

Biography: Zigmunds Skujiņš (born 1926, Riga) is a renowned and established Latvian author of prose, poetry and drama, one of the greatest names and literary minds of the 20th century Latvian literature. His books are among the most widely read and published, many works have been adapted for cinema and theatre, and many translated into English, German, French, Russian, Lithuanian, Czech, Georgian, and other languages.

Synopsis: The narrative of the novel *Flesh-Coloured Dominos* is split into two parallel stories. On the one hand we have a story of 18th-century Baltic German gentry, within the framework of Tsarist Russia: Baroness Waltraut von Bruegen is searching for her husband who has disappeared during the Turkish wars. With great difficulty she learns that her husband was torn in two during a battle, and that his lower half was stitched onto the upper half of the local captain Ulste, a man of humble origins. After finding the lower half of her husband, she conceives a child with it and is in the lengthy process of contemplating who should be considered the father of her child when her husband returns – in one piece. On the other hand, we have the life story of the author himself, travelling through the turmoil of 20th-century Latvia. The story is a rich tapestry of detail, with nationalities intertwined in an inseparable mix – Latvians, Germans, Jews, and Japanese, among many others. The connection between the two narratives gradually becomes clear: they click together through details mentioned as if in passing. The novel is also a moving story of the experience of one person’s life during turbulent times.

Excerpt

I never knew my father or mother. I remember once when I was little, the topic came up over dinner with guests; grandfather said Ausma had gone off overseas with some circus act and disappeared without a trace, like a pebble down a well. After that I’d often peer

terrified down the damp and darkened walls of our well, afraid I'd see a drowned woman. The subject of my mother and father became an issue again when our teacher in junior school assigned us an essay titled 'My family'. Grandfather just laughed: Write that your mother's a Siamese princess and that your father's Charlie Chaplin. And I wrote something along those lines. As she handed back our workbooks, our teacher joked that I'd be a writer some day, the next E. T. A. Hoffmann. But my nemesis, Consul Egle's son Fabian, spent the break talking loudly about how he doubted children of *those* kinds of women even have fathers. And that my *grand-père* was just a poor carter who made his living off transporting corpses.

That night, Grandfather and I had a long talk. The answer was split in two, like the tips of a fluttering pennant or banner. No child has ever come into the world without a father, and the matter of whose father was better, mine or Fabian's, could only be settled once it was clear what became of the seeds they'd sown.

'So kids come from seeds?'

'How else? Of course from seeds.' 'And where is the seed sown?'

'In the furrow of life, dummy. Where else?' Grandfather stared at me in surprise.

'Life furrows?'

'You've got to be joking,' Grandfather's temper flared. 'We've got seven mares and three stallions in the barn, and you have no clue where the seeds of life are sown!'

Grandfather's eccentric, old-fashioned ways were tied to exacting precision, his wild imagination to deep-seated knowledge. It's possible his old-fashioned ways weren't really him being old-fashioned, but a display of his disdain for conformity. The way Grandfather

saw it, what the world needed was entertainment, rich theatrics. He didn't want to do anything the easy way. When performing in Paris, the singer Maurice Chevalier traipsed around in a flat-topped boater, which no one else did any more. When Grandfather worked with the carriages, he'd wear either a light grey English bowler hat or one of his many top hats. In cold weather he'd go out for firewood wrapped in his pelerine cloak. He'd paint benches in the yard while wearing white gloves. His tendency to wear a hat in any situation, it seemed, was driven by a modicum of human vanity: Grandfather was handsome, but his hair was thinning – a fact he either consciously or subconsciously tried to hide.

I've thought a lot about to what I could best compare Grandfather's personality. Maybe the old cash register that sits proudly on the Baroness's desk. Modern registers are definitely more practical, but this old machine was a monumental work of art, made of silvery metal, embossed with chains of flowers. When you cranked the handle and pushed the buttons, the beautiful redwood drawer would jump open with the ring of a bell. The next morning Grandfather said he had to drive the small carriage to Riga and if I wanted a ride to school he'd drop me off.

The small carriage was incredibly enigmatic. In some ways it was similar to the black mares that pulled it. Now that I'm older and wiser, I'm able to elaborate a bit more on what, back then, were simply vague notions. The things we consider beautiful are, more often than not, a sign of conformity. The brilliance of perfection – be it the beautiful body of a woman, a boat in full sail, a running deer or a luxury car – touches us like the warmth from a stove or the breeze from a draught. The feeling I got when I touched the door of the glistening carriage excited me no less than a lover's caress would ten years later. The cool, red goatskin seat sighed quietly under my weight. I sat between two crystal glass windows like a

king on his throne.

The May sun shone brightly. The blossoming row of cherry trees along the Manor's stone wall created a white wave you could almost ski over. Grandfather came out not through the small side door but through the large main door, dressed in a new, light blue riding coat, indicating it was a special occasion. On his head, of course, was a silk top hat.

Five minutes before class started, the carriage swerved in a thin arc up to the school door.

One of the classroom windows was open. Fabian's friend Alvis was sitting hunched up like a fat cat, using a pocket mirror to shine the sunlight into the eyes of girls walking by. As soon as he saw the carriage he fell back off the windowsill. And almost immediately several other heads popped into his place, like cuckoos from a clock.

That night, Grandfather and I talked again.

'Do you know what Fabian said? He takes back what he said about you being poor. But you still smell like a stable. Me too.'

'Ah-ah-ah! Tell him that stables aren't the worst smell there is. Foolishness, however, that has a nasty stench! Tell him it's easier to get into Buckingham Palace itself than it is to get into the palace stables. Ask him if he knows that Ernest Biron, the Duke of Courland and regent of Russia under Empress Anna Ivanova, was the Kalnciems Manor stable master's grandson. And ask him: What exactly is a duke, and what a stable master? Compared to the history of mankind, all of these distinctions are short - lived and trivial. One hundred, even two hundred years from now – which in the scheme of infinity is but a single breath – the scale of value will be different. What's a duke compared to Darwin, Kant or Harvey? Like Turandot, the history of mankind will give preference to those who can solve the riddle.'

I listened to Grandfather's words in silence, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. He studied my face and seemed to understand that I wasn't ready for this kind of discussion. He opened the table drawer and took out a deck of cards.

'You see,' he said, spreading the cards out on the table, 'each generation has to learn to play the game from scratch. But there's also genetic inheritance. A skilled player can give birth to children who then inherit an improved version of that player's skill. Do you think our beautiful mares fell from the sky? It's genetic! It doesn't matter where I am, in church or at the market – I can spot a fool from ten paces away. Stupidity, arrogance, violence, those you can see in people's expressions. And words can lie, but the hands never do.'

Grandfather owned what he referred to as a 'cart rental business'. Fabian's scathing comment about transporting dead bodies hadn't exactly come from nowhere. There were also catafalques in the carriage house, sitting in the half-light among the coaches, fiacres, landaus and phaetons that clients rented for weddings, baptisms and confirmations; there were both black and white catafalques, to which two, four or even six horses could be hitched. Put simply, they were hearses, and they looked no different from those used in the times of Mozart, Robespierre and Casanova. There was an airfield a kilometre from the Manor and commercial aircraft would fly over our yard daily as they'd take off and land; but, Grandfather would philosophise, eras always overlap in the end. It really was a fantastical sight when a two-horse catafalque rode out 'to work'. Above where the coffin lay rose a rounded, baroque roof supported by thick pillars and decorated with scalloped drapes and golden palm fronds. The horses were draped with black netting that reached to the ground. Large bouquets adorned the horses' foreheads. A coachman in a long black coat and a crescent-shaped, eighteenth-century hat sat on the coachbox. Four more coachmen,

wearing the same black capes and the same crescent hats, were to walk on each side of the catafalque during the funeral procession. The men sat on the edges of the empty carriage as it drove out of our yard. But as they swung their feet back and forth you could catch glimpses of their legs from under their coats and the image was shattered: their trousers were completely of the twentieth century – probably bought from some Jew on Marijas Street or from the new flea market next to the Central Market. Either way, their clothes couldn't date back beyond the First World War.

These strange pretences that were so close to the frightening, intangible mystery of life and death held me tightly in their grip. The entertainment aspect of it didn't make it less real. It was theatre, but instead of plays people performed life. And those who were taken by catafalque to the cemetery didn't take their bows after the show.

The house we lived in also belonged to the era of Mozart, Robespierre and Casanova. It was no palace, even though it had initially been built as the Manor's central building. It was a simple two-storey structure with a great baroque tiled roof and a large fireplace in the middle. Clean lines and balanced proportions gave it a natural beauty, as did the ornately carved wooden doors, the ornamental metalwork and individually designed window shutters.

We – by which I mean Grandfather, the Baroness, Aunt Alma and I – lived in one wing of the Manor. The Pilot and his family lived in the other wing. Or rather, the Pilot's wife and two sons lived there, because the Pilot was usually off flying somewhere in the monoplane he had built himself, the 'White Fuzz'. To Africa, the Canary Islands, or Borneo. You could usually find out where he was by reading the first pages of the newspaper.

The kitchen and giant fireplace were used by both wings of the Manor. When the Baroness

caught the Pilot cutting bits from the rack of her smoked ham the sharing stopped. The door to their wing of the Manor was walled shut. If there was anything to be discussed with the neighbours, it was done over the phone. We used oil and carbide lamps for light. There was no electricity in the Manor.

On the ground floor, along with the Baroness's room and the office, was a room that, for some reason, was called the armoury. What it really was, was a changing room for the staff. The walls were lined with large old cupboards which had most likely been built right there; there was no indication that they could be taken apart or that they had in some other way been brought in through the door. The massive, blacksmith-forged locks were no longer used, probably because the keys had long been lost. And the things you could find in those cupboards! Those same pelerine cloaks and grooms' liveries, thick cassocks, Friesian tailcoats and field jackets with bright buttons. The shelves were lined with top hats, bowlers and velvet huntsman's caps. Wigs rested on special wooden stands: a layer of dust and cobwebs indicated they'd lain untouched for some time. The corner of one cupboard was crammed with black mohair armbands and mourning rosettes to pin on hats.

Foggy mirrors in cracked Venetian frames stood between the windows, their mercury faces speckled here and there with bubbles. I'd sometimes sneak into the armoury and stand in front of one of the mirrors, where I'd become Admiral Nelson, Napoleon Bonaparte, Gulliver, George Washington, Cardinal Richelieu. When combining the contents of those cupboards with things from the other rooms – a blanket, a broom handle, towels or kitchenware – the possibilities were endless. In my imagination I could turn into a musketeer, the Caribbean pirate Captain Morgan, an ancient Latvian soldier or Robinson Crusoe.

The Baroness knew about my pretend games; she'd even play along, sometimes, by letting the door open and close in a ghostly way or by beating eerie rhythms on a chair. We'd look at each other conspiratorially, the Baroness would press a finger to her lips and, carefully lifting her booted feet, would sneak out as quietly as she had come in.

Aunt Alma did the cooking, the cleaning, the laundry, and would introduce herself to strangers as the housekeeper. She couldn't stand the Baroness, not even the sight of her, and called her a crazy German behind her back, and, at least once a week, shouted threats of 'If this keeps up, I'll quit!' Back then I had no idea what she meant, and I didn't try to figure it out. There were no noticeable changes in our lives and Aunt Alma stayed on and continued her threats.

The Baroness was strange, that was undeniable. She wore riding breeches and knee-high boots whether it was winter or summer. She smoked cigarettes and wore men's ties. But at the same time, she went around with her hair curled, enveloped in the scent of perfumes that came from tiny bottles. Born and raised at the Manor, she had also lived there through the First World War and the disorder that came when power changed hands. She had no family. The Manor was technically still her property. Her relationship with Grandfather was complicated. On the one hand, he was her tenant; on the other, the Baroness worked for Grandfather, as the office manager of his 'business'. The Baroness's family tomb was located at the top of a small hill in the Manor park; it was a concrete crypt with an iron door and marble lions. In Bermond's time the iron door had been destroyed and the sarcophagi broken into; in turn, the lions had lost their heads to the Bolsheviks. When I was in primary school the tomb was vandalised by 'hooligans'. The lids of the coffins had been pushed down on to the ground, a fire had been made in front of the door. A row of skulls – four of

five of them – was lined up on the stone threshold. The rest of the bones were scattered across the entire front of the tomb, along with threadbare rags and scraps of lace, as if there had been an explosion.

The Baroness picked up all the pieces, scraped them together, cleaned them off and put everything back in the coffins. Even the skulls were put back where they belonged. I asked her if she was sure she'd put them in the right places, what if she were wrong and the skulls were mixed up?

'Oh, no!' she answered. 'I know them. That's Bodo, that's Lieselotte, and look, there's Ulrich and there's Augustine ... I've lost count of how many times I've had to put them back! You could say that human bones are just as unique as people themselves.'

'But what if you weren't here?'

She smiled slyly and made our secret sign – she pressed her index finger to her lips. 'That's exactly why I *am* here.'

I was a bit afraid of the Baroness, but was also inexplicably drawn to her. Her room was unlike any other place in our wing of the Manor. A cave of secrets, filled with extraordinary and foreign treasures. The Baroness always had a new box to open, another secret drawer in her Louis XVI secretaire. I could inspect letters written with a quill and sealed with melted wax stamped with a signet ring. I could pin a real *Ordre de la Reconnaissance*, an Order of Recognition issued by the Duke of Courland, to my coat, or hang a real medallion of the mysterious Freemasons around my neck.

I didn't understand a lot of what she'd tell me, but even that created an atmosphere in line with the Baroness's personality – the stifled laughter when inspecting strange objects, or the odd tendency to drift off during conversation and lightly, ever so lightly, brush my ear

with the tip of her finger.

The Baroness used neither oil nor carbide lamps and instead burned candles. Sometimes one, sometimes three, sometimes more. There were candlesticks all around her room.

'I can't stand oil and carbide,' she said. 'When you let noxious smells into a room they overpower everything else. See how nice this sandalwood fan smells! Or this old leather journal. Candles burn nobly, each with its own character.'

I can see the candles in the Baroness's room, flickering in their silver candlesticks. I can even smell them, crying their tears of melting, yellow wax. And my thoughts weave in playful images like the tendrils of smoke that linger long after the flames are blown out.