

**Synopsis:** This story about a boy named Jacob, who sees and explores the world for his blind parents, has appeared in book form with inspiring illustrations by Zane Veldre (1986) and was performed as a play at the Latvian National Theatre – both great successes. For his parents, Jacob is the key to life. Honestly and unflinchingly, but also with wit and humour, he narrates how their everyday life is organized, reporting on its burdens and challenges, as well as its comic moments. Jacob also reveals his wishes: Sometimes he'd love to just be a normal crazy teenager. Interesting perspectival changes are woven into the novel, as when Jacob's mother reflects on wanting to be a mother as a nonsighted person and on raising a child that she is at the same time dependent on.

### Excerpt

*In the beginning, it's easy, of course. In the beginning, you just have to watch his breathing, touch the back of his neck to see if he's too hot or too cold. And, sure, in the beginning, his dad had to be kept an arm's length away from him, to keep him from accidentally rolling over onto him, but other than that... Well, OK, diapers, yeah, diapers are always going to be a pain, but when he's sleeping, it's easy to get things done. You just have to be quiet. But then he starts crawling – and you crawl alongside him. The main thing is to keep the floor clean and his head or, good god, his eyes, from hitting any sharp corners. Then he starts grabbing on to everything and wants to walk, but can't do it without you. We made him a little play pen. He started walking on his own, but everything still scared him. Well, and then suddenly it's like somebody flips a switch and*

*he's totally fearless, no brakes, nothing, and as his mum all you can do as is pray and trust your own instincts. You learn to tell how his breathing changes when he's lying or upset, or happy. It's not magic. It's just like learning to fry potatoes – it's not easy, because you want to control the whole process, but that's not really possible – everything just slides around while the oil sizzles. Compared to that it's just easier to cut up produce and throw it into a soup pot. You cut it all up, toss it in, add water, stir it, and it's ready. Pour it into a bowl and eat it. How can you tell how much you poured into each bowl? Use your finger to check! Along the edge. In the beginning, it burns, of course, but after a while you get used to it... It's the same with a child. You check everything by asking questions. By following rules. There's a special device for measuring the water level in a cup. You put it on its edge and when the water level reaches a certain height it beeps. Children don't have a device like that and life doesn't stop because of trifles like that.*

*I wanted a child, and I got one – I was lucky! I always need to remember that. And to keep trying to talk things out with my little man. In that sense, Jēkabs is... a real blessing.*

It's Aunt Daina's birthday. I'm six years old, she's turning thirty or more. Everybody has arrived for the party on the first floor of the dorm. Mum has been helping Daina all day with cutting and braising, I've been getting in the way and bringing down glasses and stools with dad, so there are enough for all the guests. But, honestly, it's wrong and tactless to say that you're "getting in somebody's way", because I wasn't in anybody's

way – I know good boys don't do that, and I'm a good boy. I don't get in the way, I was practically flying down the stairs, landing on the open space at the bottom of the stairwell in my best ninja turtle style, sticking out the forks and knives I was holding in my hands as a warning to everyone. I stop. I need to take stock of the situation.

Everyone is milling around the dorm, just as they had been, sticking close to the walls, and I can continue on my way just as stealthily as before, so that when the forks and knives are carefully placed next to each plate, I can dash back up to the third floor like Ultraman. I'm the fastest one in the dorms! Oh, but it turns out all the knives and forks are already there – nothing's missing, and everybody is already standing together – mum grabs me and pulls me closer to her, puts her arms around me and starts belting out "Happy birthday to you!" – it's Aunt Daina's birthday.

Mum and Aunt Daina have been best friends since boarding school – since they'd found each other, they've never been apart, and so Aunt Daina's special day is also a special day for our family. She is my favourite aunt. The only aunt I like, because she has kind hands and a beautiful smile. Mum and Aunt Daina became friends, because mum defended little Daina against the teachers, and when Aunt Daina had chicken pox and half the school was under quarantine, my mum still would sneak along the school's hallways trying not to get caught. They've both been blind as bats since they were kids and I think their friendship is built on them believing each other completely. You can do it! You'll make it! It'll work out! Basically, I think I also have to thank Aunt Daina in a way

that I turned out like I did, because mum raised me believing in herself, but it was because she believed in Daina. Well, something like that anyway.

There's a crush of people in the small room – the dorms have three levels though. Of the children, the only one here is Ļoša, but he is still smaller than me, and also near-sighted, so he doesn't count. I'm the only one here who can see. I'm sitting squeezed in between my dad and mum and sway with their every motion – it's that crowded in here. My dad is big and lets out a huge belly laugh every time he tells a joke. He fills everyone's glasses and has drenched not only his own trousers, but also mine, but only I know that and we both pretend that wet trousers are an unimportant fact that no one needs to know about, let alone mum. My dad is a master of bluffing. Until he was umpteen or however many years old, he could still read the bottom line on the chart at the eye doctor's office, which is why he keeps moving through his memories of colours and shapes, telling everyone what the world looks like.

My mum is a classy lady who likes reciting poems instead of giving toasts. She remembers an endless number of them from heart – several for any occasion. I don't remember poems at all, so I try to stay out of everyone's sight (ha ha) and try to match my parents' movements without falling off this wobbly stool. The window in the little room is wide open and there is an unusually warm summer's night just past it. And I watch a bat flit past the wall of the house across from us. And I see a woman changing her clothes in a third floor window of that same house. And I see an old worn pink night

shirt slide over her back. And I see her leaning in closer to the mirror and rubbing a line in the middle of her forehead with her index finger as if she were trying to even it out, and, I assume, forcing herself to stay awake until sunrise...

"Hey, guys, turn on the light, for Chrissakes! The Logins kid can see!" my secret observation of the outside world is interrupted by Ivāriņš, Aunt Daina's significant other. That's how Daina likes to call him. Mum presses her lips into a line and I could only guess why. One possibility: Ivāriņš gets on her nerves. Especially when he's slurring his speech – he slurs his speech, because he drinks like a fish (I'm quoting mum). Another possibility: I could've said that the light had to be turned on, instead of waiting for someone to notice it and make mum feel uncomfortable. I fidget a bit on the bench, because I don't want to be the bad guy, but Aunt Daina, who knows my mum better than anybody else, immediately leaps to my defence and smooths out the situation. "That's what happens when a boy has been raised so well – he won't let out a peep without having a good reason! Jēkabs, sweetie, if you need anything, just say so, OK? Don't be shy!" And so, because of me, there was light. Because of me. Only because of me, because nobody else needed it. I felt special, but didn't say anything. That's what good kids do.

I'm my mother's most cherished dream. The perfect child. The responsibility is pretty huge, to be honest. My mum was born blind. No one told me so, but I think it has to do with her mum's – grandma's – non-stop drinking. I'll tell you what – she drinks a lot

more than Ivariņš! And I know what I'm talking about. My mum is the youngest of three sisters and while the older ones were doing regular farm work, my mum was sniffing and feeling her way around the world, because she couldn't do much else. She could though! But only she knew that, nobody else, everybody felt she was useless. Starting in first grade, my mum studied at a boarding school hundreds of kilometres away from home. Alone. Little. Well, like me now. But different, because already then, right from the beginning, she knew she'd have a family and a child: a son – Jēkabs – me. She knew she'd be a good mum, the best, literally the ideal mum, who would never permit any of the mistakes that her mother did, which is why I know that it's up to me to make sure her plan isn't ruined. I need to make sure my mum's lips aren't pressed together in annoyance, but instead automatically stretch into a smile whenever somebody is talking about me.

"My goodness, that Jēkabs of yours is a golden child, so well-behaved, I've never seen something like that – not a peep out of him!" and mum smiles.

"No, fuck it, it's crazy you get him to listen to you! My bro's kid, he's a total mess, comes for a visit, practically running up the walls, sweet Jesus, and I told my bro – why can't you get a handle on that boy of yours, and just like that, well, we got into it, and they left. At least I didn't have to deal with them anymore! But you're a really good mum, Zelma, just the best," – and mum is smiling even though she doesn't like swearing.

"One way or another, you're a fantastic mum – Jēkabs is just the perfect proof of that!"

He's a smart boy, understands that he can't do just anything, that he needs to help his parents..." – and mum smiles, though she doesn't like the pitying tone.

To put it bluntly, if mum is smiling because of me, then that means I'm proof that despite everything and everyone, mum's life still turned out OK. I know not to walk around whining, not to take anything from anybody, good god imagine even asking somebody for something, not to run away, not to get in the way. It's all clear to me. And I feel proud that my mum is proud of me. She's also proud that nobody has ever dared tell her that maybe she rushed into having a child or that it would up-end her everyday routine. My mum didn't have a single doubt, she never does, and that's why I'm pretty sure my mum and dad are together – specifically because she made up her mind and that was it, basta. Mum has said that dad was the cleverest of all the boys at the boarding school and also that he'd given up smoking because of her, and doesn't that prove his love for her?

For dad, I'm "his child/his wife's life project", which is something just large enough to forever remain somewhat incomprehensible. Dad's main responsibility to mum – just like for me – is to be like everyone else and not stick out from the crowd, though I'm definitely better at it than he is. My dad is big, his hands are big, and when he leans back the space he takes up is also big, so when the juice spilled not only into my lap but also Ivariņš' and he started swearing, my mum pressed her lips into a line again and Aunt Daina rushed in to save the day one more time.

"Who wants coffee?" Sometimes, Aunt Daina is almost like Lassie, who is also loyal and always shows up at just the right moment to make everything right.

This time Aunt Daina's question about the coffee means more. It means cake would be served soon. OK, everything is alright – I'll eat cake, I'll like it, after all I even helped decorate it. I still don't understand who exactly cares about that here, but...if I'm told to do something, I do it and don't ask any questions.

"Well, how did you arrange everything?" mum asks me, because it would be messy for her to touch the cake, since it is covered in frosting.

"There are kiwi slices on the sides and then a ring of strawberry compote, a ring of orange slices, and then another ring of strawberries with a kiwi rose in the centre..."

"Beautiful," mum likes it, so it's clear that: "Daina will love it. Sprinkle powdered sugar over all of it, OK? But so it's even, not in piles."

"Mhm..."

A cookie-cheesecake. There's nothing better than that. Right after coffee. Because, look, coffee is my favourite flavour – a real taste of my childhood, which is the reason why I'm feeling bitter tonight, sitting with the grown-ups and asking them who wants coffee – I know that I won't get the cup of coffee I want, because kids aren't supposed to drink coffee. Coffee tastes like freedom to me – it tastes like *grown-ups-can-kids-can't*, which



I can have as much as I like on the days when I convince mum to let me stay home from kindergarten and I'm on my own. I pour some coffee for myself and sit there drinking it like a big man, looking out the window far off into the distance, as far as I can see...

Mum knows I like coffee, she even lets me drink it, as long as it's kind of weak, but not when other people are around – only at home and as long as I keep it quiet, so that nobody can ever accuse her of being too thoughtless in how she's raising that boy.

Well, whatever, I'll have to be sneaky! While I sit and wait for the water to boil, I take stock of the situation – what I need to do to get what I want.

"One last time – who's drinking coffee?" Daina asks armed this time with the coffee tin and a teaspoon not just a question.

"I'll count!" I volunteer, because I know that everyone there will be ready to raise their hands quietly, because someone will see it – I'll see it. My dad too, of course, asks for his cup of coffee – loudly and expressively. I don't know where he got such a booming voice. Anyway, this is my big chance to get some coffee and I don't plan on letting it slip by. I count every raised hand and am thrilled that Aunt Velta and Ivāriņš have their hands in their laps. Though to be honest, Ivāriņš probably didn't even hear the question, because he was so caught up in telling Ļoša's grandpa something, who was listening with a lot less enthusiasm and still managed to raise his hand.

"Thirteen!" I announce, adding on a whole extra cup of coffee for my own use, and walk

to the other end of the kitchen to help Aunt Daina. The coffee tin is already open – it smells so good!

Aunt Daina pours some water into each cup, and I bring them out to the guests, while starting to tell all of them a story about evil Shredder from the Ninja Turtles, so that neither mum, nor anyone else would start paying too much attention to who is getting each cup of coffee. I give a cup each to Zina, Ļoša's grandpa, mum, dad, Maiga, Dagmāra, old Valters, Sveta and her husband, Ludāns, Kaiva, Aunt Daina, and the last one – the very last one – is for me. For a second I think that maybe Ļoša noticed that I'm sneaking a cup, but I ignore it – he wouldn't say anything unless he was really sure. I make myself comfortable at the table and put down my cup of coffee in the one open spot at the table. But just then dad swings around looking for the sugar tray and I watch as the delicate cup sitting on an even more delicate saucer starts to wobble and then – almost in slow-motion – the coffee cup tips over on its side, spilling all of its delicious contents right onto me. It's so hot! So damn hot! But I bite my lower lip and stay quiet – I know how to do that and know that that's what everybody expects of me. Dad doesn't say anything, and neither do I, because that means everything is nice and tidy, classy and elegant – nobody tried sneaking anything, nobody is weak. My chest hurts the most, so I try blowing onto it underneath my shirt, fanning the scalded area. My legs hurt less. The party keeps going, everybody drinks their coffee and eats their cake, praising me for decorating it. Incredibly valuable complements. Between gobbling down bites of cookies

and cheesecake, I swallow salty tears as I lean over, so no one notices, and suck out tiny sips of coffee from my shirt and trousers. Ugh.

I didn't get much of that coffee, or maybe it was because I scalded myself and I was so very manly and ignored it. I don't remember the end of the party and didn't stay awake to watch the sunrise. Instead I woke up the next morning in my pull-out chair completely soaked and sweaty.

I roll up my pyjamas – my chest is red. I carefully stick my finger against the red area – it's hot and hurts. But it's not like I can't stand it. Maybe I'm turning into the Human Torch. No, or maybe Superman, because heat is nothing to him, right? What a dream! I saw something really important in a dream – I was running through the basement of some new building at a construction site, it was covered in scaffolding, and I kept running higher and higher, and higher, and higher up to the next floor until I got to the very top, until I was standing on its roof! And it wasn't just five measly floors, no, it was at least thirty, and the building seemed to stop, but the scaffolding didn't, and I just kept climbing up the scaffolding, and it slowly turned into columns, and those columns went up into the clouds, into these beautiful, patterned clouds, and it was so nice and warm, and great, and then someone pushed me off that last column, and I was falling. Usually, when I'm dreaming I wake up as soon as I start falling, but this time was different – this time I woke up only after I'd already fallen down and thought: "Huh! That didn't hurt at all." Well, that was my dream, I need to go tell mum.

I get out of bed and get dressed. My shirt rubs painfully against the spot that got scalded, so I press a piece of white paper I grabbed from the desk against my stomach – it's pleasantly cool. I feel a little dizzy, but I don't doubt for a second that it's because I hadn't had coffee in so long.

The kitchen is filled with a tense silence. Well, OK, "silence" isn't really the right word, because in our house the radio is on from the moment someone wakes up until the moment when the last of us goes to sleep! Right this second there's a programme about a new radio drama that is just about to start. Something about a star child. I like radio dramas, so does my mum, but this morning she's quiet. On the mornings when my mum is quiet, I don't ask her anything unless I really need to, so I make my own cheese sandwich and don't say anything about my dream, even though I really want to share it.

At breakfast time I take stock of the situation: mum is clearly angry at dad, because he looks like a shadow of his usual self. And that's how we leave him at home – we have to go help Daina clean up the mess left over from the party. As I go down the stairs, I get dizzy again, but I forget about it right away, I pretend I'm the Invisible Man and that the white piece of paper pressed against my red stomach is the source of my invisibility. I can come and go as I please, but because I'm invisible and the air just blows right through me, it also makes me dizzy. My mum ruins everything, because she doesn't know I'm invisible (even though she can't actually see me!), and decides to stop me suddenly on the stairs and presses me tightly against her body.

"Don't ever drink, Jēkabs. It's just not worth it," she says as she holds me in a tight embrace and pushes the white piece of paper into my stomach causing a burst of red-hot heat. Now I feel like I've become real and visible, touchable and weighed down by all of mine and dad's failings. It's not easy, but I don't say a word, because it's not easy for mum either – I know that much.

"Jēkabs!" – again like she'd seen it all ahead of time – Daina calls to me from her end of the kitchen. "Are you both coming?"

"Yeah, put on the coffee," my mum answers instead of me as we return to Daina's mini-realm.

"Sweetheart, take a look over by the sink, my eye fell out over there somewhere..." Aunt Daina tousles my hair as I walk past her, and closes the door behind me and my mum, then latches it.

"Mhm," I've been taught to answer without wasting words.

Daina's eyes fall out a lot, especially when she's washing dishes. How is it possible for her to scrub those dishes hard enough to make her eyes burst out of her head, I just can't understand it, but I'm pretty sure that grown-ups simply fall to pieces and maybe with each year it just becomes more and more uncontrollable. Aunt Daina is thirty-six years old after all... My grandpa, for example, keeps his teeth on the night stand next to his bed while he's sleeping. Aunt Nastija (Loša's mum who shows up in the dorms hardly

at all, but when she does she's got a thousand new stories to tell) always talks about putting her legs behind her shoulders. A few times I've tried – unsuccessfully and very painfully – to dig my eyes out of my face, but just assumed that I couldn't because only grown-ups fall to pieces and so I'm still too young for that.

The round glass ball had fallen on the ground and rolled back to the farthest corner behind the sink. An old (because it's slow) cockroach crawls over it and goes on its way. I don't even wince – cockroaches are a fact of life in the dorms. At least for me. Nobody else sees them, after all...

"Is it there?"

"Yeah," I'm already holding the eye with two of my fingers hidden in my shirt and rubbing it against one of my trouser legs.

"Just pop it back in," Daina leans down towards me, with my other hand I hold open her eyelid and with a quiet "fp!" I snap the eye back into place. I adjust it. It looks fine.

Sometimes I've popped my aunt's eye back in, but pushed her eyelid and eyelashes in with it. That really looks horrific. But this time it worked out beautifully, and I'm happy.

"Oh, what would I do with you," Aunt Daina says under her breath and takes the leftover cake from the party out of the fridge. "You've earned a treat! You want some?"

"Uh-huh," – it feels great to be needed.

Rasa Bugavičute-Pēce "Puika, kurš redzēja tumsā" [The boy who saw in the dark]

Excerpt

Translated by Uldis Balodis

"Make him a cup of weak coffee, too," mum whispers, and Daina takes down a third cup. Then it's just the three of us left in the world – me, mum, and Aunt Daina. They speak in Russian to each other, and I can catch a couple of words here or there. But this time I feel better than other times on occasions like this, because I've got a secret, too – the white piece of paper stuck to my stomach. Aunt Daina turns up the radio and I hear the end of the radio drama about the star child. Maybe that's me?