One


FINLAND
Lake Ladoga
SWEDEN
ÅLAND
Petrograd
Stockholm
Nynäshamn
0
100 km
ESTONIA
Gulf of Rīga
Kolka
Veru
RUSSIA
Gotland
Ventspils
Sigulda
Tukums
Rīga
LATVIA
Jelgava
Jēkabpils
Bauska
LITHUANIA
BELORUSSIA
Orsha
POLAND

I

He parks the car close to the kerb and pockets his keys, the late Swedish summer of 1986 pressing upon the many ordered blocks of flats with a soft laziness. Sounds of children's voices and the coarse cries of seagulls break through the inertia, but the sounds do not seem to reach him. Enclosed within his own thoughts, he walks quickly up the short pathway from the street to the door of the cement-rendered building. He passes some dark-green rhododendron bushes, the remaining few blooms faded and already whispering about autumn. Then he climbs the three flights of cold grey stone stairs, his steps ringing sharply behind him. The drabness around him contrasts with the light he has left outside, making him only more aware of the anxiety which, octopus-like, is coiling against the sides of his stomach.

He does not need to ring the doorbell as he has his own key, and he knows that she does not like him to ring.

'They would always come at night,' she had told him when he was small and also when he was older. 'We would sit, holding our breath, listening to the heavy footsteps on the stairs and then the sharp, impatient knocking on doors and the shouting. We would remain in the darkness and pray that they would not come to our door, that they would not see it, that they would suddenly remember other things that they had to do and that they would quickly leave in their black cars and trucks.'

But this time he rings anyway, and the sudden sound echoes off into the distance behind the brown timber door with the small round peep-hole at eye level. He rings a second time and waits,

the sound once more breaking into the silence. Then, he takes his key from his pocket, puts it into the lock and turns it. He almost knows what he is about to find, and he knows that there is no path backwards from the present to the past. In that instant of turning the key, the future becomes both the present and the past before he even has time to open the door. As he crosses the threshold, he crosses from his own past to his future.

A silence has filled the rooms of the small flat and is apparent in drawn curtains and in newspapers and letters scattered near the door. It has mingled with the half-darkness and it wraps itself tightly around him, forcing him from the hall to her room. It sweeps him, reluctantly, through that in-between space to the end.

II

The blue-black entry halfway down the page of the parish register recalled the barely audible scratch of a pen on the almost-white paper: Nikolina Edvīna Kindahle, 26th March 1906, female. Parents: Zacharias Kindahls, foreman, forty-three and Rozalija Kindahle, housewife, thirty-two, both from Rīga. Siblings: Hermanis, male, twelve. Hugo Maksimiljāns, male, ten. Jānis Edvards, male, eight. The parish clerk would have then put down his pen and blotted the page. And closed the book.

The entry was concise. It did not mention that Hermanis was usually called Ermonis, that Hugo was known as Maksis or that Jānis was often called Jāncis. Nor was there any mention of Nika or Nina, Nikolina's other names.

Had there been sufficient space, the clerk could have added that Zacharias was short and compact, with large square hands and a similarly shaped head. His brown hair, already turning grey, was nearly always hidden beneath a black bowler hat – the bowler, along with white starched collars, appearing several years ago when he was made foreman. His promotion had been the pinnacle; now he was on the plateau. Eventually, he would reach the edge, and finally he hoped to meet his God. He had always been a religious man. Life for him was about fearing his God, respecting the German baron and loving Tsar Nicholas II. He could not understand those who wanted a free, autonomous Latvia, and he did not understand what difference the word *free* would make to anyone. He had only ever known the German estate: the fields, the workshops, the sawmill, the dairy and the big house. He had begun life on an estate in Estonia before

eventually moving to the estate where he now worked. He had no complaints. His wife ran the household, and the baron and the Tsar ran the country.

Rozalija had not wanted to marry Zacharias. They were two very different planets orbiting the sun with a ten-year gap between them. But, in 1892, Rozalija's mother, Ieva, with four daughters to marry off, had already made up her mind.

"You have to marry him, Roza!"

"And if I don't?" Rozalija had asked, curling the end of her dark-brown hair around her finger, passing it between moistened lips. "If I refuse to marry him?" She was thinking of Mihails, who worked at the timber mill. Mihails with the very dark eyes and the little moustache.

Barely eighteen, Rozalija was of average height with thick brown hair, which she usually wore gathered up loosely on the top of her head. Her eyes were green-grey and her skin olive. When her mother told her that she was going to marry Zacharias, she was in the front room, standing near a window, while her mother was sitting in front of her on the dull-red sofa, sewing. Behind her mother there was a large gold-framed mirror, and the mirror reflected both Rozalija and the window.

"And, if I don't marry him?" she repeated, looking past her mother at the mirror and at the window in the mirror. Thinking hard-to-define thoughts about openings and exits. Still thinking of Mihails.

Ieva, distantly connected on her father's side to Polish nobility, had looked at her daughter for a moment, not wanting to recognize the hesitant defiance behind the words.

"Why must you make things so difficult for me, Roza? Can't you imagine how trying it is to find husbands for all of you? First Matilda and now you and Paulina." Ieva sighed and looked at the sewing lying in her lap. "Anyway, I have already spoken with his family. It is all but agreed." She looked up at Rozalija. "You cannot refuse. It is completely impossible. Imagine the talk!"

She put her sewing to one side and stood up, almost blocking out the window in the mirror. “Give *some* thought to your mother, child! If you don't marry him, it will be my death. I can assure you of that.”

Rozalija wondered if things might have been different had her father, Fridrichs Kupč, involved himself, at least a little, in his wife's matchmaking, but she knew that he had not the slightest interest in such things. She sighed audibly while she thought of her father's large black moustache and twinkling eyes and how he preferred to let Ieva run everything at home while he ran the family business.

Standing in the sitting room, trying unsuccessfully to locate the entire window behind the ample form of her mother, Rozalija knew that there were no exits. There was nothing more to say. She may have wanted something else, but she did not want to be the cause of her mother's premature death. So she did as she was told. Perhaps, she argued with herself, it really did not make that much difference whom she married.

As time went on, she discovered that she was wrong and that there was a difference. She thought about Mihails and about how things might have been, and she was never completely happy in her marriage. But that, she decided, was life. She took care of Zacharias and was kind to him, but she never really learnt to love him.

At eighteen, when she rescued her mother from certain death, she was considered beautiful; fourteen years later, her beauty, like the meadow flowers she had picked in her youth and then pressed between the pages of heavy books, had already begun to fade. She knew that Zacharias loved her in his own silent, uncommunicative manner, but, when she thought of Mihails, she knew that there should have been something else. She became a little aloof and somewhat severe. Behind the wall that she placed between herself and the world, she was disciplined and efficient. By 1906, she had almost forgotten what the meadow was like.

Zacharias's mother, Anu Kindahle, was Estonian, and she had grown up on a German estate in Veru, in the southern part of Estonia, where all her grandparents had worked as serfs.

"They were beaten!" Grandmother Kindahle had once told Nina, shaking her head, still somewhat in disbelief, even after all the years that had passed.

Sitting by the small window in the kitchen, holding a book in her hand, Nina had tried very hard to imagine these people, all of them long since dead. She was wondering why anyone would have wanted to beat them.

Anu, chopping cabbage into long thin strips, said, "And it wasn't just work that the baron expected." She was thinking of their daughters.

Nina thought of the long-dead beaten serfs and the barons expecting more than work. She wondered what else might have been expected, but her grandmother was talking about serfs who tried to escape.

"They were nearly always caught and brought back to the estate, often with their ears cut off. And, sometimes, their noses as well!" She dropped the almost-green cabbage into the heavy black pot, in which pieces of pork were already swimming in a shallow pool of salted water, and then returned the pot noisily to the stove.

Nina found the image of chopped ears and noses very disconcerting. For some time afterwards, she could not look at people without imagining them minus ears and noses. She closed her book and put it on the window-sill.

Anu, unaware of the pictures filling her granddaughter's head, continued, "Though some did manage to reach the towns, where they were able to hide."

In Nina's mind the images were quickly changing to undernourished serfs in cellars and large wardrobes. Somewhere on the edge, she could still glimpse a number of shadowy forms without ears and noses.

"Until people just forgot about them." Anu paused, thinking about those few who escaped while still retaining all their facial

features. She was also thinking about others who chose a more definite kind of escape.

"All my grandparents were freed before they died." Anu carefully pushed some wood into the stove, slamming the metal door with a sharp bang. "But, by then, the estates owned all the land." She shrugged, looking at her granddaughter, thinking of words like *land* and *independence* and *liberty*.

"And without land, there's no freedom." She put the lid on the pot simmering on the stove. "When I was no older than you, I remember hearing about land at the Black Sea."

Nina was wondering where the Black Sea was and why it was black.

"All we had to do was to leave the Lutheran god and join the Russian church." Anu sat down on her chair in the corner, next to Nina.

"But you know, it had nothing to do with land or freedom; it was all about converts." She leant back in the chair while she thought of the rivalry between the Orthodox Russians and the Lutherans. She was also thinking of the years of drought when crops had consistently failed and people had starved. "People would have done anything, gone anywhere, for land. It didn't much matter that it was the Black Sea. I don't think that they..."

Rozalija had come into the room, holding the wicker egg basket. She handed it to Nina, who stood up, still looking at her grandmother.

Standing near the table, her fingers tracing the coarse, open weave of the basket, Nina asked, "And what happened afterwards? After everyone moved to the Black Sea?

Anu shook her head. "But, child, there wasn't any land at the Black Sea. There wasn't any land anywhere."

Rozalija was also listening although she had heard Anu tell the story many times before.

"The barons saw that it could all end in disaster and not just for the Russians. They didn't want a revolution; they needed their workers. So they let them buy the houses and the land." Anu ran her hand over her apron. "And most of the converts returned to

the German church."

As Nina left the kitchen, the basket firmly in her hand, she thought of the crowds of people leaving the Russian church and of the German vicar welcoming them all back. Opening the door to the barn, she could see herself in the small Lutheran church, sitting in a polished brown pew. She was holding her grandmother's hand tightly while she watched the vicar in his black clothes and strange white collar, his loud, deep voice echoing through the church, filling all the spaces while pushing outwards towards the stone walls of the building. She wondered if it was so very different in the Russian church.

Anu returned to the stove. She was also thinking about the converts returning to the Lutheran fold, remembering how, when she was still a child, everyone on the estate attended the German church. It was there she learnt about sin and suffering and the rewards she could expect in the next life. Then, when she was sixteen, a tall, quietly spoken Swede appeared on the estate looking for work, and she found herself daring to hope that the rewards might actually be redeemable already in this life.

Jan Kindal was given work in the stables, and Anu would often take a detour on her way between the big house and the dairy. Walking slowly past the wide, black-painted doors of the stables, she would attempt to catch the eye of the Swede while she smiled shyly and lingered just a few extra moments before hurrying away. Anu was not at all unattractive, and Jan was eventually forced to admit that he enjoyed her attentions. Before the end of the year, they were promised to each other, and, by the time Zacharias was born in the spring of 1862, Anu was quite certain that rewards were not necessarily limited to the afterlife.

They remained in Veru for some years before moving south to another estate, on the outskirts of Rīga. Here they bought the small timber house on Kalnciema iela with its four windows at the front: two downstairs and two upstairs. Soon they had a cow and some chickens in the barn. In the fields, they sowed rye and potatoes. Close to the house, Anu planted flowers and herbs. Carts and carriages and, later, trams rattled along the wide dirt

road that ran past their house. The years passed by; Zacharias grew up and married, and life turned a corner into a new century. Then Jan became ill.

Anu moved the heavy pot on to the table, remembering her husband's incessant coughing and the weeks of fever and how he had gradually became weaker until, finally, she had to accept that nothing she could do was likely to make him better. After the funeral, she packed together her many herbs and potions, sadly acknowledging the futility of fighting against that which had already been predestined. But, while she may have understood the pointlessness of pitting herself against something that was much stronger than herself, she was quite sure that Jan had not completely left her. She knew that when she talked to him – as she did quite often – he was still able to hear her.

Although she would have preferred that he had remained with her in the cottage on Kalnciema iela, she knew something about flow and hidden currents and the debris that sometimes floated on the surface. She knew that life was a force against which no one was able to compete; it was just a matter of hanging on while trying to avoid all the refuse and the currents. She placed some dishes on the table, thinking that, in spite of all the things she would never be able to change, there had been at least one thing in her life for which she would always be extremely thankful.