

Biography: Dace Rukšāne (1969) is a Latvian writer and journalist. Rukšāne became known in 2002 for her novel *The Little Love Affair*, which touched upon the subjects of feminine sexuality and gained great popularity. It was followed by other books as well as many articles and columns devoted to intimate subject matters and relationships. During the 1990s, Rukšāne also wrote poetry, and in the early 2000s several of her plays were staged in various theaters in Latvia. Her works have been translated into numerous languages and her novels have been published in translation abroad.

Synopsis: This novel is set in the final chaotic years of the Soviet Union. The protagonist, Katrīna, is 15 and living in the outskirts of Riga. Just before her sixteenth birthday, she embarks alone on a long journey across half of Russia to a mountain-climbers' camp in the Caucasus. There, not only does she encounter the mountains and their challenges, but also meets her first love, who happens to be Russian. In Latvian society, where Russians are the occupiers, this is practically criminal. When she returns home, Katrīna must confront the uncomprehending shock of those around her over her relationship, as well as a family tragedy. As these events unfold, so too does Latvia's liberation from occupation with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Excerpt

The flight from Moscow to Mineraljnie Vodi has been delayed by three hours already. A stinking fog hangs thickly over the whole of Sheremetyevo Airport, its oppressive odour enfolding the departure lounge, the pungent vapours swirling in my nostrils, making me wrinkle my nose in continuation. Besides, I'm spoilt – my parents' house has always smelt of flowers. The spring sees the installation of neat rows of hyacinth pots all along the

windowsills, then it's the turn of the many-branched blossoming bird-cherry tree, while in summer there is not a single vase not holding stems of white lilies or lady's bedstraw. One spray is enough to fill the whole house with scent, and yet my mum keeps on buying and buying, and buying them. Lily ladies hold back the very freshest stems for her, sometimes offering her a head for free. Mum takes the free ones too, but always pays for everything – she is of the opinion that flower sellers, like the blueberry and cranberry women, can't just drop their prices. Guests to the house often develop a headache from the heady fragrance, but we are used to it – I can't imagine a house not smelling of lilies in summer. Mum never nips the pollen out of them, so there are always bright orange marks under our noses and a haze of russet mist on our windowsills. Autumn sees the arrival of crown daisies and chrysanthemums. From time to time, asters also make an appearance, but their delicately herbal perfume is overwhelmed by the somewhat bitter flurry that seems to twirl its way even into our wardrobes - in autumn, all the women in our house smell of muffled passion and barely perceptible longing. The chrysanthemums don't wither for weeks. In winter, every room has a pot of cyclamens. If you snuffle really close to them, your nostrils are assailed by a sharp, bitter musky fragrance with a long, sweet after-scent. I've got it into my head that that is exactly how musk should smell, although, if truth be told, I have no idea what it actually is. Maybe a swift little animal or maybe a sweaty cowboy on horseback, or maybe something you could only chance across abroad. To me, foreign countries represent all things out of reach. To me, winter is a cyclamen-tinted mystery.

This is now my fifth time lining up in an endless queue for a glass of Fanta. Sheremetyevo Airport appears to be the only place in the whole of the Soviet Union where an ordinary

mortal might enjoy well-nigh genuine oranges, bubbles and all no less. Is this what orange juice tastes like? Once, quite unexpectedly, we happened to have three oranges at home - nobody thought for a second of being so wasteful as to simply squeeze the juice from them. Slowly, delighting in their taste, my sister Sofija and I ate the segments and carefully licked every last drop of juice from our fingers, then we set to work on the peel, nibbling the pieces with tiny, mouse-like teeth, devouring all the pith right down to the peel. At first, my mouth went all dry, but then the veined white mixed with saliva in my mouth and, in the form of slimy lumps, slid backwards over my tongue. Suddenly our mum raced into the room: “You two, leave these bits for me, I’ll dry them to use in cakes,” and she snatched our last bit of treat away. I never did find out what the orange part of the peel tastes like.

Is Fanta almost the same as orange juice? Is the world almost the same as musk? And why, after queuing for half an hour, am I only allowed to buy one glass of Fanta?

Grasping the long-desired glass of drink joyfully with both hands, I cautiously manoeuvre back to my seat in the departure lounge, careful not to spill the smallest amount, not a drop of the miraculous liquid! Diāna catches sight of me from afar and quickly leaps to her feet, waving her hands. I bet her mouth has been watering buckets during her long wait. Now, it’s her turn to queue up and mine to guard the backpacks – two brand new canvas *Ermak* backpacks, not a scratch on their titanium frames, both stuffed full until they bulge, the pale green canvas ostentatiously opulent against the background of misery surrounding us. Impatient, she takes a couple of steps towards me. Just a few fateful steps. Bah! We say goodbye to our warm seats. A mighty gammon steak of a man rolls onto them, pulls a brown, imitation leather suitcase onto his lap and belches.

"Shame on you!" Diāna gasps in indignation, saliva splashing in all directions, but is immediately forced to back off, missing being swiped by a pasty, black-bristled arm by a hair's breadth.

"*Zgign!*" he shouts in Russian, "Get lost!"

Diāna snatches up our backpacks by the frames and, bent double like a deformed question mark, stumbles towards me. She doesn't cry but a transparent drop trembles on the tip of her nose. I quickly gulp down my Fanta but there's not a drop of pleasure in it - the fizzing liquid stinging my throat distressingly - and help her drag the bags over to the only unencumbered patch of floor near the door. Sniffing loudly and wiping her nose on her sleeve, Diāna embarks on her pilgrimage. Earlier today we demonstrated almost identical zeal when joining a queue just as long of people waiting to weigh up Lenin's corpse. Diāna was the first to give up and we left without having seen the famed mummy. But then, queuing for Fanta five times in a row – nothing to it! Five times - pah! - we would be happy to queue ten times, if needed. Lenin isn't a patch on Fanta! Fanta is FANTA. The God of Oranges personified!

The gypsies seem to occupy a realm unto themselves in the airport. Having piled their bundles in a semi-circle by the wall, they behave like a well-organized herd of bison – the men forming an outer ring, then the women, while a group of bright-eyed kids fidgeting around in the middle. Every so often one of the women goes off to palm an offering from gullible travellers exhausted by the long wait and, judging from the smiles on their bright red, full lips, business is booming. I would quite like a glimpse of their mysterious world, to peep through a chink into the lives I have only heard tell of in occasional tales, but I back off

and bury my eyes in my empty Fanta glass. I don't want any of them to come over with offers of telling my fortune, removing a curse or putting a spell on someone. I know I'd be unable to refuse.

*

I study the drop of glittering drink at the bottom of my glass thoughtfully and try really hard not to stare at the gypsies. It's much easier with Armenians – cool and composed, their chins sticking slightly up into the air, their behaviour states that nothing going on around them is of any concern to them. You can stare at them all you like and they won't even notice. They are that proud. But how much fun is it to stare at someone you know is never going to look back at you? It might be fun for a while, until staring at their patrician, eagle-like noses, their rough features passed down through generations along with painful memories of losing Ararat, their straight, slightly upturned shoulders becomes a bit tedious. I've never seen any smiling Armenians in Moscow. Latvians, on the other hand, do smile. Swish, swish! Fast-moving Azerbaijani guys flash about like dark arrows. We were warned that it was because of them that we should never leave our backpacks unattended, not even for a second, and that we'd do well to keep our wallets in an inner jacket pocket. (Ha! Who on earth came up with the idea of women not needing inner jacket pockets? Must have been some chauvinist kleptomaniac looking to degrade women by robbing money from their easily accessible handbags. Have you ever seen a man racing desperately back and forth in the street, yelling that his handbag, along with his latest pay-packet, have been snatched from him? I haven't. But I've seen tonnes of women do exactly that. My district militia department has a whole cupboard given over to cut-up women's handbags – two of

them are mine. Ok, so I wasn't sorry for the old brown one, but the pale yellow, Polish-made briefcase was quite dear to me, a gift from my mother on my twelfth birthday.)Swish!

Swish! I clutch the frames of our backpacks even tighter, monitoring the trajectories of the dark flashes.

I badly need to take a pee. Diāna has already been gone for ages and, judging by the speed at which the Fanta queue is moving, she won't be back any time soon. I sit on my backpack as if straddling a horse and try to press my crotch down onto one of the pockets stuffed with woollen socks. Best not to think about the toilet – the two bags together must weigh about seventy kilos, one and a half times more than me, so no hope of dragging them even half way, weakling! Even if I could, it would be madness to abandon the patch of floor we'd conquered, leaving it open to new conquerors. Albeit in a draft, albeit by the door, we had our own spot at Sheremetyevo. Hey, Katrīna! You are thinking in rhyme! Maybe holding urine in turns people into poets? Dear, dear Diāna, please queue quicker, as fast as you can, I can still make good use of woollen socks, I will need my canvas Ermak backpack – five glasses of the God of Oranges isn't a patch on Lenin to be shoved into a tiny glass coffin, so it doesn't smell....Please come back, Diāna, please...You silly cow! Get yourself back over here, will you?!

“Do you need to go to the bathroom that badly?” one of the gypsy men addresses me in clear Russian. “Go, don't be afraid, I will guard your bags.”

I don't have a second left to think about it. I grimace a jagged, grateful smile, jump to my feet and dash off, tripping over things, leaping this way and that, making my way through the crowds of poor people who haven't managed to find a seat, past that revolting idiot who

pinched ours, I'm running, running, completely forgetting all about my dad and his curse, I'm running and running, I'll be there in a second...bah! Queue again! Hell, what a long queue!

"Please, please let me through," I murmur trying with my last reserves of energy to get past a group of impatient women and squeeze myself through those longed-for doors.

"I'll kill you!" mumbles a low voice and a massive, ring-encrusted fist flies centimetres from the end of my nose. "I'll kill you!" it echoes again, this time at a higher pitch and followed by a murmur of general consent reverberating through the mass of women.

I take a few steps back and start sobbing. *Moscow Doesn't Believe in Tears*. The fist continues to swing with hypnotic force. Next to us is a lonesome door bearing the sign of an upside-down triangle, swinging back and forth in draft. No-one in there. I don't get it – don't men pee at all? Maybe they don't drink Fanta? It couldn't be that...oh, it's a no-brainer – the door is open and I have no option but to rush inside. Hallelujah! I'm so happy! I totally agree with that anecdote about English, American and Russian-style bliss! What sex, what money! There is no greater satisfaction than having a pee after drinking five glassfuls – and it doesn't matter a jot whether it's the God of Beer or Oranges. I'm in Moscow and enjoying Russian-style fulfilment!

The raucous laughter of a couple of men resounds from the washroom just outside. It dampens my fervour somewhat.

What's there to laugh about while you are peeing? No woman would ever understand them.

I wait quietly until they've finished horsing around then slip out quickly. Radiating a sense of proud satisfaction, I wriggle past the infuriated female throng - let them stomp around

Dace Rukšāne “Kāpēc tu raudāji?” [Why Did You Cry?]

Excerpt

Translated by Žanete Vēvere-Pasqualini

crossing their legs and pressing their hands to their crotches! This time, I’m the winner! Ha!

Diāna and I get back to our bags at the same time. Orange nectar sloshes merrily in her glass, the tiny bubbles bursting and splattering her glasses with miniscule drops of sweet dew – the God of Oranges is on the verge of blessing her lips ... Brusquely, I leap forwards and snatch the glass from her hands and, despite a sticky splatter spraying up and marking her shirt, her glass is still more than half full. Booty in hand, I head over to my gipsy and offer it to him. He laughs – the glass travels to the very middle of the jolly crowd. Our bags are untouched and no curse has been placed on my dad. Now, I just have to square things with Diāna and wait for the plane.