

**Biography:** Vladimirs Kaijaks (1930-2013) was a multifaceted writer who began his literary work as a poet, but later devoted himself completely to prose – stories, novellas, novels – and wrote about a variety of topics. The body of his work includes crime novels and also an expansive tale about a family, which weaves its way through Latvian history - four-part novel series *Likteņa līdumnieki* [Shapers of Destiny]. However, in terms of literary merit, the most interesting part of his work consists of stories and novellas connected with the horror and fantasy genres, which are the reason that Kaijaks could be called the "Latvian Stephen King" – though at times his work also shows similarities with the metaphorical and frightening world of Franz Kafka. Kaijaks is one of only very few Latvian authors who has written literature of this type and so far no one has yet outdone him.

**Synopsis:** This is a story of railwayman Linards who, during Nazi occupation, witnesses two trains crashing into each other – an accident caused by human error. Despite getting out of the wreck alive, the survivors are clearly still headed to their deaths. Amongst the many victims, Linards finds a mute child of about eleven years old and is faced by a terrible dilemma – should he report her or seek another solution. Undecided and hesitant, intimidated by one of his workmates, he simply hopes that a way out will somehow present itself. Going to the police quarters, he encounters Lelde, the wife of the Latvian head of police in the service of the Nazis. By chance, she happens to be childless. However, when he tells her about the child she reacts violently, accusing him of unlading onto her the burden of deciding whether to report the girl or not and thus seal her fate.

### Excerpt

Linards unhurriedly put on his round, regulation railwayman's hat, turned on a slightly stronger light in the lantern, red glass on one side, green on the other, and went outside to

change the points. Orders had come through from the stationmaster to divert the approaching train onto the branch lines where it should wait whilst another one, carrying troops to the front, raced past.

The night hung heavily on the low, small town rooftops, grinding them into the ground. The darkness seemed impenetrable. Higher in the sky, the moon loomed from behind drifts of fog, lighter patches escaping before being covered once more by a cloud. There was not a human footfall or barking dog to be heard and, although it was well past midnight, a cockerel was crowing – a bird known instead for announcing the end of night and the break of day.

The pointsman put his lantern down and changed the points. Straightening up again, he listened more closely. There was no sound of a train approaching. The red light was blinking in the semaphore.

He went back into his hut and poked the embers in the cast iron burner. He took some coal from a metal box and threw it onto the glowing flames. Winter was yet to set in but autumn had come early and it had turned cold. If he didn't want to sit there shivering, he had to light the burner. Coal wasn't provided but he had to take care of it himself. The Germans watched the pennies, which was why signalmen picked up any coal falling from the locomotives as they went through or pinched them from the coal-cars of troop trains when they came to a halt, so long as the driver wasn't too nit-picking, keeping an eagle eye on everything.

Pinned to the wooden boards lining the inside of the hut were a few pictures from a

magazine that, half-ripped a German soldier heading for the front had tossed from a passing carriage. Linards had picked it up. He couldn't understand the writing but liked the pictures, so cut some out and tacked them up in his hut. When he had nothing to do, he would sit staring at the foreign landscapes, cars and people in hats. He was particularly drawn to the picture of a town by a mountain lake. It was very different from the provincial town where he had been born and raised. Linards dreamt that one day, when the war was over; he would go to Germany and find that town in the mountains. He would stroll along the blue lake; a hat with a stylish bird feather in the band on his head.

Was the ground rumbling? Was a train coming? Was the earth trembling? It was certainly still a long way off but Linards grabbed his lantern and went outside all the same. The fog seemed to be thinning, settling on the ground and turning into hoarfrost. Linards strained to hear. The train rumbled, heaving noisily as if terribly short of breath. To Linards' mind, all the trains coming from the East were grim, loaded with war and horror, whilst those heading for the front raced along at a mighty pace, forcing other trains out of their path whistling menacingly, loaded with weapons and doomed men thinking of anything other than what awaited them. Each man hoped he would return. The ones who came back alive did so wrapped in bloody bandages. None of them sang, yelled or looked invincible any longer. Weaker and more miserable still were the prisoners that rushed past in barred wagons.

Taking in the barely noticeable changes in the air, the play of light around the moon and listening to the wheezing train, Linards had the sense it was approaching far too slowly, as if it were grinding to a halt before reaching the branch lines. There was still no sight of

the locomotive in the darkness. The stationmaster's instructions were that the troops' train, headed for the front and now hurrying towards him, must not be detained, the way had to be clear. All railway staff, from the stationmaster to the crossings watchmen and signalmen, were responsible for that or their heads would be on the block.

Looking uneasily back the other way, Linards could see and hear nothing. He couldn't see the blinking eye of the signal on the other side, still submerged in thick, milky fog. Was the first train already approaching? The signalman understood that it was not within his power to change anything, either to rush or delay things - he had done his job. In truth, he no longer even had to stand outside where the chilly air was going right through his thin, railwayman's coat.

Linards went inside and put his hand on the side of the burner, giving off a pleasing sense of calm and cosiness he didn't feel at that moment. He sat down by the window and pressed his forehead against the pane, his eyes boring into the darkness, listening attentively. He felt increasingly uneasy. The earth started rumbling slightly. So the train was approaching. But what about the other train? Wasn't the one that had to be given precedence approaching, too?

He picked up the lantern again and went out, pointing the green eye towards the wheezing locomotive, emerging from the darkness like a horrifying, spluttering dragon before slowly grinding past, breathing a wave of hot steam and black smoke onto the signalman. The wheels clanged rhythmically as the carriages moved over the points and out onto the branch line. The train was gradually coming to a halt - more and more carriages

emerged from the darkness, chasses carrying bullet-marked tanks, cannons and more carriages again - the string of attachments seeming endless.

Linars jumped as a train whistle, menacingly long, shattered the air. The rails rumbled, this time much louder than before. The troops' train for the front was rushing towards the point where he stood but the endless chain of carriages was slowing down.

The phone was ringing shrilly, insistently. Linards ran to answer it.

'Are the tracks clear?' the stationmaster shouted.

'Not yet!' Linards yelled back. 'The carriages don't have any rear lights. You can't see a thing!'

'Bloody hell!' the head swore and hung up.

Linars tore back outside. He saw a feeble flash of light from in front of the station. The stationmaster must have run out onto the platform to signal that the rails ahead were not clear. However, it was too late. The army train heading for the front didn't respond to signals. The bluish light of the locomotive racing towards him was now clearly visible; a cloud of red sparks swirled in the air, the air slashed by a desperate, continuous whistling. The driver had seen the carriages still slowly sliding along the rails in front of him.

The first train almost made it onto the branch line before the locomotive slammed into it, smashing into the very last carriage and tossing it sideways like a balloon. Shards of wood flew in all directions and with a metallic screech, the air exploded with screams and cries, drowned out by the rumble of the army train rushing past. The other train had finally

come to a halt on the branch line. German soldiers, lanterns in hand, started running around the carriage, barking out orders, taking command of the situation. The side of the carriage was cut open. Passengers tumbled out of it – swaying, falling, stumbling and groaning in pain.

The doors of two or three other carriages were opened and the passengers from the damaged carriage made to clamber aboard. There was no room for these luckless travellers in the other carriages yet the Germans shoved them on with the aid of their rifle butts.

Ghost-like hands reached out to pull them into a precipice-like darkness.

Linards flung himself inside the signalman's hut, shaking like a leaf. Despite the horror of the scene he had just witnessed, he was aware of already having experienced something similar. It was surely no more than six months ago that he had seen men, armed with rifles, bundling people into wagons before barring the doors. Back then, the trains had gone off towards Russia. Who was transporting these people now in the opposite direction? And where from?

A whistle blew, the locomotive gasped into life, the buffers started clanging together. Linards looked outside. The lanterns belonging to the guards and their assistants had disappeared; there was no one by the wagon. He sensed that the phantom train had recommenced its unknown journey into the darkness.

The phone rang out.

'What on earth happened?!' the stationmaster yelled. 'The Germans threatened to

kill me!

Linards started trying to explain but the stationmaster wasn't listening, all he wanted to know was whether the damaged carriage had been dragged away behind the troops' train or if it had been left on the branch line. The stationmaster instructed him to go and look then report back immediately.

Picking up his lantern, Linards went outside, filling his lungs with the fresh air, wishing for the carriage to have disappeared, for what he had witnessed shortly before to have been nothing more than a bad dream. He strained to hear something. Not a sound, not a human footstep, not a dog barking or a cockerel crowing in the distance. It was the middle of the night. He hadn't looked at his watch. Linards set off towards where the carriage should be lying in the darkness. He soon saw it, towering like a black wall. Oil had leaked out and the air stank of it. The caved-in side of the carriage loomed in front of him, one pair of wheels off the rails as it lay at an angle to the track.

Linards lifted his lantern higher and peered inside. Several bodies lay frozen on the floor. He wanted to run away, scurry back to his hut but something he couldn't put his finger on, almost imperceptible, kept him there, looking in at the immobile bodies. The horror of it had him rooted to the spot yet at the same time, spurred him onwards.

If Linards had walked away, turned his back on the horrifying scene, his life would have taken quite a different course. Yet we have no way of knowing or feeling at the time when a decision is so momentous. Hesitating a moment too long by the damaged wagon, Linards heard a muffled moan, a sigh. Now he couldn't walk away. The groan of pain

stopped him.

'Hey, is there anyone there?' he called out quietly.

It was a silly question. Of course there was. The cautious, faint-hearted part of him said not to interfere, to run away. How could he help if higher forces were in act? If these had already resolved that someone was to die, opposing them would only endanger his own life.

Then he heard another moan. In the carriage, someone was moving, crawling towards him. In the lantern light, Linards saw a child's face. Large, frightened eyes imploring for help. Linards wavered yet was unable to leave, turn away and abandon this defenceless little girl in the hands of an unknown, cruel destiny. What could this frail being have done to deserve such horrendous treatment?

The girl crawled to the edge of the wagon. Seeing as Linards had come over and called out, what choice did he have but to help her? He put his hand out. She put her arms around his neck and he placed her on the ground. Tiny, frail and as light as a feather. Clasping the sleeve of his regulation coat with both hands, she struggled behind him to his signalman's hut. He attempted to get her to sit on the bench but she wouldn't let go of his sleeve, clinging to it with both hands as if reluctant to let her redeemer turn his back and abandon her to a world of horrors. Her tiny body was shaking. Linards wanted to free his hand to add coal to the burner which had gone cold, but couldn't.

He tried persuading the girl to let go, assuring her that he wouldn't leave her alone,



but she didn't seem to understand. When Linards moved over to the burner, the girl followed, still clasping his sleeve. With one hand, Linards poked the embers in the burner and threw in a few more lumps of coal.

They sat side by side on the bench. The girl's eyes glued to the bottle on the table. Her chapped, bluish lips opened. That's it! She was thirsty! She must have been thirstier than frightened. She let go of his sleeve and grabbed the litre bottle of tea with both hands. She drank deeply, her hands shaking, the top of the bottle banging against her teeth, tea running down her chin.

Linards was able to get a better look at her now. She was probably about ten or eleven years old, wasting away and weak, worn out by horrors. Dirty, too. Her hands around the bottle were mud-coloured. A roughly healed scar marked her forehead. Her tangled red hair reached down to her shoulders. It crossed Linards' mind that she probably hadn't eaten for a long time. Picking up the half sandwich leftover from lunch and, taking it out of the greaseproof paper, he placed it on the table in front of her but she was still drinking. His eyes still on her, Linards slowly folded the paper back up and put it in his coat pocket. Before each shift, his mother made him sandwiches filled with smoked bacon, egg or cottage cheese with some crushed hemp seeds, carefully wrapping them in greaseproof paper and reminding him to bring the paper back home as, since the war started, things like greaseproof paper, salt and matches were in short supply.

Linards motioned to the child, encouraging her to eat. She didn't tackle the bread as eagerly as she had drunk her tea. She took the bread almost reverently with both hands and

lifted it to her lips. Linards looked away. It seemed indecent to look into the girl's hungry mouth and watch her shaking hands.

The phone rang again. The stationmaster demanded angrily why Linards had not called back to report on the carriage – had it been dragged off by the other train or was it still there? The stationmaster groaned upon hearing there were casualties. He told him to wait. He would call the maintenance crew to come down with a draisine and hoist the wrecked carriage back up onto the rails before shunting it down to the sidings by the water pump as the branch line was to be kept clear. And look sharp about it! Did he not realize that another train could come along any minute! Of course he did! There were no fixed timetables nowadays, the order came through and that was that! Hanging up, Linards realized he hadn't mentioned the child. But he must have, yes, of course he must have. Maybe it wasn't too late to do so, what was he to do with her, after all?

Linards glanced at the tiny body. He made no move to make the call. Who was she? Where had she come from? When the Germans had come to town, Judenfrei had been written up in the main street. Was the child Jewish? You couldn't tell by looking at her. The penalties for sheltering Jews were severe. They were simply rounded up and carted off.

Very slowly, the child was pulling off small pieces of bread and putting them in her mouth, her eyes never leaving Linards.

'I'm stuck with you,' he said. 'My head could be on the block because of you.' She clearly didn't understand a word. 'Come now, that bread needs to be eaten, not played with! Ne nujaj, kusai! Esseb sie, Jungfrau! Prose, pani!'

Even after using his limited knowledge of Russian, German and Polish, it was plain the child still didn't understand him.

The phone started ringing again. His superior ordered him to switch the points to let the through train past. Without saying a word about the child, Linards went to carry out the order. The girl snatched at his sleeve. But he had to go! Immediately!

'Let me go!' he exclaimed.

He glimpsed fear in her eyes. Clinging to him harder still, the child proffered the bread with her other hand, begging him, trying to convey that she wanted him to stay. She wanted to buy him with his own bread, having nothing more precious to give, willing to give up anything she had so long as he would stay. Or take her with him. Explanations were pointless. He had no time to lose. Thinking the train might already be approaching, Linards pushed her trembling body away. She sagged onto the bench, her face filled with terror, fear, despair at being pushed away, left alone to die.

Grabbing hold of the lantern, Linards flung himself outside feeling like a felon, stumbling in his haste.

He bent to switch the points then straightened up again. His hands were trembling. He had to wait for the train to go through then he would return to the hut and the child, sunk on the bench waiting for him. A living, trembling creature that frightened him. Or maybe he wouldn't find her waiting. Perhaps she would have disappeared, lost in the foggy night.

A train gave a warning whistle in the distance, letting it be known that it was approaching the station. Linards peered into the darkness. Dawn was breaking. Or maybe it was just fog lying across the trees, bushes, roofs and earth; the world was covered in frost and therefore appeared lighter. What would happen to the child when morning came? What was he to do with the tiny, trembling figure that had miraculously escaped from the train of death? Sheltering her would be dangerous. And where? It was out of the question.

The train arrived, roaring past him. Linards stood at the points with a lantern in his hand. The string of carriages disappeared into the darkness, their rumbling gradually dying out. It was time to turn back to his hut. Would she still be there? As he opened the door, the girl hugged him, sticking herself to him. She didn't cry but pressed herself up against him in silence, her tiny body convulsing a couple of times. Linards carried her over to the bench. Understanding that her saviour wanted to sit down, she released one hand but gripped him even tighter with the other. There was still some bread on the table, Linards motioned to her to finish it. The girl took a small bite then held out the last morsel to him, indicating her wish to share. One bite for her, the other for him. It was most odd.

Outside, he heard the maintenance crew arrive and come to a stop. Linards jumped up. They might well come into the hut to ask what on earth had happened – he had better go out to see them. The girl was startled, too. This time, she didn't cling to his elbow so tightly, allowing him instead to lead her to the corner and hide her beneath a canvas coat hanging there. She must have grasped that Linards was not about to forsake her but that she faced danger from the people outside.

Accompanying the rescue team were two railway police officers. One of them crept into the wrecked carriage and, flashing his lantern, counted the corpses whilst the other inspected the wagon. There was an interpreter with them. Linards was questioned about what had happened. The officers wanted to know who was responsible, suspecting some sort of sabotage effort against the Great German Army. One officer remained with the maintenance crew who were lifting the carriage back onto the rails. The other, the interpreter in tow, went with the signalman over to the hut. Linards was terrified that the child's presence would be revealed and he would be unable to justify it. Attempting to warn her that he wasn't alone, he spoke loudly to the men accompanying him, explaining that the hut was unlit and it would be difficult to write a report in there, would they not be better on the draisine?

When the interpreter relayed this to the railway police officer, the latter barked that the signalman should not have abandoned his post. Maybe he was the one to blame for the accident. Linards realized that foolishly he had infuriated the officer.

Opening the door to the hut, the girl was nowhere to be seen but, rather suspiciously, the canvas coat stood loosely away from the wall. Luckily, the bottom of it reached almost to the floor. Luckily, it was dark enough for her legs to go unnoticed.

The officer dumped himself down on a stool on one side of the table and Linards was forced to sit in front of him. The interpreter slumped back on the bench, within hand's reach of the child under the coat. The officer noted down Linards' details and asked him again what had happened and how, why the troops' train had caught the rear carriage of the

other train, running in the same direction. The bored interpreter loosely reframed the questions and just as lazily translated the answers. Although Linards had followed instructions to the letter, he had the distinct impression that the officer didn't believe him. Linards glanced anxiously at the interpreter, yawning and stretching, brushing the coat with one hand. Had he noticed something beneath it? Probably not. Silently, he beseeched the child to remain motionless, the interpreter not to look down since, as his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, he would undoubtedly spot the tips of the child's shabby shoes.

Suddenly, the officer asked and the interpreter echoed, 'Did you inspect the wrecked carriage?'

'No!' Linards shouted, thinking it better to give as little away as possible.

'Why not? The accident happened right on your points.'

'I reported that the locomotive had derailed the carriage directly to the stationmaster.'

'Why did you fail to signal the obstruction to the oncoming train as soon as you saw the other train was not on the branch lines? Why did you not signal that there was danger ahead?'

'It wasn't visible in the dark as the end carriage had no rear lights. They very often don't,' Linards tried to justify himself, growing increasingly fearful that the interpreter, fidgeting on the bench, might discover the child at any second.

'Are you aware of what the carriage was carrying?' Linards was taken aback by the

question. Was he allowed to know? So much was secret nowadays. 'Yes or no? Speak up!'

the officer finally shouted.

Linards suddenly came to his senses and leapt to his feet, standing to attention in front of the police officer.

'I don't know for sure but I did hear people screaming!'

'So you surely went to have a look, didn't you?'

'I was on lookout duty at the points and saw it.'

'What did you see?'

'People chased out of the carriages and made to climb into others.'

'You saw it all right. What I don't understand is how a young man like yourself, with good eyesight, failed to realize an accident was about to happen and did nothing to prevent it. You did nothing, did you?'

Linards tried desperately to justify himself, saying that he had done everything according to the book but the train had been too slow, the string of carriages chain too long and that despite the stationmaster signalling to the troops' train, it had continued full speed ahead.

He could almost feel the noose tightening around his neck; the railway police officer hadn't believed a word he said. The officer pointed to where Linards was to sign his statement. He refrained from asking for a translation of the text, fearful for the child's

safety. The interpreter stood up, standing close to the hanging coat. The officer gathered his paperwork neatly together, put them in a folder and finally they both left. Linards' forehead was drenched in sweat.

The footsteps outside receded into the distance. A horn sounded from the maintenance men's draisine. Linards jumped. Should he change the points? Staring outside into the rosy dawn, he watched as the wrecked carriage, still full of corpses, was pulled away to where the water pump was, behind the station. It was clearly being taken to the sidings.

What was he to do with the child?

The phone rang. He had to get moving, he had to let the oncoming train through.