

The First Two Pages: “Dzintra’s Tale” by V.S. Kemanis

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My late father, Gunars Kemanis, was a Latvian World War II refugee. When I was growing up, my father and his sister, Rita, told me incredible stories about their exodus in 1944 from their farm in Latvia, as bullets flew between the Germans and Russians. Gunars and Rita were teenagers living through a hellish time, suffering deprivation and ripped from their native country, never to return. In 2018, as Latvia’s centennial celebration of independence approached, one of Rita’s stories stuck in my mind. It became the starting point for “Dzintra’s Tale.”

My narrator is a Latvian woman living in New York during the Cold War era of the mid-fifties. Through setting and context, I hope to impart the strength and resiliency of the refugees and give some flavor of Latvian culture and custom. The story includes three levels of mystery. The main storyline is a murder mystery, a hunt for the killer of a Latvian refugee. A second mystery hovers in the background: the unknown fate of the narrator’s family member, who went missing during the exodus from Latvia. The third mystery involves the genesis of the written and transcribed story itself.

All these mysteries are foreshadowed in the first two pages.

To give the feeling of authenticity and immediacy of a true story or memoir, I wrote the story in first person from Dzintra's point of view, with this opening line:

Transcribed and translated from the Latvian by Arvīds Kraulis

In this way, I've set up the question of how the story came to be written and transcribed, while giving Dzintra her Latvian voice, albeit in translation. The translator's name, Arvīds Kraulis, gives no clue of any relationship to Dzintra Bērziņa. Further into the story, Dzintra mentions Arvīds by first name, adding an element of suspense about their relationship, which is ultimately revealed at the end of the story.

I enjoy reading fiction that honors my intelligence, and I strive to do the same for the readers of my stories. The first page of "Dzintra's Tale" introduces the murder mystery and the main clue to its solution, a necklace. The reader is oriented to time and place. I interlace key facts about the narrator and her family, without giving too much away:

In 1957, I was twenty-six, living alone, still raw from Mamma's passing the day after Christmas, 1956. Her death came much too soon, but she'd never been the same after the war, the grief and dislocation and malnutrition.

It was my seventh year in New York City. I'd been working for some time as a desk clerk at the Department of Health, Office of Vital Records, processing applications for death certificates. On a morning in late spring, a man came to my window, glanced at my nameplate, and said, "Miss Bērziņa." A man of fifty years or so, with an agitated

air about him. “My name is Zelmars Jaunzemis.” He spoke in our mother tongue.

“How may I help you?”

“Please,” he said in a pleading tone, “I have nowhere else to turn. The police have given me the runaround. It’s been only a few weeks, but they’ve closed the investigation, or else they’ve no interest in pursuing it with any kind of diligence or intelligence.”

“Of what investigation do you speak?”

Jaunzemis stared at me dumbly, his eyes glistening, ready for tears. His mission was a matter of such great importance that a stranger’s ignorance didn’t immediately occur to him. In the next moment, his expression betrayed this realization. He pulled himself upright in a show of characteristic Latvian reserve and said, “The investigation into the murder of my daughter, Ausma.”

I felt a small pinch of alarm. Such an odd way to request a death certificate. “I’m very sorry for your loss,” I said, pushing an application form under the opening at the bottom of the window. “If you would just fill this out—”

“Oh, no, not that. You’ve got me wrong,” he said. “I’ve come to ask you about a necklace.” He took the item of interest from his jacket pocket and laid it on the counter. The chain bore a single medallion of the finest silver from which three elongated triangular shapes dangled. At its center, the medallion displayed a large, round piece of honey-gold amber. Intricate symbols were etched into the silver.

Absently, under the counter, I fiddled with the ring of Namejs on my middle finger. It was too big for my ring finger. My thumb probed and twirled it, an involuntary habit. Many of us wear this ring, a symbol of Latvian unity. This one belonged to Imants, and I’d worn it every minute since October 12, 1944.

In this scene, to spark the reader’s curiosity, I sprinkle hints about the murder mystery and Dzintra’s personal ordeal in the aftermath of World War II. The profound distress of Jaunzemis accounts for the jumbled way in which he approaches Dzintra with his request—a useful technique for including an elliptical reference to the main clue, heightening the suspense. What does an amber necklace

have to do with a murder investigation?

As for Dzintra's ordeal, the opening scene conveys a sense that she is alone in the world. She has lost her mother and alludes to someone named Imants in a way that suggests he is no longer with her. Readers who aren't familiar with Latvian names might even have to guess at the gender of Imants (or for that matter, Arvīds), although an astute reader will notice the similarity of a final "s" in male names, after being introduced to Zelmars Jaunzemis.

It is now 1957, and Dzintra has worn Imants' ring since October 12, 1944. This contrast between a general time period and a specific date, thirteen years in the past, suggests its significance to the narrator, a date seared in memory and a foreshadowing of further exposition, later in the story, about her war experience. The reader will also intuit that Imants is not a former boyfriend or lover. Since Dzintra is now 26, she was only 13 years old in 1944.

Jewelry and its symbolism figure heavily into the story, spiritually, culturally, and politically. The initial mention of the ring of Namejs hints at its personal significance to Dzintra, as well as a cultural and political meaning. The necklace, which is so important to the murder investigation, has "intricate symbols" etched on the silver, suggesting the clues later to come. What follows in the second page of the story further elucidates the importance of jewelry:

Anyone observing this man Jaunzemis would have been baffled by his request, but to me, it bore some logic and even suggested an

exciting possibility. Countrymen who sought me out usually provided only a snapshot of an item, not the item itself.

“Please, I need your help,” he repeated. “I’ve inquired and learned that you’re an expert in the designs and origins of Latvian jewelry.”

“I have some knowledge, yes.” Behind the man, a line of people was growing. His inquiry, like most of these, should have come to me by mail or a visit to my home. I grabbed pencil and notepad, jotted the name and street of my usual lunch spot, and slid the paper under the window. “Please meet me here at twelve thirty. I can talk to you then.”

“I’ll be there. Thank you, Miss Bērziņa.” He tipped his hat.

For the rest of the morning, my curiosity got the best of me. The man’s inquiry clearly related to my project. By word of mouth, I’d acquired a reputation for expertise in Latvian jewelry and silversmithing. I’m not an artisan myself but had studied the indigenous materials and the symbolic meanings of the geometric designs, many of them representing pagan deities. My mother passed her knowledge on to me and supported my foolish dream of helping Latvians to recover their lost treasures. During the war, many people left their precious jewelry and family silver behind, buried in backyards or given to relatives for safekeeping, on the tenuous hope of someday returning. That hope was never realized for most of us. Our homes were taken, the Soviet occupiers reviled.

With Mamma’s help, I established an information hub for Latvians who’d resettled throughout the world. They wrote to me about their losses and their bailments, sending descriptions or snapshots of the articles they wished to recover. The idea was to match these with any reports of recovered articles smuggled out of occupied Latvia.

This was the fifties, the age of aerogram letters, Polaroids and brownie cameras. The Cold War. Needless to say, I had little luck with the project, but the letters and fuzzy snapshots continued to pile up in my drawers and cabinets.

Perhaps Zelmars Jaunzemis was a rarity, one of the finders, the first man to deliver a lost necklace that matched a photograph in my files! Had the murdered daughter been trying to return it to the rightful owner?

And here, a double agenda is posed, a potential clash of disparate perceptions. As a reader and writer, I'm fascinated by opposing points of view and perception. Dzintra runs a lost jewelry project; her motivation is largely community-based and political. Latvian refugees have lost everything, their homes and possessions stolen by the reviled Soviets. We have learned, however, that Jaunzemis is distraught about his daughter's murder and the failure of the police to complete the investigation. It's unlikely that he contacted Dzintra out of a desire to return a lost necklace to its rightful owner. This passage also sets up a lunch meeting to take place later that day. Dzintra's curiosity is piqued, as is the reader's. Enticement to read on!

Who murdered Ausma? What are the relationships between Dzintra, Imants, and Arvīds? What happened to Dzintra during her exodus from Latvia, and how does that trauma shape her life? Stick around until the end of the story, and all these mysteries will be resolved.

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Stories by V.S. Kemanis have appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and anthologies including *The Crooked Road, Vol. 3* (EQMM), *The Best Laid Plans* (Superior Shores Press), and the upcoming *Me Too: Short Stories* (Level Best Books). She is the author of the Dana Hargrove legal suspense novels and five story collections, most recently *Your Pick: Selected Stories*, which received the 2019 Eric Hoffer Award for best story collection and was a 2019 Montaigne Medal Finalist. Learn more about works by V.S. Kemanis and find her articles about fiction writing and writers at www.vskemanis.com.