

**Biography:** Daina Tabūna (1985) is a Latvian writer and graduate of the Latvian Academy of Culture. Her short stories have been published in numerous Latvian publications, including *Luna*, *Karogs*, *Sans*, *Kultūras diena*, *Latvju teksti*, and the online magazine *Satori*. Her first short story collection entitled *The First Time* was published in 2014, and was shortlisted for the 2015 Annual Latvian Literary Award for Best Debut. She lives and works in Riga.

**Synopsis:** On the cusp of womanhood, Daina Tabūna's heroines are constantly confronting the unexpected. Adult life seems just around the corner, but so are the kinds of surprise encounters that might change everything. Two siblings realize they're too old to be playing with paper dolls and begin to re-examine their close relationship. A girl who dreads visiting her religious grandmother develops her own fixation with Jesus, and a disaffected young woman, listlessly wandering the streets, stumbles into an awkward relationship with an office worker. The narrators of these stories each try, in their own way, to make sense of how to behave in a world that doesn't offer any clear answers. Life, however, always has some sort of surprise in store, and suddenly nothing is as it was before.

### Excerpt

#### The Secret Box

I

It's strange how poorly I remember my dad. If I hadn't dug up those couple photographs from my mom's secret box buried deep down in the drawer, I might not even remember his face. I was my mother's daughter, and Edgars was his father's son, that's what everyone said. It's as if we weren't even brother and sister.

Actually I hadn't had anything in common with Edgars for a long time already. I don't remember us having any sort of small joint conspiratorial plans, or any sort of friendly

mischievous until that secret box of ours. Occasionally Edgars had tried, in a rather brutal way, to get me involved in his games, especially before he had started going to school and gotten to know the boys from the neighboring apartment blocks. However I was afraid of climbing trees, balls, throwing and catching things, water, fire, bugs, blood, dirty hands, even swings and bikes – and I could go on and on with this list. During the first years of my life all of Edgars' endeavors to create some sort of reasonable playmate for himself normally ended the same way – I was sitting on the ground, crying and screaming. I felt the best on my mother's lap, and if I would have had the choice, I probably never would have left it. If her lap wasn't available, I chose to play by myself. I liked soft toy animals, especially Littlebit, a little toy dog my mother had sewn. Edgars liked war and monsters. Once he decided to line up my toys and took Littlebit prisoner. Edgars wanted me to play war with him using all the other remaining stuffed animals, but I began to bawl hysterically. Then my father came and told my brother that a boy's task was to protect girls, not attack them, which is why he was supposed to stop tormenting his little sister and leave me alone. Edgars obeyed. I don't remember any big affinity between them, perhaps it was just some resemblance in their facial characteristics, but every once in a while Edgars was looked at like his father's son – as if that meant anything. They were a team.

I and my father also remained foreign bodies to one another. And now it seems to me perhaps it was not only me that secretly looked at him with incomprehension and on some level fear, but also he who looked at me the same way; he was a strong man with vitality, the life of the party, while I was the quiet, boney child with gray hair, a miniature version of his wife, my mom, whom he most probably also never got close to.

The most vivid memory I have is of one evening when he, having settled down on the couch, watched the news, and I had snuggled up beside him. Generally my dad wasn't crazy about physical affirmations of affection, our touches, or hugging – if you don't count one of those rare occasions when there was a stubbly kiss or a piggy-back ride if I started to complain from tiredness while out on a walk with him. However that evening as we both were loafing around on the couch, he hugged me with one arm, and from time to time stroked my head, or my arm, or my side. I didn't think that for him it was anything special – it was like petting an animal that had sneaked onto your lap, and before you knew it you were petting it. As for me, I held my breath the entire time of that broadcast, frozen, scared that the slightest movement would make him come to his senses, and remember that closeness did not reign between us, something that seemed indispensable for such acts. It seemed to me, I thought – perhaps this was the moment from which everything would change, the beginning of something totally new, the first chapter of a story about the fascinating adventures of me and my dad: we would do things together, now *we* were a team and in the evening we would always watch the news; with time it would be natural for me to receive his hugs, and I would stop flinching.

I didn't really believe that. But it still seemed possible.

II

In the summer when our parents understood that they couldn't manage to live together, Edgars and I were sent to our loathsome aunt in the countryside. I liked to fantasize about the countryside, but in reality there was little I found charming there. There was boring work in the countryside, for example picking berries from the bushes, and after that no one

would say "thank you" to you (mom always said "thank you"); unusual and as a result disgusting food, and you had to finish your entire plate (mom never forced us to eat); and what was the worst thing was that there were no other children in the surrounding area, which is why I and Edgars had to tolerate one another. I was a little bigger, I had been going to school for a good while already and could not be made to cry so easily anymore, but it didn't make me much more interesting as a result. His games seemed too aggressive to me. Even skipping stones in the water looked violent – because someone always had to lose (me). I never tried to suggest my own, because they always seemed stupid to him. We were united a bit by the television and indignation about the limits of our loathsome aunt to watch it just a couple of hours a day; and the boredom, above all the boredom. Then Aijiņa appeared.

I can't say that I liked her – Aijiņa was one of those terrifyingly hyperactive, domineering children, who couldn't stand if things didn't go her way. However for a week or two I spent time under her power. She declared instructions with a flat-out directness that I did not know how to counter. However what hypnotized me the most was how she despised boys. Edgars and I had never experienced anything like that before.

In kindergarten, school and the yard between the apartment blocks, boys were always somewhere nearby, however at the same time they were something else entirely.

They were savages, uncontrollable elements, and you could never know what to expect from them. They locked the girls in the room where we kept our coats, boots and bags, turned off the light and listened how we screamed in the dark. They threw the balls in dodgeball so hard that if you ended up in the path of the ball, you wouldn't get out without

a massive bruise or rather serious trauma – some even broke their fingers. On a field trip to the open-air museum a boy, I still remember his name, Ansis Timbers – found a razor on the ground, ran up to a girl and cut her hand. He simply ran up to her and cut her with a razor.

The adults, of course, were furious, scolded them, and made them feel ashamed about such things, but never really did anything – they're boys after all, and they do those things. Regardless of how badly they acted, they still enjoyed a few inalienable privileges. During dance lessons or before heading to the lunchroom at noon the boys would choose a girl to go together with. If one of them chose you, who you didn't like at all and whose mouth smelled, even if it was Ansis Timbers, you were happy that you weren't the last, the one no one wanted to hold hands with. I felt that the other girls in kindergarten and class, though they showed condemnation of it, in reality they enjoyed the confirmation of the boys' aggressive attention – I however was genuinely, honestly, terror-stricken.

Aijiņa had a different attitude.

"Just wait a few years," she said, "when we grow up, and become beautiful and sexy, and then they will do everything that we say. Absolutely everything."

"But what if we won't be beautiful and sexy?" I asked. It didn't seem to me that I would be beautiful, and whatever that "sexy" was, I only had a vague idea from television. I didn't even know what I could ask "them" to do – if only to not run at me with a razor.

"We will. We definitely will," replied Aijiņa.

As soon as her parents left, Aijiņa broke off contact with Edgars, and made both of us his enemies. He was shut out of our conversations, he was forbidden to take part in our games. That seemed a bit harsh to me.

"Boys always ruin everything," was Aijiņa's explanation, and I didn't have any reasonable counterarguments.

Paper dolls had become my favorite toy. Aijiņa had a doll in underwear cut out of a children's magazine (glued on cardboard, so it wouldn't get torn up so quickly). It came with a few pieces of clothing in the set – dresses, skirts, and little jackets with small bendable straps so the clothes would more or less stay on the doll's figure. I drew a doll that was as similar to hers as possible as well, just with brown hair – blonde girls seemed more beautiful to me, but Aijiņa insisted that she already had a blonde doll; and we could start to play. The paper dolls were not suited to bend and move much, which is why the game leaned on drawing new clothes and half-whispered talks about "what is happening with them." The story was always the same: our dolls, two simple girls, suddenly become rich – the money is found or given as a gift for some insignificant good deed, with a genie or a golden fish appearing, or someone from a modeling agency. Having come into their millions, the girls quickly begin to spend it – above all on clothes, which we drew, cut out and put on those cardboard bodies. Or they also travelled to a few places around the world and went to parties and discos – that is why they needed to draw, color and cut out new clothes. Every time that the story about spending money became boring, we could return to the story that they were poor, simple girls, who didn't own anything special, and that life was hard – and everything could start over.

I doubt my brother would have found these activities interesting if we would have invited him to join us. But it didn't matter. We spoke in whispers, even if what was said was totally unimportant. We could have just said "shoo-shoo-shoo" into one another's ears, making it

look like we had secrets, that he wasn't going to find out about. We acted like we had our own coded sign language, expressively making wry faces, we invented gestures for one another which in reality didn't mean anything at all. That made Edgars crazy.

Feeling helpless, he began reading books that were in our aunt's house, with "Treasure Island" being his favorite. Nevertheless, seeing our conspiratorial whispering and giggling, he couldn't help himself anymore and tried to talk with us.

"Ok," Aijiņa said once, "you can play with us. There's only one thing you have to do."

"What then?" Edgars asked. It was a rainy day, and we three were forced to sit around indoors. He seemed more bored than ever

"You have to eat that book of yours," she declared. I burst out laughing.

"What, are you stupid?" Edgars replied. "You can't just eat an entire book!"

"One page at least," Aijiņa said, offering a compromise, "eat just one page, and then you can come over to us. But let us see it so you don't cheat."

At first Edgars hesitated. Then he did what she had asked. He tore out one page from "Treasure Island," before that reading it once more for the last time, ripped off a corner and grimacing swallowed it.

"That paper is old and nasty," he complained. "Can't I take another book?"

"No," Aija said, not yielding, "rules are rules."

Piece by piece Edgars downed the entire page. I desperately wanted to laugh, but I held myself back, because it seemed that Aijiņa didn't see anything funny in this test. The entire time Edgars was making a wry face and eating the paper – and that was surprisingly long – she was so serious that it was scary.

"That's all," he said, relieved that it was the end. Then Aijiņa finally began to sneer.

"What did you do?" she asked in mock surprise. "What normal person eats books?" I was happy that now I could let out a laugh. Meanwhile Edgars's face stretched ever longer.

"You said I was supposed to do that," he said, justifying himself.

"It was a joke!" Aijiņa laughed. "What, don't you understand jokes? I don't know, what your aunt would say if she found out that you eat books! You're sick or something!"

Furious, he ran off, out into the rain, still managing to throw me an accusatory glance, as if he was saying "It's not like we're the best of friends, but I didn't expect that from you."

I didn't have anything to say to that. The entire time that Aijiņa was visiting, I felt guilty in front of Edgars, I saw that he was hurt, and I understood that it was unfair. However I also couldn't not enjoy this change – it was the first time that I felt that I could also have power over him. I was able to make him feel like he was under threat, and not the other way around.

Aijiņa got bored with the paper dolls rather quickly (also like with all the other games, except for messing with my brother's mind). I never got enough of them, but I wasn't in charge of our schedule. Which is why when she drove off with her parents, I felt relieved, that finally I could dedicate myself to my dolls, without any limits. I drew other kinds of paper girls and a few boys in swimming trunks, then with great enthusiasm I created their clothes. In real life clothes didn't really interest me – I wore what my mom bought. It's possible that some of my schoolmates dressed better than me, but well, they were also prettier, so that seemed rather logical to me. But now I was a fifteen centimeter long beauty

with a slender waist, impressive hips and breasts and unnaturally big, bright blue eyes. A million colorful, tiny pieces of clothing were my natural rights.

At the beginning, Edgars was cautious. He knew that after Aijiņa left I was not dangerous anymore, still my recent cold-heartedness had knocked him off-balance. I had established myself on a blanket in the grass with a notebook in my hands, where the skirts and coats repeated line after line. My dolls were in a box next to me so the wind wouldn't blow them away. For a good moment, Edgars busied himself somewhere not far off and pretended to occupy himself with other things – examine insects, beat the grass with a stick and stuff like that, still slowly and carefully he moved closer to me waiting how I would react. I didn't react, and continued drawing.

"What are you playing anyway?" he finally mustered up the courage to ask as if he didn't care. "You're just drawing...them there?"

"No," I replied just as indifferently, "drawing is just one of the things."

"Well, and what else?" He examined my two-dimension riches grumpily.

"I can't tell you. You have to play." I knew that I could tell him, but that I would sound stupid in doing it.

"Alright, then let's play," Edgars said, as if he was displaying particular benevolence. "What do you have to do?"

"First of all you draw and cut out your character," I said.

It was at once both an obliging attitude as well as a dare. We both knew that boys didn't draw paper dolls. Edgars didn't seem content. "Can't I take one of yours? You have so many," he said, trying his best to avoid it.

"No, you also have to make your own. That's the game." I wasn't prepared to give in. He had to sacrifice a little bit of his pride and dignity so we could be more or less equal.

"I don't want to. I don't know how to. Why can't I take one of those?" he said, becoming impatient.

"Rules are rules," I said, staying firm in my convictions.

"Stupid," Edgars said, left, climbed up a tree and sat there all alone – that is how he had spent a large majority of his time that summer. I continued drawing. After a short while he returned.

I began like usual: there were two characters, yours and mine. Mine is called Jenny, and Edgars after a certain period of hesitation called his Steve. I began to tell a story based on the typical plotline – Steve and Jenny were simply youngsters from poor families, after school they had to work in a pizzeria so they could earn a little money, and they never had enough time to study well, which is why their teachers were angry, but their schoolmates were arrogant and spoiled. Edgars asked which doll was the teacher. Up until now I had drawn a number of little paper people, so I could line them up in front of me in their pretty clothes, in my personal fashion show. However, when I started giving them names, think up character traits and relationship histories, I noticed that Edgars would get swept up ever more so and forget his initial skepticism. In the following days I cautiously built up the story, seeing what Edgars was interested in and what bored him. The little doll skirts barely interested him at all, still I was successful in convincing him that they weren't totally unnecessary, because after all people didn't walk around naked in real life. He made up for it by gladly drawing what he called "props" – spaces and landscapes, where the action was

taking place. He slowly began to take more and more part in thinking up stories. We spent countless hours talking, simply talking – because drawing was in reality not so important.

And on that first afternoon I understood: if before that I and Aijiņa had simply fooled around, passed the time, now it was becoming serious. Some sense appeared for all of it. I was making him listen carefully to what I was saying, my big brother, who always looked down at me. I could control him, I could tame him. I just had to continue the story, to see that I always moved forward. It was a challenge, and I had always shied away from challenges. But this time I wasn't afraid. This was my game, and he was playing it.

That was how that secret box of ours started. At the beginning it wasn't a secret at all – it was simply an empty candy box, where we put our dolls, costumes and accessories, so they wouldn't get lost, and not because it was shameful. My aunt said offhandedly: "Look, how interesting, a boy playing with dolls," but we didn't think much of it. At least I didn't.

Other joint activities appeared – the card game Durak, my fortune-telling games, his building fortresses. But for most of the rest of the summer we spent as Steve and Jenny, until their cardboard bodies were almost falling apart. Steve, Jenny and their classmates got shipwrecked on an uninhabited island. Steve and Jenny became locked in a haunted house. Steve and Jenny in the Wild West. Steve and Jenny stopped a bank robbery. And then once again – Steve and Jenny were your average, poor young teenagers. Sometimes Steve and Jenny were twins. Then their parents also appeared in our games, which usually fought and prepared to get divorced, but in the end they resolved their problems – their parents understood that they loved one another, and got back together again.

III

"Will dad also sleep in the middle room?" I couldn't understand after our return to the city.

It turned out that we had moved to another, smaller apartment in an area of apartment blocks. We had already been put in a local school. The bedroom with two folding chairs in place of beds were for me and Edgars, while mom slept in the living room on a little pull-out couch. There weren't any more rooms.

"Dad won't be sleeping here," Edgars said coldly, arranging his things in the drawers. "Dad won't be living with us anymore."

"Where will he live then?"

"Somewhere else!" Edgars answered angrily. "He has another family now, don't you get it?"

That was rather hard to understand. As if dad had played some sort of parallel reality the entire summer, the only difference from us was he decided to not come back from it. I tried to use these unusual circumstances in a bit of a modified form as material for our new storylines. For example, Steve and Jenny lose their parents in a mysterious accident. They are forced to move to an orphanage, which is located in a loathsome, gloomy, remote place and possesses strange secrets. I tried to present this story to Edgars, but he flew into a rage.

"Get lost! Leave me alone! I don't want to play your stupid girl games, because they're stupid and I don't care about them at all! He shouted. Edgars understood right away how significantly everything had changed.

In my new school I understood that games were quickly going out of fashion. A few toys existed that were still allowed – at the time everyone was going crazy over collecting the Kinder Surprise toys. But Barbie dolls could be brought out only in the company of your closest girlfriends, so you could be sure that it was something that remained just between

you and them. I hid Littlebit and all my favorite stuffed animals deep in the closet. Now we wanted to be grown-up. My classmates whispered about the boys in the upper classes, bras and periods. The moment had come unexpected when it wasn't our dolls that had to be beautiful and sexy, but we ourselves.

In any case, it wasn't so bad. The only thing is I had to join a group of regular, plain and diligent girls that was similar to the one I had been a part of in my last school. They were just as confused about all that bra business as I was.

It wasn't as easy for Edgars. Meaning, I didn't really know anything about it, to be honest. There were things that he didn't discuss – dad, the secret box, his classmates.

"What happened?" I tried to probe whether I could manage to catch a whiff of some sort of small hints – a pencil case disappearing inexplicably, a ripped-up book bag or small swelling above his eyebrow. "Was someone trying to bully you again? The fat one or the tall one?"

"Don't poke your nose in other people's things!" he exploded. "You think you're going to understand something from it? You don't understand anything!"

Gradually I began to understand, though he never said it straight: if I noticed anything in connection with Edgars, something bad, in the school cafeteria or in his hallway, I wasn't supposed to look. I was supposed to turn around, head in the opposite direction and go away. Suddenly it turned out that boys also had problems.

For a time we tried to understand the new conditions and adapt to them. We went to school, did everything that was expected of us. After our lessons I had the girls' choir twice a week, but Edgars had practice (soon after moving he declared that he wanted to learn martial arts). We came home and did our homework while mom made dinner. We said

during dinnertime things like "It was a good day, the math teacher praised me." Or "yes, I have great, new friends." Or "no, I don't miss our old school and the yard there." Or "I don't have any problems, it was all just a small misunderstanding." We had to say those things, otherwise our mom would always seem so sad and guilty. The three of us watched TV all together, sometimes we played a board game and went to bed at a proper time.

But a couple nights a week neither Edgars nor I had any afterschool activities, and mom was still at work, which is why we found ourselves alone in the apartment. We didn't have to pretend in front of anyone: we hated this reality and knew how to get out of it. Our secret box was a small island of security, the only place where after summer nothing had changed. We started everything anew.

We both liked the "old times" – me because of my long, magnificent dresses, while Edgars was enraptured by his knights, swords and bloodshed. Jenny was a French princess, while Steve was an English lord of noble birth, her very good friend. However the evil German Prince Hans desired to receive the hand of Jenny at all costs so he could expand his holdings and finally take over the world. Like a true detective, Lord Steve quickly sniffed out the real motives of the prince, however also after a shameful de-masking, Hans did not stop. Cleverly setting a trap of intrigue, he artificially created a conflict in the south of France, and Lord Steve was lured away to resolve it. Steve was delayed during the battle while Hans took Jenny's beloved, but somewhat stupid cousin Robby prisoner and tortured him. In order to save Robby's life, Jenny had no other choice but to consent to the villainous prince's marriage proposal.

"If only Steve was here! He would know what to do," she thought, while Steve, with sweat on his brow, off in a distant land trying to placate the aristocrats who were at loggerheads.

The fateful day had arrived. Jenny, in a flowing red dress with a lacy violet and yellow trim, still having not given up hope that by a miraculous chance Lord Steve had received her message by carrier pigeon and would make it in time...

"Why have you not adorned yourself in white?" inquired the prince dissatisfied (who himself was dressed in a crème-colored tailcoat with a light blue ribbon adornment and shiny knee-high boots).

"Because it is not joy that I feel today, Prince Hans, but rather hatred towards you, burning like blood-red velvet!" Mademoiselle Jenny retorted proudly, barely holding her tears back.

"All the better," laughed Hans, "because my satisfaction will be ever the greater after this night, after I have broken your petty resistance, hah hah hah!"

I exchanged worried looks with Edgars - the situation was critical! However we knew that in fifteen minutes we won't be alone anymore. We needed to hide all of the evidence, regardless of how enthralled we were in the story.

An exemplary sight always awaited mom's arrival – the room was tidy, and we both were diligently studying. Just sometimes it was stuffy there, and our cheeks were flushed.

"Have you been getting along with your brother better?" mom would ask, occasionally trying to determine what the foundation of our new friendship was. I just nodded my head.

"What do the two of you normally do?"

"Nothing special, we talk," I replied. No one was allowed to even suspect what we were doing, not even mom. We had never explicitly agreed upon it, it was just simply inferred.

Jenny held out hope until the very last moment. On the entire long path from the entrance of the church to the altar, during the entire speech of the bishop she expected that perhaps at the very last moment a miracle would occur and she would be saved... Just that at that moment when her turn had come to say "I do," Jenny understood that all was lost. The prince smirked, satisfied with himself, putting the ring on her finger. Jenny hoped that at least she had saved poor Robby.

All of Europe's high society had gathered in the church in the most magnificent of clothes. Smiling, they greet the new wife of the prince. Jenny tried her best to politely respond to the compliments for her peculiar choice of garments, but in reality she wanted to scream.

After the banquet came the tournament, which Hans had organized in honor of the wedding. He himself was a clumsy coward who didn't know anything about the art of combat, which is why he watched the defeat of other, more able knights with great relish. This time the highlight was a mysterious fighter in a red helmet, who appeared when the contest was already in full swing, however in a short time he had amassed such a large number of points, that he rose to the lead. He dodged the most cunning maneuvers of his opponents, and his spear was unerringly precise every time...

The onlookers all thought that they had never seen anything like it before. Just Jenny, dressed in a dove-blue dress with an Ermine collar and fine silver thread needlework, witnessed it all as if it were a hazy dream. She could not stop thinking about the future, which had shown itself strictly in somber colors. When the skilful foreigner had been declared the winner, she was unable to force herself to smile.

"My dear sir," following tradition, Hans informed the knight, "as the winner you may request whatever you wish, and I promise to fulfill it. Then say what you desire and reveal your face!"

"My wish is to fight you, Hans, one on one, as is befit for real men," the addressee replied, taking off his red helmet. Jenny could not believe her eyes – it was Lord Steve!

This turning point was clear from the very beginning, still, when I said it, Edgars's eyes lit up. His jiu jitsu training gave him more traumas than useful skills. But he was always the winner when we opened up the secret box.

In our new life what I hated the most about our highrise apartment building was the stairwell, where a few of the neighbours' teenage kids sometimes hung around smoking for hours. They didn't do anything particularly bad, just sometimes they blocked the stairs and pretended they didn't notice I wanted to pass by.

"Could you let me by?" I managed to blurt out after a moment of standing helplessly. For a moment they stayed where they were smirking, then moved to the side a little. Once they took my hat, but also gave it back rather quickly. At the time the thought of having a fight with them terrified me. Every time after meeting them I, with my heart racing, would climb up to my floor and shut the door behind me, angry that such stupid trifles were able to upset me so much, and I started to gather my thoughts for the moment when my brother would come home. Sometimes I liked to pretend that I had not been waiting anxiously the entire day until he couldn't stand it any longer and say "You want to play?" and usually I did not wait in vain.

Hans had no escape. He frantically wanted to avoid the battle, however now the aristocracy of the entire world was watching expectantly – he would be held in disdain for the rest of his life if he refused to fulfill the wishes of the winner!

After a brief, tense fight, which I allowed Edgars to demonstrate, Hans had fallen to his knees, his sword knocked from his hands.

"Please, I will do whatever you say!" The prince shed tears unbecoming for a man.

"You have already done enough, Hans," Steve replied and for the last time raised his hand so he could finish the prince's life...

"Steve, wait!" Jenny suddenly shouted. He looked at the princess in surprise. Had some feelings awoken in Jenny for this upstart?

"Let me do it," she said, descending upon her newly-wed box and reached for a weapon. Steve lowered his head submissively and gave her his dagger.

"Jenny, my love, what are you doing?" the prince tried once again sniveling.

"Burn in hell, my love!" Jenny, with a firm hand, drove the blade right into Prince Hans's heart. She had been avenged.

It seemed that my life wasn't really connected with me, if you didn't consider the brief moments of shame and fear in the stairwell. The problems of my classmates seemed small and childish to me – kissing games and the first school discos. At home we were determining the fate of the world. We endured betrayal, power-hungry fiends, tragic loss and mourning, and the triumph of victory. Our secret afternoons – they were his monsters, lured into my frilly ruffles and dresses.

I don't know if the TV series or the raging hormones were guilty, but that summer before the end of the secret box we began to be swept away with the murders, raping and split personalities like the ones on TV. Our characters took on bizarre inclinations and demons. In one of the stories Jenny lived a double life – during the day she was a model girl, excellent student and gymnast, but at night she would slip away from home so she could "meet" with men in the forest, unknown men, each night with another. In this version, Steve was her cousin, and he wanted to catch Jenny and de-mask her as if possessed, however each time she managed to evade suspicion and destroy the evidence. Another time they were good-looking secret agents, who worked for the good of two hostile organizations and whose task it was to seduce one another in order to steal confidential information. We were so carried away with this story that we couldn't finish even after mom came home – in the evening, having turned off the lights, we lay next to one another and whispered about what was happening with Steve and Jenny. I had a feeling that soon, very soon, they had to sleep together. At that moment I already had more clarity about this process, but that was knowledge you acquired in solitude from the teen magazines and romance novels. I wanted to compare what I knew about it with somebody else, but at the same time it felt exciting to put it off. These strange stories strengthened what I felt already after our move – what Edgars and I were doing was much more intimate, more indecent than those "dicks," "cunts," and other forbidden words that the teenagers in the stairwell would write on the walls. We were equal partners in some sort of perverse crime that should not be put into words, and it made me feel both proud and ashamed at the same time.

IV

It didn't end suddenly.

In the autumn Edgars quit going to practice and started going to art school – most likely a teacher had praised his drawing skills and encouraged him to develop it. Then he started getting friends, more precisely, girlfriends. That was unusual – my brother with other girls: after school he would go visit them, sitting for hours in the tea houses, exchanging books with them, going around to the second-hand clothing shops. He began wearing different clothes – all sorts of scarves, shirts, and jackets. Before it seemed to me that buying stuff at second-hand shops showed that you were poor, which is why you had to hide it. It turned out that it could also be stylish. His hair became longer, and in one foul swoop he had grown more than twenty centimeters. Suddenly he almost looked like an adult.

However we still played together occasionally – he got his homework done for art school, alongside that drew something for the secret box and together with me thought up new adventures for the paper doll world. Our stories became funnier and stranger. Steve and Jenny had lived through several reincarnations, because the hardness of even the thickest paper has its limits. They roamed through the wrong universes and were not able to control it. There you had an anti-gravitational dimension and a planet where all the inhabitants were liars, and another universe which was ruled by sadistic dolphins. At times it seemed to me that Edgars had begun to make fun of the secret box – but it didn't seem likely. And now he drew so beautifully. Once he drew a little dress for my Jenny – a simple silhouette, with a red, orange and yellow maple leaf pattern. It seemed to him as if it was nothing special, however for me it was prettier than all of the ones I had drawn. I took it as proof that he was still one of us.

Then Edgars brought Marta to our flat.

"This is my girlfriend Marta," he said. Both of them disappeared into the kitchen, whispered and giggled for a long time and touched one another the whole time like it was accidental. She had blonde hair and a dress with a maple leaf pattern.

Once they took me along on their walk. It was a sunny day, unusually warm for the beginning of winter – it had yet to snow. We went through the park, and they joked and laughed a lot. Marta took photos with her Zenith camera. They looked so happy and healthy – two teenagers in love, holding hands, and instead of drinking, smoking or doing other bad things, they were taking walks together with his little sister. I couldn't stop thinking – this isn't us, Edgars and I. We didn't fit into this smiling, well-lit world of parks, the world of an elegant black-and-white photograph; our place was in a dark, stuffy room, behind closed doors, where no one would be let in. Our world was in the bottom drawer of my desk, under the already used up notebooks and old choir music, in the worn-out candy box. It was there we needed to stay.

For several weeks I hoped that Marta would disappear on her own and it would all simply pass. I didn't take the secret box out anymore – even when I was alone with Edgars, because I couldn't shake the feeling that she was somewhere close by, in the next room. In the middle of December it was suggested that Edgars, mom and I would go visit Marta's parents for dinner on Christmas Day. Mom was extremely glad. It seemed that she couldn't wait that we would become one big, happy family together with Marta's relatives. At that very moment I understood that I couldn't wait any longer. Something had to be done.

I bided my time until Christmas. Normally it was one of my favorite days of the year. What I liked the most was to stay in bed almost the whole time, read books that I had taken from mom and her friends the night before, and snack endlessly on the sweets and chocolate I had got as a gift. This time it was different. I didn't lack for books, or chocolate, but I couldn't sit still. Edgars and Marta had occupied the middle room and were looking through old albums. Meanwhile mom was busying herself in the kitchen and making edible gifts for the hosts. When she stepped out briefly to go to the shop, I knew that there would not be a better moment, and it was high time.

My heart was beating like crazy – more than it ever had in the stairwell. I took out the secret box and brought it to the middle room.

"Marta, do you want to see our dolls?" I asked, not looking at Edgars. I dumped the contents of the secret box in front of her: the colored paper coats, blouses, trousers and ribbons, rooms and landscapes, the drawn little people, whose lives we had spent so much time on.

"This is mine, but that one is Edgars's." I played the part of a fool, pretending that I wanted to boast with my stupid little things like a small child, however I tried at every possible chance to stress Edgars's role – "Edgars drew that," or "those are medieval dresses, Edgars especially likes to play the Middle Ages" so she would understand that I wasn't the only one that was strange and a bit slow in their development, and that it was not just about me.

Marta carefully lifted up the dolls and examined them and their clothes. I awaited her disapproval and disgust. I awaited Edgars's anger, shame, and denial.

"Yes, Edgars told me," Marta said, "but it seemed to him that you didn't want to show them to anyone. But hey, they're really nice. You also need to go to art school."

I had not expected that. I wanted to betray my best friend, my brother, but it appeared that he had managed to do it first.

While Marta continued to look through the secret box and every once in a while say some sort of compliments, I finally took a peek at Edgars. He had an easy-going smile and was so relaxed. He smoothed over a corner of the fortress we had drawn which was bent. He made a joke about Robby's hair. But at the time it seemed to me that his look said "Why did you have to do that? You see, I already knew that this might happen, and I was ready for it. Still – you didn't need to do that."

And I looked at him, at my tall, handsome brother that had grown so treacherous, and I hoped that he also understood what I wanted to say – that he could lie to everyone else, lie to himself, say that it was nothing, just charity from his end, but I knew, I remembered everything – his hastened breathing, his excited voice, his sweaty brow, how he acknowledged risk, how much they would scoff at him if they found out, and he faced up to it; and that I remembered it and will always remember it.

But I didn't see any sort of signs of understanding on Edgars's face.

"Look, Marta," he said at some point, as he started to leaf through the photo album again, "this is a photo of me and my father. Strange, I thought that mom had hidden all of them"

I was left all alone in the secret box zone.

When Marta had finished admiring our characters and their clothes I, still trying to smile as if everything was ok, put everything back in the box and returned to the other room. I wanted to cry, to feel sorry for myself, but the tears didn't come, just disgust with myself. I put the secret box in its place and tried reading a book, but it didn't work – whether I

wanted to or not, I thought about the box, as if it filled the entire room with its stench. I remembered how Aijiņa had Edgars eat "Treasure Island." "I wonder how that paper tasted," I thought. Then I once again took out the secret box from the drawer and tore off Steve's legs. Then his arms. Then I did the same to Jenny.

"Oh no, Jenny, I don't have arms! I don't have legs! I can't move!" I whispered mockingly in place of Steve.

"Me too, Steve! I am so scared! This is the most horrible universe of all!" Jenny replied.

"Look at that huge monster! What is it doing with our clothes!" Steve said terrified while I reduced their clothing to shreds one by one, which I had made with such enthusiasm over countless afternoons.

"My beautiful dresses! Oh no! Who could be so evil and heartless!" Jenny sobbed.

"Oh God! The monster has snatched our friends!" I put all of the remaining dolls in a line in front of me. "What is it planning on doing with Robby? Please, just not that!" I took Steve's best friend and tore his head off. Then I shoved it in my mouth and slowly chewed it, while Jenny and Steve screamed in horror. The paper tasted bitter and full of chemicals, thanks to the marker-colored hair. I repeated the procedure with all of the paper dolls, occasionally I spit out their heads like little spit balls, but I also swallowed a few. Swallowing the thick paper was much harder than you could ever think. When I had finished off the rest of them, Steve and Jenny already understood the inevitable that was nigh.

"Goodbye, Jenny," Steve said through his tears, "I have never told you this, but I love you, I will never love another, only you!"

"Perhaps this isn't the end, Steve!" Jenny did not lose hope until the very end, "perhaps we won't die, and simply find ourselves in another universe – like usual! Perhaps we'll finally go home!"

"It's possible," Steve said, agreeing, "in any case, it wouldn't be proper to complain, because we have had a wonderful life." Right when he had said this, the monster ripped off their heads, both in the matter of a second. Their last smile frozen on their faces for all time.

Freeing myself from the shreds of the secret box by putting them in the trash container, I hoped a little that I would meet those repulsive neighbor boys and I could simply push them to the side – it seemed to me that I could finally do that. But, of course, not one of them was in the stairwell that day.

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I can't say whether my stomach ache that evening was real or imagined, but I knew for a fact that I exaggerated the extent of it. It didn't occur to my mom to question me suddenly falling ill. She decided that it was from overeating on Christmas Eve – most likely from the fatty peas with bacon. "There's nothing we can do, we'll stay at home," she concluded and didn't appear to be sad over our cancelled visit. Marta and Edgars left, and the two of us stayed.

We buried ourselves in our blankets and spent the evening watching some sort of classic Christmas film on TV. At the end of the film mom asked me if I could try eating a little chocolate. I agreed, and we had some – just a little so it wouldn't irritate my simulated stomach too much. There was something relaxing in all of it, as if I had always known – that was how it had to be, that was how it had to end. There wasn't any place for men here –

Daina Tabūna "Pirmā reize" [The First Time]

Excerpt

Translated by Jayde Will

they would leave, sooner or later. It was useless to try and keep them with small, dirty secrets that inflamed you in such a strange way.

I was twelve years old, and I suddenly knew very clearly that I would never play with anybody ever again and I felt older than I had ever felt before – and perhaps never so much later on in my life.