

**Biography:** Although Andra Neiburga (1957-2019) has only published two short story collections and one children's book, they have all become modern classics and an integral part of contemporary Latvian literature. Her literary debut, *Stuffed Birds, and Birds in Cages* (1988), was warmly received at the time due to its sharp, uncompromising prose and the depth of her characters. After Latvia declared independence, her acclaim was aided by a wildly popular movie based on her children's book, *The Story of Tille and the Dog Man* (1992). The publication of her second and most recent collection of short stories, *Push, Push* (2004), was called the cultural event of the year by the influential daily newspaper *Diena*.

**Synopsis:** *Push, Push* was received with great curiosity as Andra Neiburga returned to adult fiction after a 16-year absence, following her much-praised debut short story collection *Stuffed Birds, and Birds in Cages*. Not only was *Push, Push* one of the most talked-about books of the year, but it has since become a popular staple in secondary school curriculums, and hasn't lost its ability to surprise and even shock each new generation of readers.

### Excerpt

As I light the stove I only think of firewood. That's all. Firewood. And not about the forest or the trees or the people who cut these trees down, big deal. I'm only interested in the firewood, in how dry it is and is this fucking stove going to light or not, will the chimney cough the smoke back like a wheezing old geezer from the poorhouse.

Meaning of life? Go fuck yourself. There is no meaning to life. Zip.

Okay, so the snowdrops are cool and so are all those, you know, rivulets of spring.

Those streamlets. The sun. It's okay, really. And when you walk out in the morning, in your

galoshes and nightgown, you're quite warm although there is a thin crust of ice on the water in the tub, warmth from the bed preserved between your flushed skin and the flannel, when you survey the yard – all pathways raked neat, everything more or less in order, sap from the birch reluctantly dripping into the vat: drip drip drip. A bird chirping to itself. You draw the crisp air as yet unspoiled by the day into your lungs – ooh – crouch behind the outhouse, watch your piss disappear shimmering into the moss – ecstasy.

That's where perhaps there is meaning. In that one instant. That single instant where there is time to look around, look at the sky, for instance. Just look at it, without any thought even. Without wondering if God is or is not, if there is a storm gathering, if the laundry should be taken down.

But see, all that already is, simply is, without you and not for you. You simply happen to be here, by sheer accident. To be happy or sad over this fact – well, that's everybody's private business.

Planets rotate? Let them.

The Universe is expanding? Say what? – it's contracting again? So let it contract, about time it did. Contract and cease. Peace and nothing.

But fuck the universe. I have no use for it. If the universe has use for me – here I am.

Just like in that dream where I was chosen to continue mankind as some sort of an ur-mother. Our civilization was doomed, a nuclear war or something like that. The earth was red and the sky red, red dust everywhere and you couldn't understand where top or bottom was. And out of that redness, there floats out something like a ship, a spaceship, you know, like a flying saucer, and a voice thunders from the sky (I am not sure if there weren't even

flaming letters in the sky, but I wouldn't bet on it, it's possible I came up with that later):

'Andra,' it says, 'get ready!' 'Here,' it says, 'it will take billions and billions of years until life on earth starts from a molecule again, but you have a chance to start a new life over there.'

Where?!

They wouldn't say. I woke up.

As they say, your own trouble makes you contract, another man's trouble makes you expand.

So I contract, I withdraw in my house in the middle of the forest, by the cemetery. The road is bad, the bus goes to the regional center twice a week, the store-on-wheels comes around once a week. If it don't break down.

What's that, there's no such place in Latvia anymore? Of course there is, you bet there is.

And I am fine here. No problem.

I think only about firewood. I think about grub. And about Gramps. In winter I also think about spring, in summer, about fall. In fall about winter. But not philosophically or metaphorically, no. Very simple – winter's coming, so got to get firewood. Spring: rake the old leaves, dig up the vegetable garden. Fall: put mushrooms in brine.

Meaning of life.

He made me real mad yesterday with all that talk about the meaning of life! Really mad.

I thought we'd have a drink and such, I haven't had a man in a couple of months. But he is, like, 'I have these questions.'

So we didn't even make it to bed.

'Where,' says he, 'can one find the meaning of life?'

'Well, don't look for it,' says I, 'relax. Then you won't have to worry you can't find it.'

Well, you know that old saying: to seek is to find? A stupid saying, if you ask me. To seek is to hardly ever find anything but those who don't seek will just stumble upon something. For example – go into the forest and try to find a mushroom knife. You can walk for a week, for two weeks, and you won't find shit. Or a fiver on the street? Not a chance! Whereas all you have to do is just squat in that same forest, no reason, just answering the call of nature, or just kick an empty beer can on the street – and bingo! here's your knife, here's your fiver.

It's been a long time since I've sought anything.

You have what you have. You don't what you don't.

My neighbor – not even really a neighbor – a whole kilometer counting from the ditch – does herself up like the Queen of Sheba every Friday night and off she goes to the regional dance. She's seeking. A guy, of course. She'd do better to hide herself, the dumbshit.

Oh, I'm just ranting.

Have to give Gramps gruel. Gruel with jam.

Milk, butter, grits.

And thanks. Not thank God, thank myself that I can still make some money. With physical labor.

Others make art, write music, play theater, teach, but you (meaning, I) push a wheelbarrow. Go ahead, honey, push. With your higher, almafuckingmater, education.

Life straps you down. If you kick too much, the strings will simply get tighter. So you better relax.

No guy?

No.

So what?

I can manage.

My hands are all cut up – see, here with a knife, here with an axe. And this came from that fucking metal broomstick that my ex left broken and sharp as a sword, I stumbled; good thing didn't slash my belly wide open.

I do as much as I can. What I can't do I don't. Just let it be.

See, the mutt's not vaccinated, just didn't have the time.

See, he sits there and stares at me with those weird eyes of his. Maybe he's mad already, he runs around the marshes and the forests, who knows. And you can't cure that disease. Who cares about death, but the torture of it. I'm really afraid of pain. And rabies, they say, is awful. Three days of agony. Why don't they simply give those who have it a shot? You know, to take them out of their misery. And they call themselves doctors.

Phew.

I don't think about the forest, don't think about the sea, don't think about the sky. I look right through you, I don't see you, get it.

I don't see!

The morning gallops along like a horse foaming at the mouth, can't manage to get anything done. Look, the fucking stove is out but Gramps is calling from his room: he has to have his gruel and someone has turned his antenna.

I haven't touched your goddamn antenna, you old fool! Fuck. I have no time for TV anyway. I have my own reality show, my own "farm" here.

You must have turned it yourself.

He doesn't believe me.

Throws a newspaper at me; angry.

Rolls his eyes.

How far can you throw a newspaper, dumbshit?

'Sure, sure, you know best, you're the smart one.'

'Of course, I am. Not you. Here's your gruel, eat, can watch TV in the evening.'

Gruel for the dog as well. A different one. Water as base, plop in a cube of beef broth. So you don't think I feed Gramps and the dog the same gruel. There is some humanity left in me. But if it's all that good is subject to doubt.

'What kind of a jam is this?' Gramps yells from his room.

'Lingonberry.'

'What kind of a lingonberry jam is that?! A lingonberry jam should be properly cooked, there should be no berries!'

'There are none.'

'So what kind of a lingonberry jam is a jam without them lingonberries?!'

'Same one as yesterday. Eat.'

' 'Twas a different one, yesterday. But sure, you know best, you're the smart one.' All the same, he eats.

It's over. Relax, relax.

The stove has gone out again.

And the rage.

Fierceness is a form of humanity.

You think not? Meaning, an animal is fierce too? Sure, but not as fierce as a person.

Me, I'm pissed at the birch. At the rock, at the pond.

'cause I'm getting old.

What are you lookin' at, mutt? Shoo, you bastard.

The floors.

The dishes.

Take the laundry down.

Hang the laundry up.

Put what's dry into the wardrobe.

The floor again. When did that happen?

Gramps is on a roll again, has uncovered another Jewish conspiracy in the paper.

'Eat,' I tell him, 'stop yelling. The gruel's getting cold.'

I've long since stopped discussing Jews with him.

'Peace,' I tell him. 'Here, in the middle of the forest, we have no Jews. We take care of our business, the Jews take care of theirs. End of story. Besides, a Jew, -- he's human too.'

That's all he needs. Throws the paper at me again. Palestine and Israel really bother him.

'Better hold on to your paper. Next time I won't give it back.'

'What?'

'Nothing. Eat your gruel before it gets cold. There won't be nothin' else until five, I'm off to the store-on-wheels.'

The meaning of life. Let those who have time look for it. I don't. I'll take the wheelbarrow and roll it to the store. On the way there through the forest, back along the sea.

And my period has started. Cramps.

What do I need the goddamn period for? What the hell for?! Better if it were over and done with.

Yeah, better if it were all over. All of it.

Gramps gets up in the middle of the night, every night, and goes to Australia to see his brother. Supposedly there's a million and a gal waiting for him. Really. Almost feel like tying him to the bed. I scramble like a cockroach all day long, and then I can't even get any rest at night.

'D'you hear, Gramps?'

'What?'

'Do you want anything from the store?'

'Thugs, that's what they are!'



'You want some hard candy?'

'I don't have no teeth, how am I supposed to eat them,' he says crossly. Impossible to please.

'That's okay, you can suck on them.'

Old folks crave sweets, don't they.

Okay, that's it, just have to get the wheelbarrow and go.

'Stay, mutt, stay, guard the house! I'm going. Be good, Gramps.'

'Just don't stay out too long, I get scared alone. What if the Gypsies come.'

'Be back in a coupla hours. Don't be silly, we have no Gypsies around here.'

'Sure, sure, you're the smart one, you know best.'

He'll take a two-hour nap and won't even notice I'm gone. Lately he naps all day long.

Three kilometers through the forest.

Yesterday he was driving me nuts with that meaning of life stuff.

'This kind of life,' says he, 'it ain't for me.'

'Of course, not. You're the boss.'

'But the Bible says: ask and it shall be given.'

'Sure, go begging by a church in Riga and you shall be given.'

I put out a bottle of vodka for nothing. Didn't get him in bed. Am I old or somethin'?

Or perhaps just don't know how. As my old and educated city friend used to say – sex takes place in your head. Or as my neighbor likes to repeat: guys need to have their

brains fucked, then they will stick around. They both say the same thing, really. Just in different ways.

Actually he's always been that way, ever since we dated in school: he prefers philosophizing to action. On lofty matters. Though it was I who ended up a student in Riga, not him. And studying made me give up philosophizing for good. What's the point? Got my degree, but the accent remained. And I guess something different in the thinking. As that same lofty friend of mine said: no, I don't like those country babes. I seem to have even blushed – although at that time he could have hardly known. That I'm one. There must be something written all over our faces, we, the country bumpkins. Don't do what you were not made to do, right.

So that's how I've turned out – neither here, nor there, neither fish nor fowl. *Blyad'* and *fuck* in the same sentence. Country folk are too uncouth for me, I'm too uncouth for city folk. In terms of, as they say, serious relationships. But actually I don't really want a serious relationship. I have enough to push along. Don't expect that a man will make it easy for you – at least that much I've learned from life.

Rolling my wheelbarrow through the forest I do an expert evaluation of a fallen tree. True, it's on Teodors' land, but who cares. Some time, when it's dark, I'll come over with a saw and the wheelbarrow – push, honey, push. And then we'll have free firewood to last us awhile.

I couldn't really get used to the city. The city, yeah, that's the place where thoughts about the meaning of life will just bug you to death. Hot water just runs through the pipes, don't have to lift a finger – everything just happens on its own. Got a job at a

school, but could barely make enough to cover rent and the kids just drove me nuts. They are not the same as before, in my day. And not the same as in the country. Just yelling at them will not shut them up. No way.

And then those parties, those long evenings, all that blah-blah-blah.

No, thanks.

Me, I think about firewood, get it?

Not about the forest.

So I returned home from the city.

Mom, in the meantime, had taken off with some German agronomist, leaving Gramps all alone, heaven have mercy upon us sinners. So she keeps sending pictures from her German Dorf. Don't look happy none. But she now knows the meaning of life. *To live a life worthy of a human being*. Ha, that's exactly what she said in her glossy Christmas card. Decided not to even show it to Gramps. If it only had occurred to Mom to ask – years ago, when Gramps still had a grip on it, when he worked, when he made free furniture for all our village neighbors, when he would read newspapers by the hot stove in his garden shed and dry mushrooms on the stove -- that shed still smells of Gramps' mushrooms -- so if she had the presence of mind to ask then, he would have been able to tell her more about life worthy of a human being than this sausage-eating Kraut. About how to avoid becoming a broken man in Siberia. How not to betray friends. How to love one woman all your life.

Though I didn't ask either. Too late.

Shame on me.

So I'll never know.

Not long ago, in the paper, somebody went on and on about consumer society etcetera. Basically put us all where we belong. All of us. Those who don't look for a meaning but simply eat and drink, if they have enough money. And work. Work, believe it or not. And listen to Raimonds Pauls. Not me, I don't listen, but still: I demand that others have the right to be free to listen. Is that clear?

Otherwise it seems that only the five or ten or fifty smart ones up there know what the meaning is. But who, may I ask, has left the rest of us without meaning? What asshole has taken the meaning away from us? Or has forgotten to give us?

That hurts.

They know but they won't tell us.

'cause we supposedly won't understand.

But perhaps – to each his own. And my meaning is completely different from the one that smarty-pants has. Somewhere.

But I refuse to look for it, so leave me alone.

Look, those crazies have ploughed the Gulbīši road. Could only happen at a time like this. Difficult to get the wheelbarrow across that mess. Good thing I live by the cemetery, at least they won't build campgrounds there.

But these days – who knows.

Old women gathering by the store-on-wheels. Not very many. Can't get a big crowd here in the village before the season has begun. I lean against a pile of logs, light a

cigarette. Will stay here while there's a line. No wish to shoot the breeze with the crones.

The smoke tastes good. My fucking back hurts. The scent of damp wood in the air. There's still smoke by the garbage dump, yesterday there was a fire, even a fire brigade came. I didn't tell Gramps, so as not to scare him.

Actually, this is kind of a special place here by the woodpile. This is where three paths cross: to the sea, to the cemetery and to my house. Not much to see here: junipers, crooked pines in clusters, the forest on the other side of the road, the big sky, the meadow, the white-stained cemetery gate. In the early evening there's usually fog. If you stand perfectly still, completely motionless, so that even the grass doesn't rustle underfoot, draw a deep breath and hold it so that you don't betray your existence with some hissing or wheezing, just stand there and see and nothing else, just listen and look, for three to five minutes, then you can imagine how it all will be when you are no more. And to get the feeling of how you will be without being.

Oh, hogwash.

Robis had also helped put out the fire. Maybe that's why he seemed so tired. I even sat on his lap. We even sort of kissed for a while. I even poured Gramps a glass of vodka so he'd quit coughing and sleep. But nothing came of it. He just talked about the meaning and hobbled home.

A warm body next to you – I haven't felt that for months. So you can just stretch out your arm and touch and feel he's there. There. Warm and breathing. Yours. Muttering

something in his sleep. Feeling you are there and hugging you. Throwing a heavy arm around you. Or a leg, doesn't matter. Perhaps that's where the meaning is.

Phew, the smoke is getting in my eyes.

My fingers are frozen stiff. Standing like this in the norther, handling cigarettes with gloveless hands will do it.

The crones have dispersed, just a couple left, time to push along.

Okay, here we are. Just old Kārta remains. Her name matches her looks: tall and stiff, she walks as if she's got a broomstick up her ass, in an oblique angle to the ground, as if bent by the wind from the sea, and she looks at you obliquely too, from below and never straight in the eye.

'Robis apparently came home from your place yesterday only around midnight.'

'On whose authority?'

'Authority? His wife's the authority. God only knows what he wants from you, a scrawny broad, when at home he's got a woman who's a real looker.'

What he wants... he wants to talk about the meaning of life.

'Phew.'

Canned goods. Fatback. Noodles. Flour. Bread, the "brick" – 5 pcs. Margarine, economy size, hard candy for Gramps. No, orange-flavor, he likes those the best. There. Champagne? Champagne.

I want to drink, so I drink. So what.

Push, honey, push. Nice and easy along the shore.

On the shore the wind grabs at skirts and hair, a good thing I brought Gramps' old quilted jacket.

Why not make a detour to the other end of the village, there I can get back on the road – by the church?

And let's pop open the champagne to make it more fun.

And the champagne is good, sweet, the world looks brighter with every sip. Blood starts circulating, even hands get warmer. The wheel of the wheelbarrow keeps sticking in the sand, should get closer to the water, there the beach is firm like a table.

I am thinking about the wheelbarrow. I'm thinking about the bubbly.

I push and I sip. Push and sip.

And no seagulls, you know, that bring letters in that song.

The wind throws tiny, icy drops of water in my face, can't tell whether it's rain or just moisture from the sea.

Where the road leads back to the dune, there's a huge wooden spool, been there for years. Like a bobbin enlarged thousands of times, as large as the big old oak table. When I was at the university, I was fantasizing about bringing my friends here. And that guy. For whom sex happens in the head. A picnic, so to speak. Like sophisticated people would have. And the spool would be used for the table. The lower part of the spool was completely covered by sand even at that time, but the top, bleached by water and the sun, was smooth and firm. Would be appropriate to have champagne and canapes with salmon, juicy red strawberries, the bluish sheen of blackberries, beautiful black-haired women in white

dresses, with cherry earrings, the shrieks of white seagulls, yellow kites in the sky, the rustle of the waves.

And conversations about poetry, about literature, about... well, the same thing. About the meaning of life.

Ha, I must have watched too many movies.

Decadence.

Yes, I know that word, I didn't go to the university for nothing.

I can actually talk like from a book. But I don't want to. I don't pretend. I only use the words that become me.

Still, a young person sure can have their fantasies, eh?

And the champagne has made me sentimental. Should have bought wine.

Look, this year the spool has almost disintegrated, only a few boards remain from the top, everything else is buried deep in sand, only rusty cables stick out.

That's okay. Dreams should be fulfilled. Who said that? I did.

In the shelter of the spool it's quite warm and the bottle is still more than one-third full.

Gramps' jacket instead of the white dress, but who gives a shit.

Style is not important, it's thirst that matters.

Let me close my eyes for a minute and just listen.

Not think anything.

Although I didn't think anything before either.



Despite the rain and the damp cold, the monotonous lullaby of the wind and the sea  
make me sleepy, my eyes won't stay open.

There are kinds of voices talking. Kind of Kārta's voice, then kind of Gramps'.

Big drops of rain wake me up, the air has got darker and denser, the wind has died down  
– for a minute.

The bottle is empty – how did that happen? disgusting taste in my mouth, head feels  
thick.

And the meaning of life is just as remote as before.

Hard to get up, back hurts, legs have gone to sleep.

Push, honey, push.

The rain gets fucking stronger, the wind returns even more fierce, right in the face. Cold.

That's how it is with dreams.

I guess I'll pull instead of push.

It's easier to pull, at least for a while.

The light house, painted white, thrusts into the dark sky.

Poor Gramps must be worrying all this time.

The roof of the church, covered with tin and painted white, stands out sharply against  
the sky. Looks like it's covered with snow. A crowd of jackdaws is whirling around the  
spire. As if they were drunk. The church has its lights on, inviting warmth emanates from  
the windows. Like goddamn Christmas.

Shall I go in?

Nah, nobody wants me there.

God lives elsewhere.

And don't say I'm drunk.

And meaning... perhaps it's in the voices of jackdaws and in my ability to hear them and in the silhouette of the cross against the sky and in my ability to see it.

And to hear music in the sea.

My legs are a bit teeter-tottering, but so what. There's no one to see.

And I must hurry, Gramps is waiting.

Why not trek through the forest.

The path starts out wide and firm but then all but disappears in a muddy mess, the forests are boggy around here. Where it's most sloppy, somebody – bless their heart – has thrown down some boards, I just have to steer the wheelbarrow so the wheel hits the boards. Not an easy task. The bog to the left looks like it's from a black-and-white Russian fairy-tale movie from my childhood. Witches lived in such places – places where the dry lower branches of big firs are reflected in the still, unmoving marsh water. Any moment could appear such a witch, smacking her evil lips, sniffing through her long nose, and, with her feet clad in bast shoes not as much as crinkling the surface of the puddles, wobble off to some witches' business.

You're that witch yourself now. I'm that witch myself now.

I fear nothing anymore. Neither the living, nor the dead. So strange to think that I was so afraid as a child. Of bad, recurring dreams. Of ghosts. Of pieces of furniture that moved in the dark and seemed to have a life of their own. Of door handles that used to turn in the twilight and doors that used to start opening silently without ever fully opening.

And of death, of not being, of eternity.

'Grandpa, would you sit with me, I have those bad thoughts again.'

And Gramps, exhausted after work and side jobs, smelling of fresh sawdust, sat with me, holding my tiny hand in his own large, dry hand crisscrossed with veins, until I fell asleep.

The little bedside lamp was always burning.

Good thing there comes a time when it's over.

It's all over. And nothing can be held back.

Nose leaking, I must be getting old.

Gramps also tends to have a drop hanging from his nose.

Wonder how he is.

The house is dark – of course, forgot to turn on the light when I was leaving.

'Brought you some hard candy, Gramps!'

I turn on the light.

Gramps lies motionless in his bed. His head at a funny angle. Facing the wall.

Dead??

'Gramps!'

Whew, alive.

He turns his head.

'Where the hell have you been all day?'

'There was a big line by the store. And hard to push. Those crazies have ploughed the road.'

'What for? Are they gonna plant potatoes or what?'

'They'll make tourism.'

'Bull.'

'Camp grounds. Ecologically sound recreation.'

'Bull. Sure, sure. You're the smart one.'

'Here, Grandpa. Hard candy,' -- I stretch out my hand, and I touch his hair.

'Leave my hair alone. Go pet a dog, don't pet me.'

'Who's petting.' Your hair's dirty, I have to wash it. Have to light the stove, heat some water. I am thinking about firewood.