

**Biography:** Regīna Ežera (née Regīna Kindzule, 1930–2002) was born in Rīga. Ežera graduated from the Department of Journalism at the University of Latvia and published her first literary work in 1955. From the 1960s onwards her primary occupation was writing. Considered a master of what could be called "silent drama" as well as nuanced psychological portraits, she pays great attention to detail in human relationships and often uses parallels with the animal world, exploring the interaction between man and animal.

**Synopsis:** This novel begins on the shores of a lake in the height of summer. Rudolf, a doctor from Rīga, is looking forward to spending some time away from work and plans to spend the time fishing on his own while lodging with an elderly couple on a lake. He comes into contact with the neighbours next door, the Tomariņi family, when he borrows their boat for his fishing trips. He meets Laura and her two children, Zaiga and Māris, her mother-in-law Alvīne and her sister-in-law Vija. For Laura, this encounter is a reminder of her wasted life, one of self-denial and her attempts to honour her responsibilities. For her children, it is a reminder of how much they lack a father figure. Attraction blooms between the quiet, slightly standoffish Laura and the confident, successful Rudolf, yet from the very beginning there is the feeling that the relationship is doomed.

### Excerpt

It was the time that separates day from night. As Rūdolf's approached the Tomariņi's house along the alley, the sun before his eyes was sinking slowly below the horizon until finally disappearing altogether. Now, only the skyline was left glowing and the first star rushed to light its dim lantern. Against the pink, still light-coloured sky, the buildings emerged ponderous and noble, like loaded barges, and it was only up close that he realised with surprise how old in fact everything here was. Even the forgiving, golden luminosity of

twilight did little to salvage much or make it more attractive. The roofs were mottled in colour, patched up with off-white and dark yellow scraps, all of them were more or less caving in like the sides of starving dogs. The house, with its poky windows, loomed grimly through the overgrown lilac and jasmine which stretched up as high as the roof, at places even higher. When in bloom, the Tomariņi were surely overwhelmed in a pink and white cloud of fragrance, but now their branches resembled work-worn fingers clinging to the grey timber walls. The apple trees, too, sparse and covered with lichen, broken by the gusts of autumn wind, looked at least half a century old so that the glut of apples like fairy lights on their grey, twisted branches seemed too opulent to be true in this shabby kingdom.

The lakeside houses were too far from the town for the *kolkhoz* to carry out repairs or build anything anew, yet they plainly didn't interfere with their plans for the fields as otherwise they would have been swept away. As long as people still lived here, the old buildings remained standing: abandoned they would collapse in no time, overgrown with weeds and grass. As always everywhere else, the lilac would last the longest.

Only distant sounds, some clearer, others more muffled, reached him from afar. On the opposite side of the lake, someone was calling out "coo-ee", cows lowed gently, wanting to return to their shed. Amongst the elm trees, Leda barked and then fell silent again; here, not even the dog came to greet Rūdofls. He stopped to listen for voices or other signs of life but could hear nothing close by. The door to the shed stood wide open but no hens or cockerel were scratching on the dunghill. Someone had made a start repairing the windlass on the well, but it looked as if the job had been hastily abandoned halfway through; the well lid had been removed and the rotten pole dug out and just left there, the spade dropped to

one side against the well curb. The Tomariņi's home appeared deserted. The doors to the house stood ajar. Rūdolfs knocked, having already concluded that nobody would come to let him in and indeed was not surprised when that was exactly what happened. Walking across the veranda and through a room in semi-darkness, filled with baskets and buckets on hooks, he then entered the kitchen. There was a fire burning in the grate – quiet and lifeless like an electric one. For a moment, Rūdolfs sensed that someone was walking on the other side of the kitchen wall.

He cried out, "Is anyone here?"

There was a sound of hoarse wheezing followed by heavy, hollow-sounding beats.

Bum...bum...

A started loaf and knife lay on the table, surrounded by a scattering of breadcrumbs, above the range two pairs of children's socks, one pair white, one blue, hung from a clothesline, a teddy bear had been left tossed on the floor. Rūdolfs bent down mechanically to pick it up. It was a disabled teddy bear, having just one leg.

Bum...bum...

The clock gasped and stopped; the house was once again engulfed in a complete, spellbound silence. The Tomariņi's home resembled a rural homestead from a museum of ethnography – everything was stored or hung to create an illusion of reality. Even the artificial fire was on yet no one was about, only the things, possessions and objects that had once belonged them.

Rūdolfs put the teddy down on a bench and went back out into the garden; he had no wish to be caught standing in the kitchen. If someone was to suddenly come home

they would have a fright to find a stranger there, goodness knows what they would think. Rūdolfs lingered in the garden for a while, unsure where to go; he went over to the well and looked in over the well curb. He was surprised at how deep it was. Way, way down at the very bottom glistened a small grey circle like a coin and a fresh, dewy smell wafted up from it.

Wells as deep as this one tended to throw a black echo back at the human voice, the water far below crystal clear and ice cold, leaving a metallic aftertaste when drunk directly from the wooden well bucket on the windlass yet tasting slightly sweet when poured into a china cup, just like freshly strained birch juice. No sooner had he thought of it, Rūdolfs was overcome with thirst. But there wasn't a drop of water in the bucket and the well's windlass lay on the grass with the chain wrapped python-like around it. The grey water went on glittering way down deep on its own.

Somewhere there was the sparrow-like chirruping of children. Where was it coming from? Towards the Zalktis side? The laughter could be heard again. Yes, beyond the garden, probably along the lake shore. He headed in that direction, trying not to step on the pink and white cheeks of apples that glistened in the grass. No, it wasn't so lonely here after all. When Rūdolfs emerged from the cover of the trees, a vast, scythe-shaped lake came into view. An elderly woman was leading a cow on a chain along the path up from the bay meadow, followed by a couple of sheep and their lambs. Against the dim vastness of the lake, which appeared somehow frozen, three figures were on the move: a boy, a girl and a dog, occasionally yapping in the high-pitched falsetto of a puppy. This enthusiastic barking had nothing to do with Rūdolfs's arrival at the Tomariņi's, as they

were yet to notice him. The children were running along the shore, dragging waterweed behind them like drenched mops of hair, and shouting, "The beard of Carabass Barabass...the beard of Carabass Barabasssss...."

Something tumbled down right next to Rūdofs, he looked round – an apple, just another fallen apple. The orchard smelled of ripe fruit. He was still thirsty but he did not dare to bend down and pick it up. To drink from the well, now that would have been another thing.

"The beard of Carabass Barabass, Carabass..."

The dog pounced on the "beard", grabbed a mouthful and raced away; the children chased him, white foam splashing all around.

They seemed so far away, so deep down, as if he were still looking down the well...

The silence was suddenly broken by the buzzing of a saw. Rūdofs spun round. As far as he could make out, the sound was coming from the barn. He approached the open door and looked inside; firewood was stacked on one side, various implements and tools on the other. Hay was clearly stored here in winter as the floor was scattered with bits of dry grass. For no obvious reason, Rudolf was sure that the man using the saw would suit his purposes here in the Tomariņi perfectly, but then he saw it was a woman. Having put quite a thick plank up onto the horse, she was sawing at it with a rather small, apparently blunt handsaw. She looked washed-out; a faded blouse, worn out sports trousers with push buttons and bare, dusty feet. Only her longish hair, tied at her neck with a black elastic band, shone in all its splendour, giving out a burnished glow at odds with her surroundings.

Busy sawing, the woman could hardly have heard Rūdolfs' steps, it was more likely that she noticed his shadow, as she briskly turned her head and a strange, inexplicable expression ran over her face – fright or, maybe the opposite, sudden joy. Either way, it was swiftly replaced by obvious embarrassment.

"Oh, is that you!?" she said in response to Rūdolfs' greeting, but this half exclamation, half question did nothing to bring any clarity to the situation. She must have taken Rūdolfs for someone else, the words just tripping off her tongue, the first that came to mind. Putting aside the saw, she turned towards Rūdolfs. Goodness knows why she had tied a workman's apron over her trousers and under the thin fabric of her blouse, sticking to her skin in places, her bony shoulders were outlined. Yet her pale face was lent an almost ascetic expression by the clear, wide-spaced eyes.

"She looks the sort to be consumptive." The thought just popped into Rūdolfs' head.

"Yes?" she said, inquiringly.

"To tell the truth, the fact that I scared you is a bad start for my mission here." While Rūdolfs was talking, the woman did not take her eyes off him and smiled at his last words, beaming with her large, white, regular front teeth on show. "Eidis sent me here. At the Gobas house, the boat is completely out of action, and he said that I might..."

"How long would you need it for, then?"

"I am almost afraid to say."

The woman gave a shout of laughter miraculously transforming her face, making it appear young and alive.

"I don't know myself how long I am going to stay, a fortnight maybe, or the whole month."

Having said that, Rūdofs immediately regretted it – no one gave anything to stranger for a month! He then hurried to add, diplomatically, that he would be grateful to accept the loan of the boat whenever it suited her, if she ever chose to entrust him with it. It was like a strategic chess move, and the corners of the woman's mouth slightly twisted slightly. Suppressed laughter? A smile? A smirk? Who knows!

"I really don't know." She was unsure. "Sometimes my mother-in-law uses it to go over to the store, sometimes Vija needs it..."

When the woman mentioned the name "Vija", Rūdofs was boyishly tempted to ask what her own name was. But no, rather not! Over-familiarity was no friend when asking a favour, it could ruin everything. Besides, the woman's face had a distant look to it – proud or cool? – he would just have got a polite refusal and be seen out.

Having thought it over, however, she added,

"I have almost no problem letting you have it until tomorrow evening. I realise it's not long, but I must go to Upešgals on Monday."

"I'll bring the boat back exactly when you tell me to."

She smiled again.

"I don't need it back at an exact time. You can bring it at the last moment. Come, I will give you the keys and show you where the oars are."

The woman took off the cumbersome apron and slung it on a hook, immediately becoming slim and light, and led Rūdofs out into the yard. How old was she? Somewhere around thirty. By the look of her body – under that age, but judging by her face – over thirty.

Both sides of the path were bordered by huge, rich dahlias, some growing as high as Rūdofs' shoulder, some even taller.

"What amazing flowers!"

"I'm sorry?" she asked, looking over her shoulder, and Rūdofs was again taken aback by the observant, serene look in her light grey eyes. "Oh, the flowers! We're having a bit of fun with them. And the soil is good here, real clay, only it all dries out in this heat."

Both children and the puppy, the first to notice Rūdofs, came running up from the lakeside. The puppy ambled over to him across the yarrow plants. And so the stranger's arrival was belatedly announced at the Tomariņi house. Upon noticing Rūdofs, however, the children - barefoot, wet and dirty - hung back and didn't come any closer.

"Zaiņi, can you get me the boat keys, please!"

The girl ran off, her blonde pigtailed blowing in the wind. But the boy, a head shorter, his hair as dark and curly as a gypsy's, peered at Rūdofs from a distance, his eyes brown and round like the one-legged teddy bear.

"What's your name?" Rūdofs asked, but the boy made no reply, just stared at him with interest, observant and slightly mischievous.



"Come, Māris!" the woman called to him.

"Mum!"

"What?"

"Is that dad?"

The woman shook her head, her face inscrutable, and quickly turned away, her body instinctively tensing as if expecting a blow. His mother's obvious gesture of denial did nothing to diminish the boy's interest in Rūdolfs. Māris looked him up and down, taking in every detail - his hair, glasses, zipper, wristwatch, sandals – with the same serious, concentrated attention used to observe animals in a zoo, and Rūdolfs could not help but laugh. A smile appeared on Māris' face, too, timid at first, then wider and wider, confusing the boy himself. Then he grew shy again and hid behind his mother, from time to time peeping out at Rūdolfs with one shiny eye.

Zaiga returned, carrying a lock tied by a rope to a wooden plank. Rūdolfs noticed how alike the two of them were – the same features, the same eyes - only the girl's hair was still really blonde, although it would no doubt darken and later take on that chestnut gloss like her mother's.

"Let's go down, shall we," the woman said dryly, and they went down to the lake. The dog had lost all interest in Rūdolfs, but he continued to sense the boy's constant gaze, sticking to him like a bur. It was twilight. The black trees, the boat and the trestle table against the background of the lake was like a painting done in varnish on pink glass.

"It's so incredibly peaceful here that I can't quite take it in." Rūdolfs said, after a prolonged silence.

She neither agreed nor disagreed, just smiled slightly.

"No motorboats, no radios, no ..."

At that very moment, the sound of distant music drifted across the lake.

"Talk of the devil!" he exclaimed, amused. "It's seems to be coming from the other side."

She nodded in agreement.

Rūdolfs failed to get anything more out of her other than a smile or nod. Silence fell again.

The music from the other side of the lakes and the rustling of the grass filled - and yet didn't quite fill - the silence.

"The oars are behind the alder bush."

It sounded so matter-of-fact, unnecessary even, as the children had already recovered the oars and were carrying one each, first over the grass and then the sand before throwing them over the side of the boat. In the crisp evening air, the two loud thuds rumbled over the vast waters like a duplet from a hunter's gun, frightening the wild ducks from the reeds where they had retreated for the night. The ducks took off in flight, soaring over the lake and leaving their reflection on its surface.

"Ducks! Ducks!" Māris yelled behind them. The puppy was running nervously along the shore from one side to the other, even wading into the water up to his chest.

"Ducks!"

The birds disappeared behind the peninsula on the Gobas house side, Māris quietened down, the dog came back and, after its momentary interruption, the lake sank back into silent slumber.

The woman unlocked and released the flat-bottomed boat and handed the key to Rūdolfs, but didn't turn to leave.

"Now for the warnings, bans and reminders not to sink, lose or forget anything..." he thought to himself, ready to hear it all as payment in kind for the loan of the boat, looking at her with a hint of irony. She didn't say another word, however, and Rūdolfs, having waited a moment, eventually climbed into the boat and pushed off from the shore.

"See you tomorrow evening then!" he called, sitting down to row.

"Good bye, doctor!"

Rūdolfs realised he had been a little guileless to imagine that no one in the neighbouring houses knew who he was. In the countryside it all happened quickly, new faces soon got noticed and information, with more or less embellishment, could easily be drawn out of Marija. Rūdolfs wondered what they knew about him in at the Tomariņi's. He sniffed to himself as he rowed away from the shore, the boat cutting through the water with a soft swish from the moorings. The oars, the handles polished smooth by strangers' hands, fitted comfortably in his and sliced the water with muffled splashes, flicking droplets towards the lights on shore and wrinkling the mirror-like surface of the lake. The woman still stood in the same spot, her slim figure reflected in the dim, melancholy evening light. Rūdolfs waved but she didn't make any response, indeed making no show that she had even noticed. Rūdolfs rowed on; his strokes so long, slow and regular that his back tightened, his back and stomach muscles even starting to ache as the boat ran rippling across the water. The complete absence of wind afforded him a waft of sauna house smoke from the Gobas house: the air smelled of Saturday evenings.

Rūdolfs didn't notice when and where the woman went; the lakeside was simply suddenly empty, the figure vanished like an apparition. Not in the water, nor on the slope, nor in the garden amongst the trunks of apple trees: a figure in motion was nowhere to be seen. Up the hill, only the house looked out over the lake with yellow cat's eyes. Dusk did much to hide the ravages time had caused to the Tomariņi house. As the distance grew, the old house once more fell under a spell – the roof recaptured its former, noble substance and, shrouded in its sea of greenery, floated back to earlier glory.

"What, and in relation to what, has Marija told me about the Tomariņi?"

He couldn't remember.

Then the peninsula, with its humble willows, alders and single pine tree, removed the whole from sight.

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For a moment it seemed to Laura that Alvīne had turned the lights on. But drawing closer, she realised that it was simply the evening sunlight reflected on the window panes. The children had already run on up the hill. There was the sound of laughter, clamouring, screams. At first it seemed to come from the garden (they must have been throwing apples at each other), then from the yard (where they were probably splashing around the laundry tub). The chain clinked, the bucket clanged, Alvīne yelled about something – then everything fell silent. The only sound was the groan of oars in their rowlocks, although the boat was long lost to sight. It was the only sound breaking the tranquil silence, joined only by the gentle noise of sleepy grasshoppers chirping.

Laura went back up to the barn but stopped in the doorway, looking outside. She smelled the cut grass, apples and water, each smell coming to her on waves. The peaceful Saturday evening made her want to laze about. She wanted to carry on standing with her back against the doorjamb feeling a pleasant weariness from carrying the watering can in her hands - to stand there until she grew tired, then go down to the lake, go for a swim, then slip into bed and cover herself up to the chin with a cool, crisp blanket. The rowlocks had stopped groaning. From the other shore, the music had started up again. Vija said that Elīna would lay the table in the garden... One by one the stars came out. The August evenings were no longer light and green, but dark and blue.

The sawhorse and plank were hardly visible. She tackled the saw again. Brum-brum ... She was tearing more than sawing it. But how to sharpen a saw? She had already tried with a sharpening plane, as she had seen men doing. Maybe it had made it sharper, maybe not. Brum-brum ... Never mind, she would slash it in two just the same. She had to get the windlass working well enough at least to draw up clean water for breakfast. Earlier, she had filled the laundry tub to the brim so she would have enough and not be forced to fetch water from the lake. But clearly, that afternoon, not only the children had dipped their grubby paws in it but passing cows and Toby the dog had drunk from it, too. Brum-brum ... Oh well, done it at last.