

Biography: Regīna Ezera (née Regīna Kindzule, 1930–2002) was born in Rīga. Ezera 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 is composed of six stories, all of which take place in the small town of Mūrgale, and the main characters of each tale die at the end due to various coincidences. The novel culminates in the sixth story, where the reader learns that all of the earlier stories were a vision seen by the author. Ezera then speaks directly about creativity and about the relationship between literature and literary criticism, and the story includes a conversation between the author and a young journalist as well as with a stubborn colleague at the literary museum who ends up causing the author’s death. This novel is unusual in Latvian literature, because Ezera dared to make it less of a description of Mūrgale and its people, and more about her relationship with literature and the development of the novel’s fictionalised form.

Excerpt

Prison, or a story about Lelde and, not only her, but also Aurora and Askolds.

‘Look ... Just look!’ he exclaims in a low, muffled voice, stuttering slightly as he always does when nervous, his entire being one whole surprise, an enormous surprise that reverberates and flows, radiates and breaks out of the wide-open, rounded pupils of his eyes . ‘S-s-see? T-there!’

But Lelde has already seen it all for herself.

Something glittering and opalescent flashes in the dark depths of the water and moves forward as if burning with white flames, as if quickly flickering, as if giving off sparks, resembling both a bright shiny star and a silvery, many-finned fish as it glides past them. It flashes and flares, disappearing, sparkling and brilliant beneath the edge of the ice, disappearing from view never to appear again, not once, not one single time, no matter how hard they try to spot it, looking back to where it happened just a moment ago. But there's nothing now and nothing else happens.

'D-did you see it?' Aigars utters again, incredulous at what he has just seen and unsure whether it was some sort of illusion or joke, a successful trick taken from the book of "Introductory Chemistry".

'That?' Lelde asks, almost mechanically, without thinking of the words her lips are forming. 'That?' she repeats again, as if asleep, before coming to: 'It was a dipper!'

'A dipper? Really?'

'How do you know?'

'I know.'

She doesn't explain where she might have read about such things or who may have told her about them, she simply says "I know" with conviction, she says it as if she has always known it – since the beginning of time or even before, as if she had been born with this knowledge. It's so funny that Aigars gives a shout of laughter and Lelde looks at him.

The untied earflaps of his hare-skin hat are pointing outwards, hanging loose from his head, drooping at different lengths on either side. Early, amber-coloured freckles glisten on the tip of his nose, appearing as if in relief against his white skin although, in fact, they do not, and his eyes, usually seeming such a dark grey, now appear like sapphires and the tip of his nose is frozen and shines in shades of blue and red. A long, boyishly skinny neck looms out of the collar of his coat, it is somehow helplessly and touchingly bony, so scrawny that, who knows why, Lelde is flooded with pity. Why is that so, why does it happen? However, looking at his neck – at his comically scrawny neck, she is not overcome with pity but rather with a strangely warm and, at the same time, painful feeling. Sadness descends over her face like a veil, erasing the outlines of her childish traits and seemingly tracing on it the netting of future wrinkles and hollows, rendering it alienated – oddly serious and unusually adult. Lelde's mouth pulls into a gentle, bittersweet smile, intended both for Aigars and for no one at all and Aigars, for whom intuition has never been his strong suit, other things maybe but not insight, suddenly realizes with his seventh or eighth sense why Lelde has got off the bus one stop early and is now standing on the bridge without going anywhere, why she is now standing on the Ūdrīte bridge in the freezing cold, minus fifteen degrees, without moving and without even talking about anything much. Lelde doesn't want to go home!

So now it's both of them standing there. Lelde glances at her wristwatch and sighs. In turn, Aigars looks at his and sighs, too, oppressed by this prolonged silence and at a loss for anything to say and unsure how to act. It seems as though they are both waiting for something or someone who isn't coming, not showing up and they can't, they are unable to wait for him. Nevertheless, Aigars has always been a person of action and doing things,

unable to stand still endlessly like some kind of effigy. So, squeezing his satchel between his knees, he feels in his pockets for his matches and cigarettes, pulling one out of the packet for himself.

'Give me one, too!' Lelde says.

'Here you are!'

Aigars strikes the match and lifts it to Lelde's face. She doesn't look at him; through her lowered eyelashes, her attention is turned exclusively to the orange flare, as if she were under the spell of the fluttering, dancing flames.

'You've got the tobacco end in your mouth!' he exclaims as he notices it. 'Turn it the other way around, the filter bit goes in your mouth!'

'Oh, does it?' Lelde wonders and, as she turns the cigarette round and looks at it, considering which is the tobacco end and which the filter, the match goes out. But he strikes another, striking several times along the side of the box because his fingers are already icy cold and crooked.

'Inhale more, or it won't light! What? Have you never smoked before?'

'Me?' Lelde's eyelids are still lowered and slightly trembling. 'What makes you think I haven't?'

Finally, the cigarette lights. Claspng it between her bony, frozen fingers, she inhales and exhales the smoke in a funny, inexperienced way, her loosened hair touching her cheeks every so often like light brown threads.

It would have been nice to sit down but there is nowhere suitable, snow has fallen all around them, blown everywhere by the wind, so they smoke standing where they are, leaning against the rails of the wooden bridge while the river bubbles below, rubbing against the ice. The colours of the crisp February day are as clean and clear as watercolours; in the absence of any wind the air freezes, the frost is getting thicker and, presumably will get even thicker overnight.

'Lelde!'

'Yes?'

'I'll show you how to do a French inhale.'

'What? What's that?'

'French inhale. Look! Focus-pocus! Three, two, one – go!'

Aigars inhales deeply on his cigarette then, opening his mouth, the smoke rises but, who knows how, instead of dissipating into the air, it runs obediently back up into his nostrils.

'Well, what do you say to that – takes some doing, eh?' he asks, fishing for compliments – and why not, it really is quite a sight.

But Lelde doesn't say a word.

Prior to settling down for the night, several jackdaws fly over their heads towards the park of the manor house in an uneven flock. The trees on that side are already beneath

the purplish-grey, misty veil of twilight which, engulfing the horizon, blends with the pearly pink of the sky.

'Listen!' she finally says, although she keeps her eyes on a spot behind the birds rather than actually looking at Aigars.

'What?'

'If you could wish for anything you wanted, what would you wish for?'

'Me?' Aigars replies. Now it is his turn not to look at Lelde; instead he throws his head so far back that his hare hat almost drops off and, like Lelde, keeps his eyes on the jackdaws. 'Well that's an easy one! I'd wish for a gun in my hand, right this second!'

'A gun?' She wrinkles her dark eyebrows and there is a moment's pause until the birds gain distance from them, then she says, 'No, seriously!'

'I've just said. I would wish for a gun! A double-barrelled gun! Or even better still, a machine gun, so the bullets would just glide straight down the barrel on their own from the cartridge.'

Eventually, she looks at Aigars.

'Would you really not wish for anything? Nothing at all?' Despite Aigars having expressed himself quite clearly, she is still puzzled. He then adds,

'And I would love a motorbike, too. A little "goat" like the one Ingus has would do very well, but most of all I'd like a *Pannonia* – with a proper sidecar.'

Lelde is clumsily tapping ash from the end of her cigarette.

'Heavens, what would you do with a sidecar?' she asks.

'What would I do?' Aigars asks, spitting into the snow. What a silly question! 'A motorbike with a sidecar is something else, quite another thing from one without. A motorbike with a sidecar is practically ... it's practically like having a *Zaparozhets* car! What do you think anyone does with them?' he asks, spitting again.

'What do you think anyone does with them?' she echoes, mimicking Aigars and laughing.

Aigars is suddenly hurt by this; the idea of having a motorbike – a motorbike of his own, and one with a sidecar at that, has long been his dream and dreams are something sacred and untouchable, not something to be criticised or mocked, even if it is Lelde doing so and maybe Lelde should not have done so, more than anyone else, given that her family, the Kasparsons', own a car and the fact that it's an old *Zaparozhets* really doesn't make any difference because, hand on heart, that's still way better than even the best of motorbikes, better than a *Jawa* or a *Pannonia* or even the giant *IZH*. And, all of a sudden, he starts wondering what someone might possibly wish for if they already own a car. Another one, maybe? Or maybe if you had a *Zaparozhets* you might hanker after a *Moskvich*, or a *Volga* if you had a *Lada*? But what if you already had a *Volga*? What could anyone possibly wish for if they already had a *Volga*?

Lelde leans over the railings and tosses the cigarette butt away. Hissing, it falls into the ice-hole, floating over the water to the edge of the ice before getting swallowed

beneath it in the current.

'So what would you wish for?' he asks, his tone slightly challenging as, deep down, he is still irked by Lelde's laughter. So what ... but even so, it's still really annoying, bloody hell!

Lelde looks back and, lost in thoughts that Aigars can't begin to guess at, seems to give off a special glow. She doesn't laugh or smile but just glows as if thinking about that special something she would wish for. 'Go on then, spit it out!' Aigars prompts her, but she only says, rather elusively,

'You'll laugh.'

She says that and then doesn't utter another word; only the reflection of some airy thoughts flicker behind her eyes.

'Well, I suppose it's probably a gorgeous dress ... or, maybe a necklace of some sort ...' Aigars takes a stab in the dark, trying to imagine what a girl or, more to the point, a girl like Lelde who apparently already has everything, might wish for.

'A necklace!' she exclaims scornfully. 'Goodness, what a child you are!' Ashamed, he wrinkles up his nose and, with a flick, sends the butt of his cigarette down to meet Lelde's – in the river. Doing a complete turn as it falls, it glows one last time in flight before landing on the snow.

'Then I can't imagine,' he says rather abruptly, regretting ever having started the conversation. Why couldn't she just say that she yearns for some imported goods,

something made of nylon or some fancy tights, what else could she possibly yearn for, and yet here she is, pulling a face as if she were thinking of goodness knows what noble item!

'It's not a thing at all!' Lelde says quickly, as if she has guessed what Aigars was thinking and is offended. 'And actually ... I don't think you would understand.'

That may well be the case ... neither of them speak again. They hear the blurry, sleepy voices of the jackdaws from way off in the park. Wasn't it about time they started making a move? It wasn't much fun hanging about there! Fine, they stood there for a bit, had a smoke – and that was enough.

'Don't you think we should be going?' He has had enough now of standing there, half frozen to death and there's nothing to do, on top of which he's so hungry he could eat a horse, the smell of cooking wafts out of nearby houses, something frying, maybe – meat and onions perhaps, or fried eggs and bacon, the bacon might be lean or streaky, he loves it either way so long as it's fried with crackling rind down the side. With this picture in his head, he starts shifting impatiently from one foot to the other, no longer the least inclined to waste time where he is, even if it is with Lelde.

'As you wish,' she replies in sad submission, as if coming to terms with the inevitable, and he remembers that Lelde doesn't want to go home. Suddenly he is filled with sympathy for her; he too has often been in similar circumstances, having quarrelled with his parents so badly that he hasn't wanted to go home. But there was no option other than to go home. Where else could you go, where else could you stay? At times such as these, all you want is to be somewhere else far, far away – to the end of the world, to jump on your motorbike

and ... and off you go, wherever the feeling takes you.

'Maybe you want to get somewhere?' he says imaginatively, imagining distinctly the feeling when your feet refuse to walk in the direction towards home.

'What do you mean by getting somewhere?' she asks, lost in her own thoughts.

'To go somewhere?'

'Mmm.'

Lelde says nothing for a bit and then nods.

'Yes, sometimes.'

That's what she says but, after a moment's reflection, she adds,

'But that ... that's something else. You wouldn't get it. Don't be offended but you wouldn't understand, Aigars ...'

She isn't able to put it into words. It's like some long-forgotten word she has been trying and failing to recall although it's there somewhere on the edge of her consciousness, it was there when the birds flew over their heads but then it melted and dispelled, leaving behind no more than a sharp sense of longing for something good and very beautiful and very abstract.

They walk between the snow-covered houses and gardens sunk deep in snow, snow-drifts and white-splattered trees, through the familiar landscape that has been rendered quite alien by the snow, as if the place they are walking through, wading through the snow,

wasn't Mūrgale at all.

Nerons, his whiskers all frosty, is sitting outside the Voicehovskis' house, waiting for his owners.

'Nerons!' Aigars shouts over the fence but the dog pays him no heed; he neither wags his tail nor pricks up his ears but merely stares at Aigars as though he were an empty space, nothing. Aigars makes a snowball and tosses it over the fence. But the snow, as is always the case at such incredibly low temperatures, is crumbly and wayward, refusing to hold together, and the snowball disintegrates as it flies through the air.

'Why are you acting like this?' Lelde asks, frowning, despite the fact that Aigars didn't hit the dog and hadn't meant to anyway, he only wanted to tease him a bit so has he would stop sitting like that, like a lord. Well, he has certainly made a fool of himself again and, trying to hide his embarrassment, he wrinkles up his nose, wishing that a fire or a war would suddenly break out, or that undercover agents would sweep down on them, or something else truly terrible would happen that would enable him to show everyone just how brave and daring he was, leaving everyone with their mouths hanging open in disbelief.

But things like that never happen in Mūrgale and they don't now. There's a smell of bacon and eggs, smoke rises from the chimneys, drifting straight up into the still air. First-graders are stomping about, throwing snowballs at each other and, as Lelde and Aigars walk past, at them too.

Someone shouts:

'Lovebirds! Lovebirds!'

Others join in the fervent yet hollow chorus:

'Lovebirds ... Lovebirds ... Love ... birds ...'

Little devils !

A hot wave runs through Aigars and he swings round menacingly. The jeering shouts are cut short, tapering out and dying abruptly with dull shrieks, gurgles and wheezes – in the resounding echoes of their yells.

'Just you w-w-wait!' he bellows, pale with rage, his fingers physically twitching.

But Lelde just keeps walking as if she hasn't heard a thing, as though what she heard and can still hear has no bearing on her at all. She just keeps walking without even slowing down at all until Aigars, having turned his back on the little rascals, catches up and walks alongside her again. The laughter and shrieks behind them gradually grow louder again, as if coming back to life, recovering from a fright, and again they hear that irritatingly hollow, mocking chorus:

'Lovebirds ... lovebirds ... love ... bi-irds ...'

Aigars glances sideways at Lelde, questioningly, scrutinizing her – and then, suddenly and brusquely and so unexpectedly, as if looking at her for the first time, someone he has never met her before, and it is so unforeseen that he is completely taken aback, where has he been looking all this time, and to his astonishment, like some sort of miracle, he realises

how beautiful Lelde is. Her delicate profile, her long, very dark hair, her slender frame –

everything about her is rich and intensely coloured against the white of the snow: her face pink from the frost, the black sheen of her hair, her poppy red scarf, her little grey fur coat. And, blinded by this bright, stunning abundance of colours as if it were the sun, he suddenly feels he is blushing and, embarrassed further, goes an even deeper red. He doesn't know what to do with his eyes or hands, so he stares straight ahead, never looking aside; his hands stuffed in his pockets, his satchel jammed under his armpit, his fingers numb, going cold and damp in his mittens while his ears are aflame under his untied hare skin hat. He longs to touch Lelde yet does not so much dare look at her. He wishes he were closer to home, to be rid of this inconvenience, these troubles, yet at the same time his home looms menacingly, frighteningly, coming at him at the speed of a racing train. At the very last moment, he is seized by a strong and ardent desire to somehow detain Lelde, to make her linger, to tell her something amusing and so compelling that she would be unable to leave, but he is tongue-tied, his mind wiped clean of thought, dull as dishwater, quite unlike his usual self as he never has to cast around for words, quite the opposite in fact, for how often has he got himself in a bind with his blethering.

But while he's still trying to come up with something to say, Lelde exclaims, 'Bye then, see you tomorrow morning!' and goes off. She doesn't look back, not even once, although her pace grows slower and slower as if she were about to stop, coming to a halt, not taking a step further, not going anywhere, and yet still she does not look back. Now, for the third time that evening, it crosses Aigars' mind that Lelde really doesn't want to go home, as if she were returning to prison. She must have had a row with her parents. That could be it, couldn't it? It was quite possible, quite so ... Brrr, teachers at school, teachers at

home, dreadful – how does Lelde cope with it? If he were in her place then ... then it would be a real calamity ... In that case, he would most definitely have steered clear of home, even if that meant living elsewhere, in a dorm or something. At least there you would have some independence ...

As Aigars ponders on this, Lelde looks back as she reaches the shop and, despite already knowing off by heart what is on display, stops to have a look at the few items in the window. Everything is veiled in icy flowers. She goes inside, looking at the shoes and trying them on although she doesn't need any and doesn't have the money for them, either. Then she wanders into the food section and stands looking at the sweets she has no wish for, glancing over the canisters on the shelves, the big-bellied glass jars with sugar and grain, paper packets with cocoa, biscuits and wafers and suddenly she sees them: there they are – the cigarettes! She feels as if she has suddenly happened upon something she had unconsciously been searching for and now finally found. She buys some. She doesn't want to smoke, though. Quite the opposite, in fact, as she still feels queasy from that earlier cigarette, but the packet of cigarettes gives her an odd, undefinable sense of independence and security. As she draws closer to home, she fingers it in her pocket as she might have fingered a weapon, faced with imminent danger.

The gates of the Kasparsons' house, white and snow-covered, stand ajar. A wooden shovel is propped against the fence on the inside. The apple trees stand up to their armpits in snow and the white expanse of the garden is crossed by the tiny hollows of the cat's foot prints. A great, profound peace abounds. The road leading from the unlocked garage door to the gates is decorated by fresh tyre prints, left by the *Zaparožhet*. So, father is not at

home. Within Lelde, something which had been pulled taught, almost to breaking point, immediately relaxes and a profound sense of relief sweeps through her so swiftly that her heart sinks, her head spins and her balled fist unclenches.

She sighs fitfully, like someone who has been weeping, and goes inside.

Aurora is instantly aware that someone has come in. Lelde? Or is it Askolds? She hasn't heard the car so it must be Lelde. And about time, too. There's the sound of muffled footsteps and the soft scrunch of boots coming from the hall, the hanger tinkles against the peg. Of course, it's Lelde. Askolds way of walking around is completely different; loud and fast, owing to his over-abundance of energy and nervous impatience, everything in his hands jingling, chinking and clanging. Aurora opens the door – sees the figure of her daughter quietly moving in the twilight of the entrance hall.

'Is that you?'

'Yes, it's me,' Lelde replies.

'Why didn't you turn the light on?'

'I can see as it is.'

All the same, Aurora reaches out and turns it on.

The chill and freshness of outdoors emanate from Lelde; the strands of hair on both sides of her face still covered in white rime.

'Why so late?'

But Lelde, with hollow breaths, is busy pulling off her boots, the frost in her hair melting rapidly before their eyes.

'But you only had six classes today,' Aurora says again, her well-trained teacher's memory recalling exactly the time Lelde's classes finished. 'Did you have something else on?'

'No.'

Lelde puts her slippers on.

'Then you should have got the earlier bus.'

'I did. I just decided to walk part of the way.'

'Come on in, wash your hands and have something to eat.'

Lelde goes ahead of her mother into the kitchen. They are the same height, only Lelde is fragile and slender. As always, in proximity to the natural slimness of youth, Aurora is even more painfully aware of her own lumpen heaviness.

'A walk ... in this cold? Wasn't it chilly for that?' she wonders, remembering, shivering at the thought of it.

'It was beautiful. Everything covered in snow.'

'Yes,' Aurora thinks, 'it's snowed heavily. There'll be no end of back-breaking work –

cleaning and shovelling. I didn't even notice. Was it beautiful? Wasn't beautiful?

Almost unconsciously, she turns towards the window but the view outside is shielded in part by the curtain, in part by the misted-up pane and she cannot see anything much, just some branches on the apple trees looking like thick doodles drawn directly on the glass from the outside.

'Where did you walk?'

'Just around.'

'Just around ...' Aurora utters, filled with sudden self-pity. 'But me? What about me? When do I have time for a walk? Not on my way to school or going to the shop or somewhere, but "just around". For no obvious reason or purpose, merely for my own pleasure. Dream on! Piles of exercise books to correct. A basket full of dirty laundry. For the third day running, I've had no time to cook, so it will be that old soup again. Well, re-heating doesn't harm sauerkraut, but still...'

Lelde sits down at the table. Aurora, putting out some of the soup they are both so tired of into a couple of bowls, sits down in front of her daughter. The third chair remains empty. Askolds still isn't back from Raudava.

'Father went to the People's Education Department,' Aurora says, noticing Lelde glancing at Askolds' chair at the end of the table. 'Eat up, won't you? Why don't you eat? ... Were you on your own on your walk?'

'No,' Lelde reaches for a spoon. 'I was with Aigars,'

'Pērkons?'

'Uhm.'

'With Pērkons.' Aurora again sinks into quiet contemplation, involuntarily appraising Aigars from a female standpoint. 'He isn't even very good-looking! And with all those freckles ... and the neck of a plucked chicken ... very mediocre in his studies, too,' she thinks to herself, now with a teacher's disappointment, having taught Aigars Pērkons mathematics from fifth to eighth grade and having struggled with him considerably, especially in algebra.

'How is Aigars getting on with algebra nowadays?' she inquires, although she has no reason to ask, strictly speaking, seeing as he is no longer her pupil. 'Does he have any marks below the pass grade?'

'Not on his report card,' Lelde says shortly.

Aurora grimaces. Of course! He might very well not have any fail grades on his report card – by the end of term he can manage to keep his head above water, so the same as he always was.

Not inclined to talk, they are both lost in their own worlds.

'What are you thinking about?' Aurora finally comes to and notices Lelde is still looking at Askolds chair as though her father were actually sitting there, but invisible, as if he were sitting there; watching them both eat and listening to their conversation, sitting there watching their every move, what they were doing, listening to every word they say. Her daughter is thinking about Askolds. But what is she thinking, and why? Is it through

anger or shame, stubbornness or a silent wish to make up? What could Lelde possibly be thinking about, staring at Askolds' empty place at the table?

Aurora has absolutely no idea, no way of guessing. Lelde's face reveals neither anger nor spite, regret nor offense, none of the feelings that might logically or naturally be expected following yesterday's bust-up and that would be more or less understandable. Instead, her eyes reveal some kind of concentrated and very tense, inward expression – centred on herself, as if Lelde were trying to remember something vitally important, indispensable, but unaccountably was unable to do so. Whatever it is she is trying to call to mind no doubt has something to do with Askolds. But what? What might it be, that vital, significant moment in Lelde's world – a world that up until then, Aurora thought she knew everything about? She carried her, gave birth to her and raised her, she knows Lelde's likes and dislikes, the subjects she is good at and those she isn't, she knows Lelde sometimes talks in her sleep and that she has no ear for music, that she has flawless, perfect teeth and that, after breaking her collarbone, her shoulders are slightly different in height, she knows how much Lelde weighs and even the make-up of her blood, her haemoglobin level and white blood cell count, she knows everything and she knows nothing, it's like standing outside a closed gate and seeing the lights on indoors but without having the slightest notion of what is going on inside – seeing no more than an eery interplay of light and shadow.

This fragile, gentle child she loves and is responsible for is no longer the same as a year ago, or even six months ago, and her perception – that's already all in the past, yesterday and the day before. Aurora has always thought of her daughter as untainted and

pure, holding on to a distinct and at times naïve idealism about youth and an all-or-nothing approach to it. And then, like a bolt out of the blue, you have Lelde faking Askolds' signature, which is quite another thing from finishing off a jar of jam or honey, it's another transgression entirely, something which could even be punishable by law, something that the old Lelde would never have done but which she has done nonetheless, and with such incredible nonchalance, a lack of responsibility so extreme as to be quite frightening, like a kleptomaniac helping herself to others' belongings without the slightest flicker of remorse or guilt.

Aurora sighs. How complicated and tricky puberty is ... Of course, she has dealt with this transitional period in a myriad of forms with her pupils at school but, inexplicably, she has always imagined that Lelde would be an exception to the rule, that she wouldn't be affected by it, wouldn't be touched. The delusions and narrow-mindedness of a mother. And now, here they are, Lelde sitting across the table from her, her gaze going from Askold's chair to out of the window and back again, and Aurora at a complete loss as to what to do or say for the best, as though she were the one to have done wrong rather than Lelde, as if she rather than Lelde would have to figure out the hard way how to make everything alright again.

'You'll have to make things up with your father somehow,' she finally says, unsure whether it was the right thing to say or not as they sit in front of their re-heated sauerkraut. 'Say sorry and make up, then everything will be fine again,' she adds, annoyed with herself that she sounds too pleading. Aurora meant to keep her tone calm and lenient yet it comes out too meekly, imploringly even, as though she were the one in dire need of consolation.

Inside, she riles against that tone of hers, engulfed with a sense of peevishness against herself. However, what is said is said and there's no taking it back, there's nothing she can do about it now.

Lelde's dark eyebrows draw together.

'I have done him no wrong!'

Aurora coughs. There you go – another fine example of her complete lack of remorse!

'Clearly, what happened can be viewed from two different standpoints,' Aurora says, carefully monitoring her tone so it betrays no additional emotion, trying to avoid making an already painful, distressing situation even worse. 'As you saw, your father was very upset by it.'

Lelde's eyes turn swiftly to Aurora.

'And what would you have done in my shoes?'

Aurora looks at her daughter, trying to hide a certain embarrassment. What is that? A genuine lack of understanding or another transgression?

'It's not about me,' she replies elusively. 'But I would say that I have never in my life faked someone else's signature. Can you not see what a difficult position you've put your father in? Now he has to...'

'But what about me? What do you think I should have done?' Lelde exclaims, her

voice choked with tears. 'I needed that note ... I couldn't do PE and you were not here to ask. We can only get out of PE with a note from our parents. Father would have asked me why I couldn't do it and what would I have said then? What? What?! Well, tell me that, why don't you?'

Covering her face with her hands, Lelde drops her spoon and her shoulders start heaving.

'What on earth did I say that for? And right now, of all times?' Aurora chides herself. But there's no keeping quiet indefinitely, it just can't be done. You can't just go on pretending nothing has happened.

You have to talk it through, lay it to rest in some way. Otherwise, it's impossible to go on living under the same roof.

Her daughter's weeping causes something to resonate, reverberate within her and she is overwhelmed by the sensation, pulsing and vibrating through her like feverish, nervous streams. Aurora is suddenly struck by the thought that she fears Askolds' return; she is unsure of herself and somehow almost helplessly fearful of him as though he weren't her Askolds, her husband, but rather only her boss; the headmaster to whom she is subordinated and dependent.