

Biography: Sven Kuzmins (1985) is a Latvian writer, artist, and actor. A fiction writer and journalist, he also experiments with various forms of visual arts and literature. He is actively involved in other media projects and is known to the wider public as one of the initiators and authors behind the *NERTEN* sketch theater project. His works have been translated into English, Russian, Lithuanian, Estonian, and Spanish, and published in various printed and online platforms.

Synopsis: *Urban Shamans* (2016) is Kuzmins' first collection of short stories. It is a collection of interconnected stories where subtle mystical experiences find their way into everyday urban life. Separate plots seamlessly intertwine, creating a twisted and magical picture of the modern world. In spite of their surreal settings, the stories remain grounded in our reality, with a great deal of tongue-in-cheek humor. The book is designed and illustrated with a suitably bizarre visual aesthetic by the author himself. In 2016, *Urban Shamans* won the Ventspils Silver Quill Award and was nominated for both the Liepāja Egona Līva Literary Prize and the 2017 Annual Latvian Literature Award.

Excerpt

The Ichthyologist

On Friday evening, when Ērika's husband had finally gone, never to return, she was overcome by strongly conflicting feelings. Experience had taught her that in this situation you have to react sharply and specifically: you have to drink more than usual, you have to wake in the night to understand that there's no-one beside you in the bed, you have to ring your girlfriends and talk for hours on the telephone, you have to cry by the mirror; in other words, you have to stick to the classic forms of melancholy. But she was also overcome by a

strange relief; she no longer had to worry about what would happen if he went out the door one day – to fetch milk or something – and never came back in it again. Of course, that didn't reduce Ērika's anger. Ērika spent the weekend in bed, looking at the series *Boardwalk Empire*, and eating pizzas, but on Monday afternoon, driven by an illogical impulse, she took a holiday.

It was a very unsuitable time, the second half of April: not warm, not cold, no skiing, no summer cottage. But when Ērika realized that, it was too late. She rang around to several friends. They all turned out to be otherwise engaged. Cheap air trips to countries that were far enough away yet not too exotic in the coming days weren't available. "All right then," she thought, "I'll scare away the blues by wasting money," and did a circuit of several expensive clothes shops, but soon enough she realized that it was all empty and senseless, even if they were beautiful. Then, instead of acquiring rags, she tried something practical, in the hope that at least it would make her feel better, but, having bought an excessively expensive French ceramic pan, she realized there was no sense in that either. Finally Ērika decided that it would be pleasant to spend her free time in peace and quiet. She bought two litres of cognac, a little food and went off to her seaside summer cottage.

Just after sunset she was driving the car through the garden gates. The lawn in the yard was still damp after the thaw, and the car's tyres left rough muddy furrows behind them. The gate hinges squeaked, the house had grown cold over the winter and smelled of damp cardboard. Ērika opened the slide of the stove, took the keys of the shed out of the kitchen drawer, drank some expensive cognac in the popular "let's warm up" mode, and went to fetch firewood. "Yes," she thought, "peace is just what I was missing."

She took a torch from the kitchen drawer, checked that the batteries hadn't run out over the winter, and set off to the shed for the wood. Crossing the dark yard, Ērika was overcome with unease. At first she paid no attention to it, as her emotional state had generally been unstable in recent days. But, flashing her torch on the door of the shed, she realized that there was a reason for her alarm. In place of where by all the rules there should be a door-handle and a stopper, a hole had been cut out. Ērika sneaked back to the car and took her new ceramic pan from the back seat, and just at that moment a light came on in the shed. She raised the pan ready to strike and started fumbling in her pocket for the telephone, but behind the window of the shed someone was stirring, and in the doorway appeared a young, stooping man with raised hands. On his head he wore a red woollen cap, and he had a crumpled padded jacket on.

"Please don't shoot," he said quietly; "I'll explain everything!"

"Who the hell are you?" Ērika challenged him, adding, "I'll bash your head in and call the police!"

"I wouldn't recommend that," replied the stooped young man, adjusting his cap; "there would be a misunderstanding. One or the other."

Ērika wanted to retort with something about answering back, but the unexpected joke calmed her slightly. She put the pan down, took a few steps closer and asked for an explanation. The young man introduced himself as Ēriks.

"Ēriks? And what are you doing in my shed, Ēriks?" Ērika looked in through the doorway.

Ēriks had installed a little sleeping-place in the shed with mattresses from the garden swing and connected an electric heater, a table lamp and a coil for boiling water.

"I've just... installed myself here," he answered.

"Installed, yeah? You're probably shooting up in there. Right! I'm ringing the appropriate authorities!"

"No, please, no need for the authorities! I'm not a thief. And I'm not a heroin addict either. Word of honour, I'll pay for it all."

"So, you live in other people's gardens, though you have money of your own?"

"Well, now, at this precise moment, maybe I don't quite have any, but I soon will, I promise."

There was a pause. Ēriks hesitated a long time, and then, as if preparing to lift some heavy object, declared: "Since we've got into this situation, perhaps I could ask for something to eat? I haven't eaten for a terribly long time, you know. Like in the old joke: 'give me something to drink, otherwise I'll be so hungry that I won't have anywhere to spend the night'."

Ērika burst out laughing. Such openness completely disarmed her, and she caught herself thinking: "But what if he really hasn't done anything bad? What would happen if I acted in an unacceptable way, and met him half-way?" Having weighed up the pros and cons for a moment, she invited the boy to an improvised dinner, and after a couple of glasses of cognac it transpired that Ēriks was an interesting and sharp-witted conversation partner. As usually happens, the interesting conversation created a wish to go on drinking, which in turn

raised more and more subjects of conversation, and after a few hours it seemed that without Ēriks' presence this evening would have been a lot worse. In short, everything happened surprisingly quickly and naturally, so naturally that at one moment Ērika found herself sitting next to Ēriks on the sofa by the burning stove, enraptured by the ridiculous coincidence of their names and studying his gaunt profile.

"But it's marvellous, isn't it? Such an exceptional situation," she said.

"Really extraordinary. As in 'The Irony of Fate'."¹

"Yes, yes. 'Гражданочка, что вы делаете в моей квартире?'"²

They both burst into laughter.

"But, to be honest, I still haven't understood *что вы делаете в моей квартире.*"

"Well, wasn't it clear from the start?" Ēriks asked. "I've come here to look at a whale."

"What – what have you come to look at?"

"A whale. I've come here to look at a whale," said Ēriks, adjusting his red cap and adding,

"I'm an ichthyologist."

"An ichthyologist?"

"Well... I'm ashamed to say it about myself, but a non-professional one. 'Amateur' is an awful word. Let's say it's more of a hobby for me. But anyway, as an ichthyologist I'm very interested in these things, and as soon as I was told about the whale, I got on a train straight away and came here. Well, and then it turned out that I had to spend the night somewhere. The practical part, in other words."

"Wait, I don't understand anything. What's this about a whale?"

"What – you don't know? I thought the locals were talking about nothing else!"

"Hardly anyone lives here in the winter," Ērika replied, taking a drink in the hope that it would make the situation less absurd.

"So you haven't seen the whale yet. Okay, we'll fix that straight away. But it's quite cool outside. We'll have to take the bottle with us."

Ērika got up from the sofa and put on her coat, murmuring quietly: "The bottle, yes of course, where would we be without it?"

The sea was less than two hundred metres from the house. Ēriks insisted that if everything went all right, it would be better if he didn't say anything more. So they walked in silence, stopping every few moments for a sip of cognac. The dark tops of the pines swayed almost imperceptibly against the starry background, and a cool freshness could be felt in the air, but closer to the beach the spring scent was gradually replaced by a strange, not altogether pleasant aroma.

"Look, there it is," Ēriks indicated with his finger triumphantly, somewhere in the distance.

At first Ērika didn't even understand in what direction she was supposed to look, but when Ēriks took her hand and led her closer to the water, she gasped and almost lost consciousness. Motionless on the beach sand lay a whale washed up on the coast. In the darkness of the night you could even take it for a shipwrecked fishing-trawler or a downed hot-air balloon. But the raw salty stench, which became more unbearable with every step, left no room for doubt: this animal would no longer be swimming in the ocean and would not be catching plankton, whatever it had done before.

Ērika was silent, because she didn't know what to say, and Ēriks took advantage of this moment to expound all the facts at his disposal, starting with the whale species and their possible origins, finishing off with the hypothetical causes of its death.

"The most interesting thing is what he was doing here, in the bay. This is quite untypical, just judging from his size. I've already made some approximate measurements. Length twenty-eight metres, diameter at the thickest point difficult to calculate, because Willy, poor fellow, is partly buried in the sand. But take a look – to climb up from the side you'd need a ladder," he told her enthusiastically, but Ērika seemed no longer to be listening.

She observed the huge lump of meat lying lifeless on the shore, the sky with its countless stars, planets and clouds of gas, and the little man in the red cap, rapturously walking back and forward, and against the background of "Willy", he looked like an obtrusive insect. She couldn't understand whether it was the awful smell that made her feel sick, or the cognac she had drunk, but the only thing Ērika wanted to do was to return home. Ēriks seemed to notice that his lecture on ichthyology wasn't being heard.

"Forgive me, maybe I'm boring you, but for me this feels like the most exciting moment in my life," he said.

"In mine too," responded Ērika thoughtfully, "it's just that I've never seen death so much magnified before."

The next morning Ērika woke up with an aching head. She had fallen asleep with all her clothes on. The fragmentary memories she still retained from the previous evening affirmed that Ēriks had spent the night on the sofa. Everything else seemed foggy and dreamlike. It

was warm in the rooms, from which she could conclude that the young ichthyologist had got up and lit the stove. Ērika rose and went to the kitchen. Ēriks was in full swing – he had made an omelette in the new ceramic pan and greeted Ērika with an optimistic "Good morning".

"What? Good morning? Don't you feel bad?" Ērika muttered gloomily.

"Not at all. I feel like I'm reborn. Please come to the table." Ēriks, still in his red cap, was serving breakfast.

Ērika was of course very glad to be waited on in this way, but her guest's strange self-possession was incomprehensible to her. You might think that after several nights in the cold shed he would be pleased at the chance to wallow on the sofa and take it easy. But Ēriks was full of determination and claimed that he wanted to "get to work" as soon as possible.

They breakfasted, drank coffee, and Ēriks, having thrown a canvas rucksack over his shoulder, said goodbye.

"If there's anything, you know where to find me," he waved, and ran out the door with a smile.

"I know and I'll find you," Ērika belatedly addressed the empty room.

It was a hot day – untypically hot for this month. "Very good," she thought and went into the yard. In the fresh spring air her hangover no longer seemed so tortuous, and Ērika took a turn around the house. Strange: everything in this cottage reminded her of her husband – the grill where he used to cook, saying that "a barbecue can't stand a woman's hands"; the garage where he used to tinker with his motor-cycle; the gutters which he always used to

clean without being prompted, and so on and so forth. But the sense of emptiness she expected wasn't there. Ērika understood that she was doing well. She recalled the huge whale washed up on the shore and how insignificant she had felt beside it, and this feeling of insignificance was calming.

Around lunchtime she decided to please Ēriks and take him some sandwiches, because it didn't look as if such everyday trivialities as food were able to distract him from the research process (although Ērika was never sure how this process could take place and whether one man could have things to do so long beside a dead whale – until now it had seemed to her that all the most important scientific processes take place in laboratories.) She spread the sandwiches, put them in a bag and set off for the seashore.

The whale was still lying in its place, but in the daylight this sight no longer seemed so enticing. Around it were washed-up seaweed, driftwood, rubbish and incompletely thawed pieces of ice. Ēriks, dressed in yellow overalls, was squatting on all fours on the whale's back and fiddling with the wrinkles in the animal's hide – they must be meant for breathing.

"What are you doing there?" Ērika called to him.

"Oh, nothing special. I'm studying the terrain of the hide. An amazing thing. I'll never get another opportunity in my life."

"I've brought you some sandwiches," she said, screwing up her dazzled eyes in the sun.

"Thanks, but I've got dirty hands."

"Come down."

Ēriks slipped down the side of the whale as if from a sledge-slope.

"I probably don't smell very nice," he said.

"Never mind – sometimes I go to work by trolleybus," smiled Ērika, adding, "I told you all sorts of silly things last night when I was drunk."

Ēriks replied that it didn't bother him at all. He was impatient and wanted to continue his work as soon as possible. Maybe that was why Ērika felt so comfortable in his presence.

A couple of elderly walkers strolled past. They stopped by the whale, hung around a little while, exchanged a few phrases of amazement, but then walked on, as if nothing had happened.

"How nice that a person doesn't have to grow old alone," thought Ērika. She took her telephone out of her pocket and photographed Ēriks as he climbed back up the whale's back by its fin. Then, having left the bag of sandwiches on the sand, she set off back to the house.

A week passed, then another. The days grew ever warmer, and the whale had ballooned to at least twice the size it had when Ērika first saw it. On the first night the animal's grey body was soft and slimy. Now it had become as stiff as tightened rubber.

"If this goes on, Willy will soon go up into the air," Ēriks said once, hitting the whale's flank with his finger. Somewhere within the animal's insides resounded a hollow metallic noise.

The stench had also grown in strength. If at first the locals liked to include the beach in their walking routes and take photographs of the whale, now nobody could be observed anywhere near it, except Ēriks, who would run along the beach, constantly measuring something, drawing, calculating and photographing. The local authorities still didn't understand how to act in this situation. As the main whale enthusiast, Ēriks had taken the initiative in his own hands, and every day he rang all the appropriate services – rescue, sewage, accident and emergency, each in turn. But none of the services seemed to know

anything about what had happened. One got the impression that nobody except Ēriks was disturbed by it. A whale lying on a beach? Then let it lie there, where's the danger in that? Every day promises were expressed to resolve the situation, but nobody did anything about it. Possibly not because of laziness, but because of a lack of relevant experience. To remove the whale you needed more than just a lorry; first it would have to be cut up into pieces, but nobody was prepared to take on the initiative. It was a job requiring resourcefulness for which no solution could be found. One businessman who owned a summer cottage not far away, travelled there in a Jeep and said that he would solve everything, money was no problem. He only had to make a couple of calls, and "his people" would sort it all out. He did indeed make a couple of calls, but then got into his Jeep and drove off. Of course the whale remained lying on the shore. Shortly afterwards, one active and rather elderly resident of a summer condominium did what, in his words, "any sensible person would have thought to do right from the start", namely, got in touch with the "Flashpoint" television programme. For a little while the impression was created that things were moving forward – a whole film crew arrived on the beach. But after filming a little footage (Ēriks gave an interview in it, which for some reason was not included in the final broadcast version), they went off back to Riga, and nothing changed. The next day a few interested journalists turned up, from various media, but again, after 24 hours it all fell silent again – meanwhile many more interesting and important things were going on in the world. But the flies continued to swarm around the inflated whale undisturbed. With every day there were more and more of them, and Ēriks complained that the working conditions were intolerable.

"God forbid if the seagulls get in on the act too," he said; "then it will be dangerous to be here."

In the evenings they sat by the stove and talked. Ēriks showed Ērika his sketchbook, whose pages were filled with filigree drawings – fins, teeth, overviews from the most diverse perspectives and other details. But Ērika sat in silence. In a sense she was pleased that no one had taken the whale away. It was helping to create a strange sense of togetherness.

One night Ērika woke with a horrifying thought – the end of the holiday was approaching. There were only a few days left until she had to return to her city routine. She lay a long time with her eyes open, looking into the darkness of the room and thought that maybe it was the last moment to put an end to it. To free herself from everything superfluous. Leave that damned job and start a new life. But even that idea wasn't comforting. Quite the contrary, it raised more doubts. So that wasn't an appropriate solution.

She clenched her fists, braced herself, breathed out through her nostrils, got up and went into the guest-room. There was still warmth in the stove, and Ēriks was sleeping peacefully on the sofa, covered by a woollen rug. Ērika carefully sat down beside him, then lay down on one side, slipped under the rug and snuggled up to Ēriks' form. Without opening his eyes, he smiled, and Ērika kissed his lips. From the ichthyologist arose a barely perceptible aroma of whale, but it had become familiar and almost cherished. Still not opening his eyes, Ēriks drew Ērika in closer and travelled along her spine with his fingers. It seemed to her that if this were a film, the credits would start rolling about now, because there was no room for anything else left except for those two. But then, from beyond the door, a strange noise resounded from the seashore. It was quick, soft and liquid, but it was followed by the cries

of frightened gulls and a rustling echo. Ēriks and Ērika opened their eyes and, after a moment's reflection, jumped out of bed, put on the first clothes and footwear that came to hand, and ran outside.

This time the stench really was unbearable – it spread all over the beach and could be smelled even in the woods. Ērika covered her nose and mouth with her hand, Ēriks pulled his little capo from his pocket and clapped it on his head. There was complete chaos on the shore. It was dark, the stench stung the eyes, and it seemed that even the stars were shifted by the explosion. The form of what was up to then a majestic ocean mammal now looked like a huge frayed rag, over which the sea-water was lapping. Pieces of organic material were thrown about the beach, some even hanging in the pine branches.

"Life is so good," Ērika remarked, controlling the urge to vomit.

"So it seems to me sometimes too," Ēriks replied, adjusting his red cap.

¹ A popular Russian comedy film made in 1976, directed by Eldar Ryazanov.

² Russian: 'Madam citizen, what are you doing in my apartment?'