DOG TOWN



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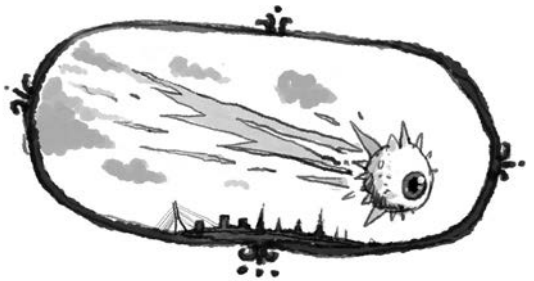
High time for the lost bird to feel happy 176

The myth of Riga

Riga, where this story is set, is the capital of Latvia, one of three countries on the southern edge of the Baltic Sea, between Poland and Russia.

Like all countries, Latvia has many legends. One of them is the *Myth of Riga*. The myth says that work to build Riga can never be completely finished because then it would be drowned in the Daugava River which runs through the middle of the city, and the building work would have to start all over again.

Once every hundred years a water spirit rises from the Daugava and asks the first person it meets whether the city is ready. If that person says yes, Riga, with all its residents, will sink under the water. But as everyone living in Riga knows this legend, they always answer the spirit that Riga is not ready, so to this day Riga is still standing.



Riga is ready

What Jacob wanted most of all was for an enormous one-eyed comet to crash down onto the city. Or failing that, some other massive disaster that would make the dark, catfish-filled waters of the river Daugava overflow their banks and swirl through the streets and avenues of Riga. Then fabulously tall ships, as high as nine-storey buildings would glide proudly along Brivibas Street, right past Jacob's dining-room window, carrying highly valuable secret cargoes to warmer, distant shores.

The night before, Jacob had screwed up all his courage and, his voice trembling, whispered:

'Riga is READY!'



Now, waiting for the evening news at half past eight, butterflies were fluttering madly in his stomach. He hoped with all his heart to hear shocking news about Riga sinking to the bottom of the Daugava river, or some other natural catastrophe that would transform the familiar view from his dining-room window into something wonderfully different.

If the disaster came, he knew would be absolutely the best person to help the ships' captains – he knew the city streets like the back of his hand, even though he hardly ever got to walk down any of them. Children were strictly forbidden to go out on the streets of Riga by themselves. But how could you have fun with grown-ups watching?

Children were forbidden from doing virtually everything here: talking to strangers; getting into cars; crossing the street at a red light, even if there were no cars around. They were not allowed to play ball on the pavement or in the courtyards – especially if it was washday and those white linen sheets that you must never touch were drying in the sun, under watchful eyes hidden in the ground-floor apartments.

But all those rules were pointless if children were not even allowed out on the streets on their own! It made more sense just to stay at home.

Jacob was allowed out with his dad … but his dad was always at work. So Jacob watched the world go by from his dining-room window and he knew everything he saw off by heart. At home on his own, he spent days on end stretched out on the windowsill, watching the noisy comings and goings on the main street below.

Actually children weren't allowed to stay at home on their own either, but that was harder to check up on because they also weren't allowed to open the door to strangers.

When Dad came home from work he often said, "Give me a moment to myself, I need some grown-up time, please!"

There was clearly some subtle connection between being a grown-up and being on your own, in which case Jacob had already been a grown-up for quite a while. In fact ever since his tutor, Mademoiselle Poupette, had stopped coming and, shortly afterwards, Marta the housekeeper had disappeared too. She must have decided to devote herself full-time to keeping her own home tidy, or

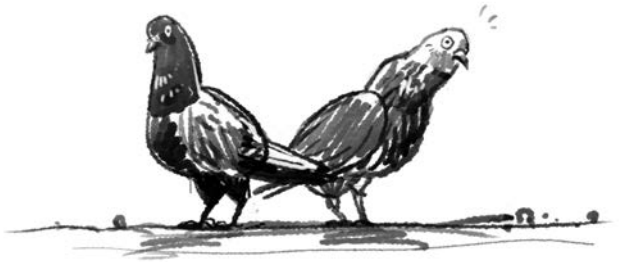
maybe the home of that man she used to mention so often – Jesus Christ.

Jacob's mum was not there. Jacob knew that some children only have their dads with them. Others only have a mum. These things happen.

Jacob's dad worked long hours, spending most of his time being a big, important boss and not a dad. But at weekends when the two of them, Jacob and Peter Bird, went on expeditions to the city-centre department stores, they sometimes threw in a few extra rounds of the streets of Riga. On these days, Jacob swopped his usual view from the dining-room window for the deafening noise of the city's main road – Brivibas Street – with its wafts of food and courtyard smells, exhaust fumes, maddening commotion and noisy conversations. Grand buildings literally sprung up before Jacob's eyes and transformed themselves into a huge living, breathing city. His eyes grew as wide as satellite dishes, trying to take it all in. His ears opened wider to hear everything better. Amazed birds could have easily found themselves inside Jacob Bird's wide-open mouth, having taken it for the open door of a nest box. He was too young to be allowed a phone, but he made

sure that he memorised it all, down to the last detail, so that he could mark it all down back home on his handdrawn *Ship Navigation Map of the Streets of Riga*.

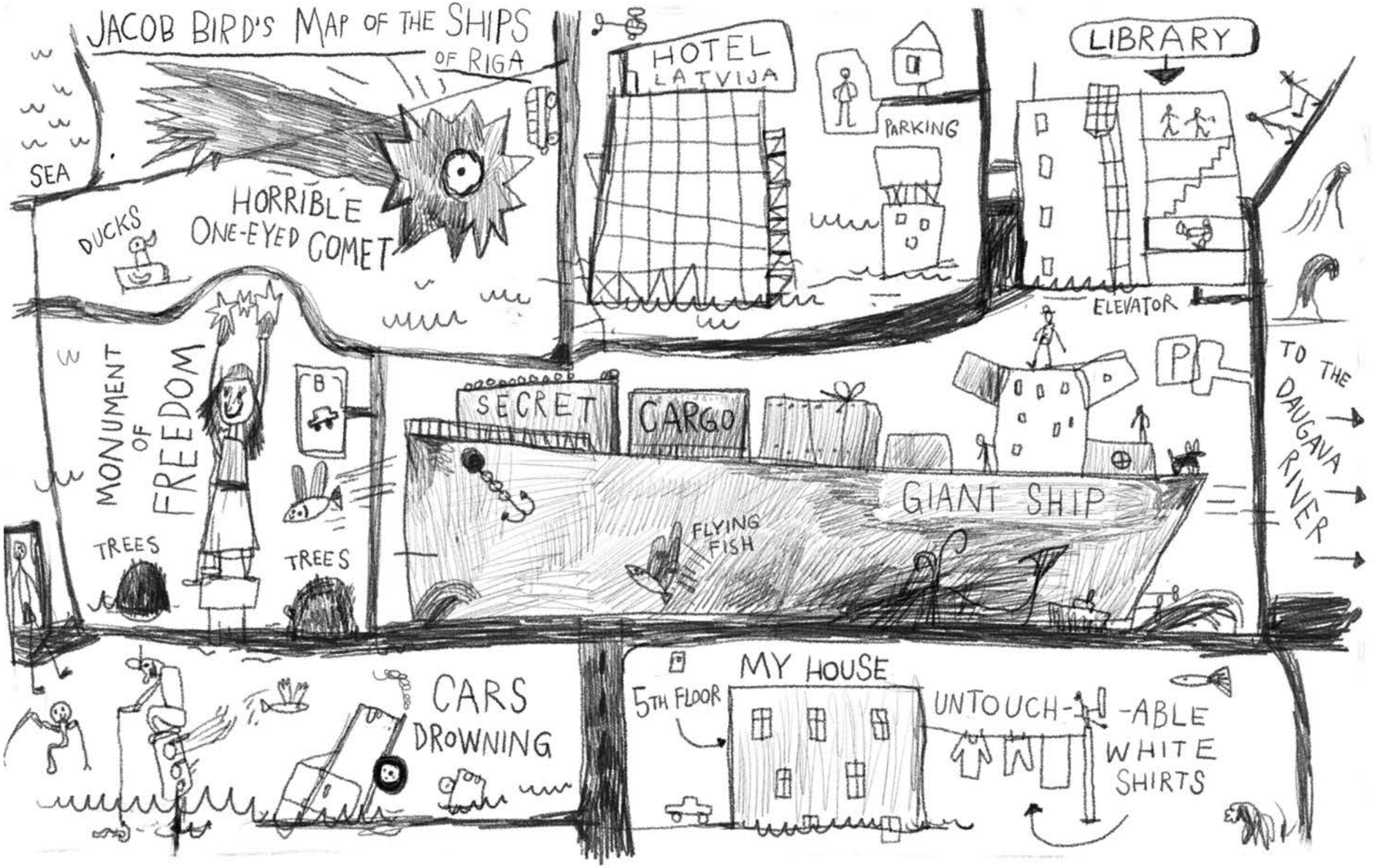




A ship on Brivibas Street

The summer was so hot that Jacob had no problem imagining the terrible, one-eyed comet taking the sun's place above the city, curling up innocently like a cat and nervously twitching the burning tip of its tail, just waiting for the right moment to strike and cause an earth-shattering disaster.

Jacob was alone at home. Again. Sometimes he could hear dull noises and echoes from the courtyard thudding through the open kitchen window behind him into the otherwise silent, four-roomed flat. Once in a while, pigeons landed on the tin windowsill and strutted about, always as curious as the first time they appeared there. They'd fly away again,


JACOB BIRD'S MAP OF THE SHIPS OF RIGA
SEA
DUCKS
HORRIBLE ONE-EYED COMET
HOTEL LATVIJA
PARKING
LIBRARY
ELEVATOR
MONUMENT OF FREEDOM
TREES
TREES
SECRET
CARGO
GIANT SHIP
FLYING FISH
TO THE DAUGAVA RIVER
CARS DROWNING
MY HOUSE
5TH FLOOR
UNTOUCH-ABLE WHITE SHIRTS

their wings thwacking like a newspaper being shaken out. In the complete silence he thought he could even hear the sun gliding across the wooden kitchen floor, climbing up his spine to his neck then leaping up between the slats of the half-empty shelves and drying the spots of water on the sink … late at night the furniture could be heard sighing with relief in the cool darkness.

Today, leaning eagerly over the kitchen table, Jacob was drawing a Ship Navigator's Map, to help sailors find their way along the city street fjords. (See Map N. 1).

Suddenly, between Elizabetes and Dzirnavu Street, progress was stopped abruptly by the sound of ships' horns. Jacob carefully scanned the side streets on the map where some unfortunate, lost vessel might have gone off course. The horns went off again. Where were the ships? And again! Then Jacob remembered where he was and went to squint through the spyhole in the door of his flat in Brivibas Street.

'I know you're at home – open the door!' called the commanding voice of a strange creature with a huge head and a bony bulk of a body (they all looked the same), pressing on the doorbell again.



'I can hear you BREATHING there, behind the door,' the creature commented crossly, after waiting a while.

Jacob jumped back from the door.

'There's no one here, just me!' he called back.

'Oh, Jacob!' the tone of the voice changed. 'It's me, Mrs Schmidt. Do you remember me? I'm the landlady!?' she purred from the other side of the door and pressed her head up close to the spyhole, her nose broadening like a giant cucumber.

'Open the door,' she pleaded.

When Jacob finally did open the door the woman seemed to fill the entire entrance hall with her small head and large body. 'It's not polite to keep a lady waiting,' she remarked. 'Go and tell your dad I'm here, would you?'

Jacob suddenly realised what he had done. He had opened the door to a stranger when he was *all alone* at home! He was going to be in real trouble.

'Run along, now.'

Mrs Schmidt was talking particularly loudly and slowly, as if children couldn't hear or understand properly, just because they were shorter and the words had to travel to further their ears. 'What's the

matter?! Are you feeling unwell? You look really pale. You don't get much sun, do you? Let me feel – your forehead is burning up! You must be really ill!'

An idea popped into Jacob's head. He arranged his face into a grimace of pain and whimpered, 'It's my heart, it hurts … Dad's run down to the chemist to get some medicine. He'll be back any second!'

Mrs Schmidt clapped her hands, thinking, *the poor boy, he's really sick, and here am I, coming at such a bad time with the unpaid bills. Just look at him, he needs to go straight back to bed!*

Meanwhile Jacob was moving nervously from one foot to the other, worrying about how the ship was doing all on its own on Brivibas Street without him to guide it.

'Is it really sore?'

Jacob nodded a bit too quickly to be totally believable so, just to be on the safe side, he put his hand to his chest round about the spot where the ache was meant to be.

A shadow flitted across Mrs Schmidt's face. She narrowed her eyes and drew in her breath in disgust.

'It's very naughty to tell lies,' she finally spat out.

The entrance hall, and Mrs Schmidt with it, suddenly started expanding, growing monstrously huge and Jacob, tiny as he already was, shrunk even smaller – though sadly not small enough to be able to hide under the rug.

Mrs Schmidt was wagging a large, reprimanding finger in front of his nose.

'The heart is on the other side of the chest, boy! *On the left side*!'

She had grown quite angry.



'Every child knows which side the heart is on!' It was like a sermon. 'If you go on lying like this, your heart really will get sick!'

Jacob gulped. It was all so horrible. And Mrs Schmidt showed no sign of calming down.

'Your father must have told you to give me this nonsense to try and get sympathy and pity from my marvellously generous, kind and noble heart. Is that it? But rest assured, he won't get out of paying all the rent he owes me that easily. I'll talk to him about this later!"

Mrs Schmidt turned on her heel and staggered up the stairs, still mumbling something about the recession, bills outstanding for months and also about the world coming to an inevitable end because, in her day, such horrid things really didn't happen.

Gradually the entrance hall went back to its original size. Jacob looked out of the window to make sure the terrible one-eyed comet was not approaching after all and the world was not actually coming to an end. Then he started wondering about what his dad would say about him opening the door to a stranger.

'Every child knows that, bla bla bla…' The

more Jacob thought about it, the more annoyed he became with that silly Mrs Schmidt who didn't seem to realise that he hadn't been a child for quite some time.

'And … if I am not a child, I might very well not know exactly where the heart is!' Jacob muttered. 'Who on earth thought of placing the heart on the left side anyway? The right side is better. If my left leg itches, I always scratch my right leg too, even if it isn't itching, so it's not annoyed that I'm paying too much attention to the other one. OK, well … hmph! So, it's on the left … the heart is on the left…'

How on earth could the heart be on the wrong side?!

Jacob had often heard women in the courtyard talking about someone going over to the wrong side. Maybe this was some horrible, even incurable, heart disease, Jacob thought to himself as his Brivibas Street ship disappeared over the horizon.



Disaster

Jacob felt a long arm catch him, dragging him like a kitten away from the yawning darkness and into a wonderful ocean of light. But the journey was hard going as the wind hit him full force.

His fingers and toes felt like balloons, filled with air for the first time. He breathed in slowly and, as he did so, he realised he was back behind the kitchen table in the four-room apartment on Brivibas Street.

Reluctantly he opened his eyes. Where had he been? He must have been asleep, dreaming. Maybe the dream man had noticed that Jacob was