

I'LL PART THE FOAM FROM THE WAVES
(an excerpt from the novel)¹

Feri Lainšček

Translated by Laura Cuder Turk

I'm getting older, therefore my ancestors are getting older, too. That is to say, my memory is their final, increasingly unreliable dwelling place. And in the memories of others it's no better, because there's little left that people can touch and might think worthwhile. They lived by the river, ferrying people back and forth. This is why their lives were marked by an animism that only river peoples can recognize and understand. But even this is probably not entirely the case. Just as there is truth in the saying that one cannot step into the same river twice, so must it be true that no two rivers anywhere in the world are completely alike.

The river that rises in Lungau in the Hohe Tauern and flows into the river Danube in Pannonia is named Mūra in our country. Its likely Indo-Germanic root 'mori' can most accurately be translated as 'body of water'. But its name nevertheless reminds us of the old Greek word 'moira', which means 'destiny'. The descriptions of these physical and metaphysical extensions in and of themselves probably capture all of its hidden essence. With only four hundred forty-four kilometers of current,

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Feri Lainšček has written fourteen novels, all widely acclaimed in Slovenia. He is the author of numerous bestsellers, including *Instead of Whom the Flower Blooms*, which inspired the feature film *Halgato* and a three-part television series, and *The One Brought by the Fog*, upon which the feature film *Mokuš* is based. Lainšček has won several literary awards, including the Kresnik award for best Slovene novel in 1992 (*Instead of Whom the Flower Blooms*) and the national award for literature—the Prešeren Fund Prize—for the novel *The One Brought by the Fog* in 1996. The novel *The Astral String* received the Vladimir Slejko Fund award for best novel in a 1993 national competition; and in 2001 he won the Večernica Award for the collection of fairy-tales *Mislce*. His works are translated into several languages.

it is much too short ever to have overstepped the boundaries of the powerful former Austro-Hungarian empire, but its lower tracts were most definitely wide enough to separate us, Pannonian Slovenes, from our native country for a whole millennium.

Due to its inconstant and diverging current, the Mura has changed its course frequently since ancient times, its channels inexorably pushing back its banks. Austrian and Hungarian landowners quarreled to no end as a result of its volatile nature. They bickered and litigated and came to blows, each accusing the other of having built levees and dams that altered the river's course in the opposite direction, causing damage. But no matter how assiduously they directed and redirected it, the river went on doing as it pleased and shifted the border as it pleased, as well. It was not until the days of Maria Theresa that the border was finally determined, at which time the first plans for regulating these still, but unsteady and unpredictable waters were agreed upon.

Ing. Julian Spransky, Thesis, 1938

SATURDAY

This afternoon Elica went to Sóbota for only the third time in her life, although the town was less than an hour's walk away. It was a dark and rainy day so that Main Street was one long puddle and Elica and Ivan had to leave their light carriage at the vicarage by the Catholic church. Sticky mud had already spread over the paths between the houses, water in ditches had risen so high that some wooden footbridges were already submerged. All of this, which most likely portended a long and wet autumn, was the reason why the Pannonian town seemed like a big drowsy village, where geese and hens wandered slowly out of backyards and pecked in the unmown grass. For shopkeepers this was, of course, the day when hardly anyone went shopping, so they stood gloomily under the eaves or looking out of their shop windows like motionless apparitions, praying for the weather to improve.

Almost all the tables in the cafe of the new hotel called Dobray on Main Square were taken, probably because of this sleepy day as well. This was where rich Hungarian and Jewish merchants, senior clerks, land owners, lawyers and doctors met, and where chance travelers and retailers, driven from the four corners of the earth by their business, and students, playing at being fine gentlemen, on their way back from

Koszeg, Szopron, and Gyor, went astray. Here and there sat a group of ladies, who with their shoes and coiffures let others know that their servants were taking care of things at home, while they chatted about love novels and listened to piano music instead.

Elica sat on the edge of an upholstered chair and didn't dare lean back. She felt as if everyone had noticed her ragged shoes and her one-piece dress and that they were only waiting for her to demonstrate some treacherous awkwardness so that they could send her away. She was sorry for having followed him like a sheep without asking what he meant to show her, but she was even angrier for not having foreseen something like this and making an excuse. The fact was that she now found herself in a smart salon entirely against her will and looked more and more like a gray mouse that had come out of its burrow at the wrong hole and now in distress could not find her way back.

"Can we go now?" she whispered at last.

"Why not treat ourselves to a couple of mugs of mulled wine?" shrugged Ivan, who most likely sensed her heart chilling. "We have to wait until our appointment with the tailor anyway," he pulled out his pocket watch and looked at the silver dial. "That is, I asked him to make the appointment for when he would really be able to take time for us."

"Why do we have to go to the tailor's?" she was even more uncomfortable.

"For your fitting," he smiled. "And to show you his patterns, which you might like," he explained. "But besides," he winked at her, "once the tailor has your measurements, you can place your order there and you don't have to stand in line for every little thing."

"You're going to have a dress made for me?" she finally understood and was left breathless. "You brought me here for that and never said a word?" she was seized with a joy she could not hide. "Well, I could just smile and smile," she admitted and with her hand covered her face; she really was smiling like a Gypsy at white bread.

"You need clothes and other lady-like things," he held her hand across the table and drew it to him. "We have to provide you with a lot of things so that you won't be embarrassed when we go out," he whispered.

She grasped his big hand, which was now not only a safety net but an open hand, generously offering something she had never dared

dream of before. She gazed at his immobile face, wondering how he could do all of this as if it were only natural. Unbeknownst to herself, she was slowly becoming a part of his plan, which he never talked about much but demonstrated with unexpected acts. But surprisingly he never let her feel that she should be grateful or that she owed him anything.

"As a matter of fact, what does being a gentleman mean other than having fine clothes?" he continued a thought she was unable to follow. And a few refined words which can be learned," he added. "Behind it is all that human vanity which doesn't have the courage to admit that everyone prefers their own way of doing things to anyone else's."

"It doesn't seem so simple to me," she pulled back.

"It isn't," he listened to her. "But we're newcomers and what do we care about their poor relations," he whispered again. "Everything we're going to need here we're going to buy," he explained excitedly. "Clean accounts will be our legitimation, the key to all worldly doors."

"Don't hold it against me," she interrupted him. "But I don't understand what you're thinking or what you're planning to do," she admitted. "You can't simply forget that I've gone barefoot until now," she added after a moment. "You can't just buy me shoes I've only ever seen from a distance and think I can wear them like these women here do."

He pursed his lips and looked away. It seemed as if she had said something he didn't like or that she was getting on his nerves. But most likely he was secretly admitting to himself that what she said was undeniably true and that he had to take it into consideration. And it was certainly better to face it now when the tailor hadn't yet taken her measurements, than to regret it later. This is why she didn't want to conceal her distress, though she would rather have turned away these words, which were as heavy as stone. But his face softened again in the mean time, and his blue eyes were as clear as water. He leaned over the table and whispered: "Not only shoes, we're going to buy a house."

"A house!?" she exclaimed.

"Yes," he affirmed with a voice one couldn't object to." One with a drawing room, a balcony and a glassed-in veranda."

"Here?" she asked timidly.

"Here or somewhere nearby," he was determined. "I hadn't meant to tell you yet because I haven't found one I can show you," he explained. "Now I see that it's better if you know."

She gazed at the waiter's white hands, which were setting a pot of mulled wine in front of her, and later she felt drunk even from the aromatic vapors. The other guests in the Dobray hotel cafe were suddenly so loud that she could not hear herself. She heard the clatter of dominoes tumbling, cards being shuffled, and the tapping of billiard balls, but she could not at all hear whatever it was screaming inside her. She had the feeling that the only thing sitting at the carved and lacquered table was her snaky body and that her soul was being lifted out of it by a strong whirlpool, scrambling her as if scrambling eggs. Of course, Ivan had said something to her that she hadn't expected and she ought to be very happy now; No doubt she was afraid of moving somewhere new, of making a fresh start with people she didn't even know. But why didn't she feel this joy and fear now, why instead was everything inside her becoming hollow, filling with the unbearable noise of the town, entertaining itself with chatter and games? Was she really drunk from the heated, aromatic air or was she feeling sick because of the events, which took turns as if an irrepressible river were piling them up?

"Let's drink," said Ivan in the distance. "Let's drink to us."

"To us," she lifted her mug of mulled wine with both palms and held it out to him. "And to wild ducks," she sighed before taking a sip.

"To ducks?" he was astonished.

"Yes, to ducks," she nodded. "To those wild ducks from my first reader, which keep flying and flying and never flyaway," she smiled thoughtfully.

"Well!" he said as if he wanted to say: you're really confused.

She put the mug back on the table and wondered how to explain it. They were frightened ducks that had flown up over the horizon and stopped in mid-flight—just as it sometimes seems that even undrawn birds come to a stop for a moment while flying. Even as a child she felt that the illustrator had deliberately captured them in such a moment. This is likely why they stuck in her memory like a picture with a hidden message in it. But what that message was she could hardly put into words.

Instead she stood up, leaned over the table and kissed him on his soft lips, which had parted in surprise and were sweet with the cinnamony wine.

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Elica had already recovered when they knocked at the tailor's. The apartment they entered served as a workshop as well. Wooden coat stands stood in the hall, hung with shabby clothes; there was a sewing machine in the living room; and at the kitchen table the tailor was receiving orders and writing down measurements. Clippings of fabric, accumulated during the day, were scattered throughout the rooms like fallen autumn leaves, and stretched threads dangled from the furniture and doorknobs like a colorful spider's web. Tailor Holsedl, an elderly but spry and talkative man, answered the door and showed them around as if he wanted to show them all the capacities of his fashion laboratory before taking their order. He talked about the crazy prices of textiles, the shortage of buttons and the bad quality of thread, but at the same time assured them that in all the empire there was no silk he couldn't get nor dress he couldn't stitch together. All the while he would take off his round, brass-framed glasses, wipe them with the edge of his untucked gingham shirt, and look at them as if he could see and size them up better without the lenses on.

"That's how the times are," Ivan Spransky said, a little weary of the man. "It would be strange if that didn't show," he thought to himself.

"Terrible," shuddered the tailor and stopped as if his whole body ached.

"All around, new Simplegade cliffs and not a pigeon in sight," he sighed as if he were going to cry. "Only jackals mating in the royal palaces and crazy peoples everywhere like locusts, devouring everything in their path."

"Yes," nodded the inspector. "It's just that the people aren't really to blame," he objected slightly. "Our young men would surely rather be doing something else."

"Yes," the tailor nodded as well. "Although we mustn't forget: the horrors of death are poison," he rolled his eyes. "It's enough to bring a man to the verge, when not even his own mother can recognize the beast moving inside him," he claimed. "Besides: look at what this poet wrote," he reached for a folded newspaper. "Even lofty spirits like that

get included in military propaganda," he pointed to the poem with his forefinger.

"If I should die, think only this of me; that there's some corner of foreign field that is forever England," Ivan read aloud.

"A certain Brooke who died in April at the Dardanelles on a French medical ship; luckily the grass won't be growing out of him," laughed the old Holsedl.

"I find the poem very sad," the inspector said quietly after carefully folding the newspaper and putting it on the table. "Thousands must find comfort in it, but one day England won't care about that grass," he thought. "Even Germany won't give a damn about its grass," he added after some time. "And everybody will forget."

The tailor took off his glasses but didn't wipe them this time, he just rubbed his eye with a bent forefinger. He seemed not to like the newcomer's words but he didn't wish to object. Business is business and why should they quarrel over things they didn't know much about and were at odds over anyway .

"I have already notified you as to why we've come," said Ivan Spransky, who understood the tailor's gesture. "My future wife would like to register here and choose something nice for herself," he explained with a smile.

"Certainly, certainly," the tailor turned to Elica and stepped back to size her up better with his eyes. "The young lady will be a valued customer, and I can guarantee your satisfaction," he walked around her in a circle and looked at her from the side. "One thing I must say at the outset," he said confidently. "Even if I had chosen it myself, I wouldn't find a prettier body for our clothes between here and Budapest." He put his glasses back on and stretched out the measuring tape. "I know the measurements of all kinds of fine young ladies, so I also know that sometimes you really need to make an effort," he measured her around her waist and hips. "But this," he said triumphantly after reading between his thumb and forefinger. "This, Sir, is truly an idol!"

Elica, embarrassed, closed her eyes for a moment but she restrained herself and didn't object to his immense praise. After all, she did secretly like the fact that Ivan was hearing it, that with her figure she might hold her own with the ladies of the town.

"Truthfully," added the old man. "It will be a great pleasure, and it will show," he raised his voice and winked at her over his glasses. "You just have to promise me that you will never turn into a silly goose."

"Oh," Elica said eventually. "How could you think that?"

"That was a nasty thing to say, I admit," laughed the tailor. "But I don't mean the kind of goose you can meet out on the promenade, but the one the father of the gods had to turn into a swan for," he leaned towards Ivan again. "I, too, once had a young and beautiful wife, so I can tell you from experience," he whispered in his ear: «I was a swan but I should have been a lion."

"Ah yes," the inspector nodded slightly. "But a man can only be what he is," he shrugged. "It's also true that with many things we don't know until it's too late what the right thing to do would have been."

"True," the old man nodded slightly as well. "Although only a man at my age realizes that doing the right thing never helped him, only doing what was good for him," he had to add his part at the same time.

"What about love?" Elica interjected into the overtly masculine atmosphere filling the workshop, which was becoming increasingly dark. "Doesn't it have anything to do with that?" she reproached them as she was getting fed up with this courteous bargaining.

"Love?" the old man glanced at her in astonishment. "Let's call it *Coincidentia contrariorum*, Miss," he informed her with a raised forefinger. "That's just it: the force that tries to unite opposites is only a force after all, and indulgence is not its strong point," he explained to her with a preacher's voice. "But people, God knows why, are convinced that love is all about indulgence; and mistakes like that are usually fatal," in his excitement he grabbed hold of her fingertips and pinched her.

She neither showed her pain nor pulled back her hand. She did believe that this was erudition speaking, but she also felt that it wasn't doing him much good. She would have liked to object to what he was saying, but felt it would be rude.

"I know you don't believe me, but this is truly the way it is," he withdrew, startled, as if sensing her concealed objection. "If the power of love doesn't achieve complete union, it tends to turn into its opposite, and such an encounter of lost souls can be worse than meeting the Tatar monsters themselves," he continued. "That's why we have to realize that

the feeling of love is simply an innocent sprout; there's something that has yet to grow out of it." He became excited again and turned to Ivan. "Of course, we can only talk about love afterwards, when the clothes have already been worn out..."

"Yes," the inspector shrugged, patiently letting the words go in one ear and out the other. "And we have only come to order clothes after all."

"Of course, of course," the tailor swung his arms and fumbled around on the table for the measuring tape, which he had forgotten among the patches of cloth. "You mustn't hold it against me," he then searched for a piece of chalk to write on the board with. "There's no better place to get to know people than in a tailor's workshop," he rummaged further and apologized again. "That is, people don't have to hide their vanity here because in a tailor's mirror anyone can be pretty."

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"Nightfall caught them in the city; carbide lamps were already hanging on the poles by the main street, and they flickered in the fog like gigantic glowworms. The tall windows of the Dobray hotel were the only ones really glowing in the dark, and from afar the building looked like a ship stuck on a shoal. The sound of a piano echoing like a swarm of bees in the interior, could only be heard when they stopped walking, otherwise it was drowned by the sound of their footsteps. Cats and dogs ran across the wide roadway, occasional people slipped past under the eaves like bodiless shadows, refusing to look at them even if their eyes met.

Elica still felt the tailor's pulsating fingers, and his outpouring of words that she didn't entirely understand remained with her as a less than pleasant sensation. She knew he recognized her distress and that her vulnerability amused him, but what really struck her was something else entirely. That is, she felt as if he was actually warning Ivan with his advice and doubt. But, of course, it wasn't her youth that troubled him and it wasn't her beauty, he talked about it as he probably did with every other women as well; but he was warning him about innocence that had come to change into a lady at someone else's expense, and besides she probably intended to stay in town. That's why he got so upset when she brought up the matter of love, because it was undoubtedly true that only love could make it possible. But however deep and pure it might be—did it really grant them the right? Elica wasn't so sure anymore.

The Sóbota she walked through today after so many years, had turned its face or was merely self-contained. It was hidden behind thick fences, walls without eyes and closed houses. There was something unappreciative in its forced bearing, some kind of fear of exchanging glances or in its deliberate and superior deviation. Or perhaps this is how a mother might behave out of fear for her young. Or this was the way a thief contained himself when he trembled after his abundant quarry. Or—and this seemed the most true this is how the gentry defended themselves because they didn't have as much they dared show. But be it the first or the last, it was convulsiveness which clung to the heart and put out smiles—or at least so Elica thought and she felt as if she was coming from far, far away. But all she said was: "I don't know if I could ever get used to it."

Ivan pulled down the brim of his hat and held her tightly around her shoulders.

She surrendered herself to him and kept pace with him.

"We'll get used to it," he said when they were already past the flickering street lamps and only the yellow light showed them the way. "We'll do it for our child," he uttered into the night with a subdued voice.

She stepped into emptiness and fell to her knees. It hurt her in the abdomen, probably exactly where a baby was yet to come, the one he now mentioned for the first time, though others had already said all sorts of things about it. She clung to him and concealed the cramp which was only slowly passing away because she didn't dare tell him how much what he said hurt her and how she was now filled with fear.

"So that it will never ramble in the dark like we are now," he whispered in her hair. "And so that it won't idle in other people's halls," he squeezed her.

She shuddered and she felt like crying. So the thing she could push away as a lie was true at last: he came for it and wanted her to give it to him. It was also true that she couldn't promise it to him like she could now promise every shred of her body and soul.

"If only God would give it to us," was the only thing she could say. "If only there was a prayer he would hear..."

"He will give it to us," he held her face in his palms. "I know he will."

"How do you know?" she asked with childish enthusiasm.

"I can feel it," he kissed her on the forehead. "I could feel it from the beginning," he was still touching her with his lips, which were becoming softer and warmer. "I have never felt anything like this before in my life and that's why I believe it will come true."

She set her lips apart and breathed these words, which weren't just warm air from his chest but a potion of relief as well. She felt her look sharpen again and life moving through her body. She was sorry they were in this sticky humidity and mud, because if there was even a piece of dry land anywhere she would make love to him that moment, even in broad daylight.

"What about in the hotel?" it suddenly occurred to her. "They have a bed there, don't they?" she grabbed him by his sleeve. "Surely we can use it," she led him and was no longer listening to him.

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Hungarian officers drinking all night at the café, horses neighing in the stables and cocks crowing behind fences—those were voices that by turns splashed into her dream and poured out into one distant but distinctly heard male song. She slept and woke at the same time, it was like a dream, although she knew that it was really happening, she was getting lost and coming back again as if their desirous game was still going on and would never stop. She felt strange and sinful but she still wanted to stay in this water and warm herself under the transparent blanket of dream. But the Dobray hotel, which kindly offered them shelter that night, was still a ship, which accidentally got stranded on a shoal of the Múra, waiting for some powerful waters to take it back to the center of the world.

Then she felt Ivan was no longer by her side and woke up immediately.

He was standing completely naked between the lace curtains, staring thoughtfully through the window at something in the street. The morning light shone upon him from the side, and the hair on his shoulders glimmered as if he were covered with frost. His subsided body was the body of a man she had allowed to enter the last shred of her body

this night, and his bony face was a mirror in which she could see how dear she was to him and how much that suited him. So now she had no doubts: he was her man, whatever that might mean.

"Isn't it chilly over there?" she asked.

"I'm not cold, I just feel strange," he replied silently without turning. "We came here to make a baby," he said even more quietly. "And now I feel like we really have although we can't know that for sure."

"We came here because we love each other," she replied. "That's why we came here."

"But still," he turned round. "What if we really have?" he tried to smile. "Then we must never tell this to anyone," he approached. "Then this will always be just our..."

She pulled him towards her and covered him with a sheet. He was shivering with cold, more than he could probably feel, and this told her that he had been standing by the window for a long time thinking. But why did it bother him, why should it be such a holy secret? She just couldn't understand it now and didn't dare ask.

"And the child must never know either," he leaned over her and looked into her eyes close-up. "You have to promise me that," he asked and ordered her at the same time.

"Of course I can promise," she breathed. "But why?" she asked. "What's wrong with it?" she insisted. "Mustn't a child be conceived in a hotel?" she thought, although the thought seemed funny to her. "Children get conceived, they get conceived anywhere..."

"Wait," he let her go and pulled back. "I know it's not easy to understand," he sat on the bed. "But I would like to explain it properly," he forced her with his look to sit next to him. "Listen," he took her palm like a fortune-teller. "I decided tonight that we're going to buy a house in Sóbota the first chance we get and move here together," he drew a circle on her palm with his forefinger. "This will be our home and our children will grow up here," he marked the center of the imaginary circle. "They will be born in this town and no one will ever be able to say to them that they're not from here," he raised his voice. "But it will only depend on us whether it will happen or not."

"If it really does depend only on us," she shrugged and agreed.

"We're the only ones who'll know that we came here and started in this hotel," he reached into her palm and squeezed it. "Only we'll be able to remember the way we took," he drew her to him and held her tight. "Or maybe with time we'll forget what we had to go through to finally start afresh."

She leaned against his shoulder and buried her face in it. Now she could see what was bothering him and what he wanted, but could she understand why this was so important to him? Questions without answers sprang up but at the same time she felt that she mustn't utter them aloud anymore. The only assurance that she would manage was in touching his masculine body and in the firm belief that he really loved her. There was something in his behavior that told her she was the only one he trusted and was ready to share his plans with. Or even more: it was probably true that he wouldn't even be trying anymore if it wasn't for her.

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She stopped in the middle of the path and was still looking at the plain towards Beltinci long after Ivan's carriage had disappeared in dry maize fields and the clatter of horseshoes could no longer be heard. It was as if she were returning from a long journey; autumn had already arrived, which, strangely, she had not noticed the day before, and everything was so strange or perhaps it was she who was strange. She knew he had dropped her off before the village because he was in a hurry or because she had told him she wanted to walk and clear her head; but now she was no longer comfortable with being alone. Under the wide morning sky there was silence again, a cool and unfailing peace blew across the plain, but everything inside her was waiting impatiently. The day would break and she would only rummage around the house again or not even feel like doing that. She would be covered by an early autumn night, too long for a fast sleep. She would go crazier day after day from waiting and the time passing by would seem lost to her. But that's how it was—she brought impatience, uncertainty, unrest and anxiety home from Sóbota—and she had to calm down.

Her mother was squatting under the eaves, carving out the soft, seedy insides of a big white pumpkin. Her look was transparent, although Elica had seen in the distance that she wasn't angry at her for not coming home the night before. It almost seemed as if she wanted to overlook it, to tell her through silence that it would have happened sooner or later and would probably happen again. But, of course, Elica knew that her

mother was only concealing her worry and that now, relieved, she was becoming curious. Even yesterday perhaps such unnecessary denial would have made her nervous, but this time she was touched and grateful, so she stood next to her and after some time said: "We were delayed up in town."

"In town?" her mother said as if she had said "in heaven."

We went there to order clothes and then night fell and so we stayed at the hotel," she explained. "Partly because we had had mulled wine to drink and we didn't feel like leaving in the fog, and partly because I was curious how it was there," she pretended.

"Well, how is it there?" her mother stood up and wrung her hands. "Oh," she lifted her chin. "I can't really tell," she breathed through her nose. "You just watch and absorb it for a time and you just can't believe it," she tried to make up her feelings as well. "It's really breathtaking."

"What about Ivan?" she wanted to know. "Was he pleased with you?"

"Pleased?" she was astonished at the question.

"It was your first time with him among such high up people," the old woman explained.

"Eh," Elica swung her arm out and went into the house.

She was immediately sorry that she had been so kind to her, that she had said anything at all, because a woman from Sreš too soon became interested in things one had better left unspoken. But she could have known that this was her main concern but that she could only guess at it herself. She was upset so she ran into her bedroom and seized with an inner itching that she couldn't scratch away, she eventually buried herself in the eiderdown. Her mother, of course, couldn't even guess what had come over her that night; and she tried to argue with herself that she couldn't blame her for her ignorance. For her mother, this was all God's doing and all she could do was wait; but Elica wasn't satisfied with relying on vain hopes. Ivan had finally decided to go straight to Sóbota, and she believed him. But this was only the beginning, the first big step to the center, where things accumulate and have a different weight, onto a chessboard with strategically displayed figures trying to remain in the game, onto the promenade of winners or behind a curtained windows of

losers. It was becoming evident that her fortunate escape from the farm was as much a release as a test.

"We're the only ones who'll know..." Ivan had said; and only now did she understand what he meant. "Or maybe with time we'll forget"—she was heart-stricken because she couldn't imagine leaving like that, and so she wasn't worried about her mother, who would probably be left alone. But now she didn't even know what would happen to her; would she be able to go back home whenever she felt like it or if she had to?

The thought was crazy and worrying, perhaps even unnecessary, but it moved her, it got to her and stuck inside of her, so she stood up again and went out to get some air. She breathed in the fresh air and sat under her pear tree, although she would have liked nothing better than to go after Ivan and ask him. And she would ask him a lot of things because she really was crazy now, and secretly she blamed him for not having told her everything; it even seemed as if he were making it all up as he went, deciding what they were going to do and what they should do. But even had she dared go after him she wouldn't know where to find him—his river, the one he always wanted to go to, was long and meandering; the paths along it branched off in many directions and sometimes were hardly passable; his ways remained unknown and mysterious to her. She knew that he supervised the workers, strengthening banks and setting up dams, called on the millers who mostly worked on floating mills, stopped to see the boatmen, who ferried goods across the river as there were no bridges, and he must also keep company with fishermen and hunters because he often brought back game, but that was all. She had never been to his place in Radgona, where he stayed with a Dorfer, a military comrade, supposedly, who had taken him in. And he had never taken her to the Bathany estate in Petajnci, where he had his nook and sometimes stayed the night. But now—and was this also the part of a past that would someday be forgotten, or that wasn't meant for her, she simply did not know...

"The bells tolled so strangely today and you didn't even clasp your hands," the old woman said after it finished ringing at noon, but Elica was still sitting motionless under the pear tree, looking across the plain.

"I did," she hissed, although she really hadn't.

"Yes," the woman from Sreš said with a dull voice. "And you fed the pig, too."

"Mother!" she shouted, caught and awakened. "Why are you acting like that?" she asked.

"Because you're hiding something from me," the old woman replied reproachfully.

"I'm not hiding anything," she asserted hastily. "There's nothing you don't know," she corrected herself with the same breath. The only difference is that you think everything is all right, but sometimes I worry."

Finally the mother grew silent and her irritability disappeared suddenly. It looked like she was going to withdraw and light around as a dandelion clock, at least until the evening, but then she suddenly whispered: "She wants a baby, I know it. Neni Uj told me so."

Elica grasped her waist and bent. She had another cramp, in the same place where the baby had yet to appear, and again she felt a treacherous sickness that she could hardly conceal. Neni Uj was a quack who didn't like to help the poor; she demanded payment from them even if they had to give her their last penny; so no one liked her and everyone spoke of her with scorn. And when they had to go to her because she was their last hope, they perceived it as a penance, hardly less of a nuisance than the misfortune itself; and from then on they were said to have been helped by that diabolical woman, the insinuation being that she was possessed by the devil. The fact that the Sreš woman had gone to her den was proof enough that she was worried; she just wasn't showing it. Of course, she didn't learn anything there that hadn't already been going around the village for some time, and no doubt she paid for it; and at the same time they themselves had become the talk of the town because visits like that never went unnoticed. Anyway, this confirmed even more inexorably what Ivan had confessed to her last night, so she couldn't blame her mother now.

"I want it," Elica shrugged. "Anyone would want it."

"Neni Uj will help you," her mother offered.

"Why should anyone help me?" she was baffled.

"She said to come early and on an empty stomach," the old woman ignored her protest.

"I'll go only if it's necessary," she demurred.

"You'll go because it can't hurt you, and it can help," her mother insisted. "I've already given her two capons and she won't ask for anything else."

Elica stopped talking and secretly agreed to do it; it wouldn't be good to fall out of favor with that diabolical ugly old woman now.

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Neni Uj had lived in an extension of the Kresls' outbuilding for a long time, and no one knew anymore exactly what her connection to that eminent and rich family was or else they just didn't care to remember. There were rumors that she was the fruit of an unhappy love between one of Grandfather Kresl's daughters, all of whom were long deceased, and a Rumanian Gypsy trouphmaker, presumably named Ujaš, after whom she was obviously called, though it wasn't her first name. The story was spread by the trouphmakers themselves who made their living plying chiseled, softwood troughs to the villagers along the River Mūra; so no one really believed the story completely. But there was no other explanation of her fate, so people believed that she was so strange because she had come into this world in circumstances, and that it would have been better never to have come at all.

Her unfortunate mother, who knew very well that she wouldn't be able to marry her beloved Gypsy, ended up running off with the trouphmakers, who intended to cross the River Raab again in autumn and retire to the larger Hungarian towns where they could spend the winter more comfortably. Her father, who suspected what the young lovers intended to do, went after the gang and caught them sleeping outside of Monošter. In the attack, which even left a few dead, the boy bled to death from a wound under his arm, and the girl had to return home. Her father didn't yet know that she was carrying the trouphmaker's child; nor did she dare tell him. She kept her pregnancy concealed under bandages and clothes. But when, to everyone's surprise, the weary child did come into the world it was no larger than a hand, and for a long time after the Kresls could hope that the child wouldn't survive. But Neni Uj slowly began to start living, and as if to spite them, she survived. But at the same time it was true that she has never really grown, probably due to the distress of being in her mother's belly. For now, stepping out in front of Elica from a low and slightly vaulted smoke kitchen, she only came up to her waist.

"Well, look at you!" said the midget instead of greeting her. "You really are Sreš's," she recognized her. "And you look as healthy as if you've been drinking the water from under the mill wheel," she said and gave a surprisingly undiabolical laugh.

"I have," Elica nodded because she knew that her mother really had brought her this water once.

"I know you did," she tugged her by the sleeve. "And you still will if you have to," she prodded her into the somewhat higher-ceilinged room next to the smoke kitchen. "It'll give you strength that no mirror will be able to take away from you."

Elica bent under the low beam and squatted down on the footstool offered to her; she looked up at the room around her. There was only one window, which was halfway veiled by sackcloth so that only a little light made its way in. But the scratches and cracks in the wooden walls reflected that light and produced images that turned the whole bivouac into a speckled shell. Because of this unreal mix of darkness and light she felt funny and limited even though she knew that morning was in full bloom and that the Kresls, too, must already be awake. She felt more and more like she had on the way over—she simply went although she'd rather have returned, and she stayed on although she'd rather have gone. Which was to say, she was sure she didn't need any help, but at the same time she didn't dare decline it, because she had the feeling that something might really go wrong then.

The old woman climbed off her footstool onto the trunk, took down the sackcloth, beat it as if dirt had gathered on it overnight, and then folded it over her arm as she obviously used it as a dishcloth. Then out of the darkest corner she retrieved a damaged washbasin and put it on the floor in the middle of the room. Elica, of course, had now idea why the woman was doing all of this, but as she did her movements became slower and calmer, and her tiny mouse-like face grew serious. It seemed as if her thoughts, which made her forehead wrinkle and grow even narrower, were no longer meant for the girl; she behaved as if she'd forgotten inviting Elica over in order to help her.

"Your man is watching over you, like people in heaven do," she suddenly said.

Elica flinched, as she didn't understand.

"And you're afraid of the way he looks at you," she added after some time. "You're afraid because you know very well that he can't see everything," she explained rather reproachfully.

"I really don't understand," Elica quietly admitted.

"Don't forget this, because some day you'll remember it and understand everything," the woman jumped up, irritated. Then she found something else to do in the corner where she kept her dishes, and she was again remote.

Elica sat down, no longer thinking about what the woman had said. It was lighter in the bivouac now, and she had a closer look around. There may have been a distillery here before, or maybe hired hands lived here. The footstools, trunks and shelves were hewn with a carpenter's axe and were without any carvings or other ornamentation. Most of the dishes were damaged and worn as if the River Mūra had washed them ashore. The mirror on the wall, however, had a gilt frame that would have been better suited to Beltinci castle or a Sóbota salon. Besides that she noticed none of the awesome things such quacks usually accumulated: They said that Neni Uj helped only with words and that she healed by looking; but that was hardly possible, so Elica quietly waited for the old woman to bring her something. But she merely wandered back and forth, floating more and more, until suddenly she said: "But your mother didn't put salt in your crib."

Elica turned around and eyed her skeptically; she wasn't even sure if this was a question or a statement. Salt, which protected from curses and spells, was no doubt a rare commodity when she was born and as expensive then as today, so it was entirely possible that she didn't get any.

"And salt is exactly what you will miss," the woman added after a while. "So we have to see to that first," she pointed at the washbasin with both hands. "Squat already and let your water loose," she waved dictatorially, urging her.

"You want me to pee?" Elica asked her, uncertain and ashamed. "What else?" the woman snapped. "How else am I suppose to do this?" she was impatient and irritated.

Elica lifted her skirts and squatted, even though she didn't have to pee, and she was certain that she wouldn't be able to before the old

woman's expectant gaze. But then it finally began rattling into the washbasin, and after the first shy drops it even poured. She hadn't even lowered her skirts before the old woman had taken the washbasin and placed it in the light coming in through the window. She sniffed at it and watched its contents for some time, then put it onto the trunk and dipped her bony opened hand into it. Elica was disgusted but didn't dare show it and didn't look away even when the woman licked her fingers and tasted it, smacking her lips. She was fairly sure that she wasn't salt-deprived because she'd been eating chicken soup on Sundays for some time now, and her mother was hardly one to spare the salt. But at the same time she was afraid that this diabolical woman might find something else in her urine. But the more impatiently she waited for the old woman to tell her, and possibly save her, the more the old woman smacked her lips and tasted the urine with her tongue.

"Did you find anything?" Elica asked uncertainly.

"Yes," she answered without looking at her. "I almost certainly did find something," she murmured after pouring the yellow liquid from the washbasin into a glass. "Something we weren't expecting," she shrugged ambivalently and placed an inch-high reddish stone into the glass.

"What?" Elica came closer.

"We have to wait," she glanced at her. "Now we'll just have to wait," she even smiled for a moment. "The live stone will tell us," she crouched down beside the glass and waited. "Look, how tiny it is, and yet it knows more than we do," she admired the bulb soaking in the urine. "There's no one far and wide who has something cleverer than this," she flattered it. "Therefore there's no one richer than I am, even if many think they have it made," she laughed. "But what does it help them, those poor men?" she spread her hands triumphantly. "They're going to die when their time comes and not a minute later, while I'll be still here, squatting like a jackdaw," of this she was certain. "I'll be quiet and watch the world being born again," she hunched over so she really did look like a jackdaw. "And if I ever get tired of it all, then I'll eat my stone and die with it."

Elica listened with her mouth opened wide and was amazed, even though she didn't completely believe her. Neni Uj was slandering the world with a kind of concealed contempt, but at the same time she

clung to life by any means possible. But did she really have this power over it, or did the immense will of life give her strength that Elica couldn't yet imagine?

"Look at it!" the old woman suddenly poked her and pointed to the stone with her hands.

Elica looked at it but couldn't see anything.

"Can you see it?" she asked, overwhelmed. "Can you see it now?"

She watched and tried to guess what it was she was supposed to see.

"Spots," the witch whispered. "Spots like poppy seeds," she bent her forefinger like a claw. "Here and there, some bigger, some smaller..."

She leaned over and indeed saw tiny brown and gray spots, like poppy seeds, on the reddish stone. There was no doubt that it did show something—whatever it was—but was it good or bad for her? She stepped away but continued gazing, as if bewitched, at her fate, written as it were in a script unknown to her. She felt blood rushing through her body like a rhythm of savages and she felt a hole in time.

"I'll tell you what they mean," she heard the old woman say.

"Tell me," she asked.

"I'll tell you even though it's worth much more than two measly capons," she leaned over and stared at her. "Someone else would gladly give a cow, I'm sure your gentleman would give a horse..."

"Tell me already, please," Elica repeated, exhausted.

"But I won't ask again because it's up to you, not me," she continued with a quiet voice.

"But this is what you wished for and you got it," the woman kindly looked into Elica's eyes. "And this is why it stuck and why you've already got it in your belly."

"A baby!?" whispered Elica.

"A baby that is going to live," nodded Neni Uj, then took the stone from the water and wiped it for a long time with the sackcloth.

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Ivan stood for a long time at the door of Sreš's hut and watched the sky. From afar, one might have thought that something was irritating him, that he was fighting with himself; but Elica and her mother knew that he was praying, thanking the Lord for his mercy. In this solitary but unconcealed act there was something that meant more to them than the joy he himself hardly knew or the gratitude that he did not show them. This could only be the behavior of a man who had almost stopped waiting and was now surprised by a fruit of final hope. Whether his will, which was testing him, was satisfied by this, or whether he was now freed from a curse they didn't know about, both were over now and none of it was important anymore. They stood there, on the threshold of their poverty, which gained meaning from this and, touched, waited to perform their virtuous ceremony, which seemed humble and upright at the same time.

"You should take a present to the Countess Teodora," the mother finally whispered.

"I'll take her a bride's bouquet," the daughter decided.

They waited for Ivan like a blessed image. Finally he put his hat on again and strode back toward them. He seemed even taller now than he was in fact, and an unfamiliar determination or even fighting spirit could be made out in his characteristic poise. This could only be a man about to become a father. Or perhaps he had to be like this, now, in nineteen fifteen, with the Great War and its mass enlistments looming. He gave the sense that he was taking matters into his own hands, and with this he made his stand for what was his. That, of course, meant the baby and her.

"Tomorrow, early in the morning, you'll dress for the trip," he said to her when he came to the backyard.

"Right after morning prayers I'll come for you," he added sternly.

She nodded and didn't dare ask where they were headed so early in the morning. The old woman, too, merely wrung her hands and shuffled her feet.

"We may end up spending the whole day by the Mūra," he eventually explained. "We may also end up spending the night there, or even tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow," he wasn't sure. "It's time

for you to know things that my wife should know," he lay his hand on her shoulder and led her to the kitchen. "In the gravel pit, which I'm going to show you, is where my treasure is buried," he said quietly after making sure that the old woman hadn't followed them. "There you're going to meet many people who work for me," he became more and more trusting. "Then you'll realize why this business is connected with things you must never talk about," he pulled her into his embrace and looked in her eyes.

"You know I don't understand," she whispered.

"Of course I know," he kissed her on her ear.

"And I'm not asking you to tell me any of this," she was afraid of this trustfulness and commitment to silence.

"We're going to the panners," he whispered.

"To the panners!?" she was astounded.

"The entire area between Radgona and Lakoš is a district I manage," he hugged her as if he was afraid she was going to inhale and scream. "And down in Leteny I have my people," he calmed her with his look and asked her not to be too loud.

But there was no danger that she would say something because she really was astounded: panners were people who searched for gold in riverbeds, panning it. People didn't know much about their mysterious deeds and secret knowledge, but they talked about their wealth and finds with raised eyebrows. There were also stories about conflicts over valuable game and bodies floating down the river because of gold nuggets. If anyone had told her before that Ivan was so close to them, she wouldn't have believed them—but she might have figured it out because the river was his and why should he let anyone take it from him.

"So now you know," he said after she had gathered her thoughts. "You also know that there are not a lot of things in this world heavier than gold," he continued with his forefinger lifted. "But, according to the panners, the hardest thing to keep silent about is gold."

"Don't worried," she assured him. "I wouldn't tell my own mother."

"Neither your mother, nor the confessor," he shot her with his forefinger. "Not about what I might confide in you, and not about what

you're going to see," he raised his voice. "Even if someone should come to you and claim I that I've already told him everything, you still must deny it," he inculcated her.

"Who might come?" she asked fearfully.

"I don't know," he shrugged. "Anyone—impostors, soldiers, bandits, gendarmes, Croatians, revenue officers or judges!"

"All those people?" all of a sudden she felt cold.

"Any and all of them," he nodded. "All of them and others, too," he smiled gloomily. "It makes everyone's mouth water, and then they go and break their teeth on it."