaked in cheap alcohol just squelched and dropped to his knees. A dagger flashed in the hand of the third...

Gatis brought my memories to a halt:

– I think we walked up about a minute later. Yes, yes, it was very soon. You were standing there and so were they.

That's right. My memory improved right away. It did not happen exactly the way I told. Yes, they were standing there like small trees, it was them alright. The head honcho asked:

– Where did you go?

I did not know how to answer.

– We started walking after you, we thought that you knew where you were going.

We did know, stranger, we did indeed.

– And where are we now? We will all freeze to death!

He sounded really worried, and the rest joined in:

– Yes, what are we gonna do?

They looked so scared that I found it really amusing, I just barely held back laughter. Gatis agreed:

– Yes, I too noticed that they were scared shitless.

– But so I again didn't get it in the face?

– I don't know. You had a bloody nose when we walked up.

– No! Really?

– Yes.

I suppressed laughter and remembered why I had come to them, my saviors. I said:

– You are morons.

– What? What? Please speak up, we're in a snowstorm.

I cleared my throat and said again, louder:

– You are pigs!

It occurred to me that pigs are not such bad animals and added:

– You are an embarrassment to your species!

They exchanged glances.

– What do you want? What is it?

– Want me to punch you in the mouth?

– What?

I walked up to him and pushed him.

– What's your problem?

He must have really thought that it's some sort of misunderstanding. I thought, what, what shall I do now?

– Little shits!

And then someone finally hit me, punched me in the nose. From the side. I did not see who it was, it was dark, after all, it was a blizzard.

It was not so terrible, just a numb sensation. I got a bit dizzy, that's all. And then my nose started dripping, my upper lip got wet. At first I thought it was snot, but no. As if I was some Pūpols.

And then you came up, my friends. I had thought you had abandoned me, forgive me.

– Where else would we have gone?

Zombie said:

– Good evening, gentlemen!

He noticed my face:

– I see that there's been no wasting of time!

And he hugged me. All strangers started speaking at once:

– It wasn't me!

– Me neither!

– Who hit him?

– I don't know, I didn't see!

– We have no problem.

But Death kept his litany:

– Fuck, how can we get to Sinister? Perhaps they've already started? Probably so. How can it be – we missed Sinister!

The strangers are getting really stressed out:

– What... what is it?

– What did we do?

– What's going on tonight?

But then another voice came from the dark, it was the voice of a girl:

– There will be no Sinister.

The strangers jumped, but Death asked:

– What do you mean, no Sinister? No Sinister for us?

– No Sinister for anyone. They didn't come. They got scared.

She came closer and it of course was Liar.

– Where did you come from?

– We too were on that train. We too came along.

Indeed, there was another group. Anything could hide in this blizzard. Perhaps the entire town of Jelgava was here. But Death asked:

– What's with Sinister? How do you even know that?

It was the right question to ask. But Liar held up some shiny object:

– They called me!

It was a cell phone, Motorola Star Tac. We of course did not recognize the model, we just knew that the matter was serious. That's how it was at the time. The strangers stood at attention.

– What did they say?

– Sinister got scared to come to Latvia. They won't play here.

– Really?

– Yes. They got scared. They haven't come. Will not come. There'll be no concert.

– So we haven't missed it?

– We can't miss it.

Death raised his eyes to the sky that kept falling down on us and exclaimed:

– God in heaven, how good you are!

And he hugged Zombie and me. And then another one joined in, I just didn't see who it was. We were laughing happily, what else could we do? I had become a human

being and nothing in this world happened without us and our opponents had been defeated.

Gatis was nodding:

– Yes, that's how it was.

– How could I forget it? – I wondered.

– We had already drunk some. And then we drank some more.

– But it happened like we just remembered, right?

– Yes, yes. Or maybe they got scared of your friends, the criminals... didn't you say something like that?

– Oh, no, no!

– But how did we get away that time? We didn't stay there, did we?

– I don't know. I can't remember.

– Oh, I know. I think that girl called Kārlis. He came to get us in his old man's car. He was really pissed off. The blizzard! It was Kārlis, who else.

– To Kārlis!

– To Kārlis!

We fell silent for a moment.

– But what happened then that... What for?

– What do you mean?

– Well, what did we learn? What did we get out of all that?

– Honestly?

– No, go ahead and lie!

– Really?

– No, tell me the truth.

– I don't really know. Maybe we simply didn't go over to the other side.

– But maybe we should have? Maybe then we would have become more successful members of society?

– And what's wrong with now?

– Well, nothing really. But now what's called real life does not seem serious to me. All that worry about work and your place under the sun. We didn't learn that.

– Well, because we were morons.

– Yes, little idiots.

And we laughed.

Zombie appeared on the terrace – now he was Edgars again. He had put on weight and his hair was very short. He noticed me and said:

– Oh! Blondie!

He stretched out his hand, gripped mine tightly, looked into my eyes. We hadn't seen each other for several years, but he broke up all this ice of time, absence and past with his first question:

– And how's your sex life?

THE END