

SAMPLE
TRANSLATION

FERI LAINŠČEK

I WILL DIVIDE THE FOAM
FROM THE WAVES

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Feri Lainšček: I Will Divide The Foam From The Waves

Synopsis:

The novel, set during World War One, is composed of three novellas. In the first novella, we meet Elica Sreš, an innocent and solitary girl who lives with her mother in the countryside. The surveyor Ivan Spransky brings Elica to the world of the city, where she is blinded by her emotions for Ivan and certain that he feels the same for her. She is not even aware that her new husband earns his money through illegal means. In the second novella, Elica becomes even more uncertain, her peace of mind being disturbed by a vagrant woman who appears in the town desperately searching for her husband. It appears that he had left this woman because she was barren. In the third novella, Elica crosses the border and begins to betray her husband. She feels that the mornings she spends with her lover Andi bring “a closeness that is not only giving and taking, but also a shared spark and contact with beauty. And at last it was clear to her that love was not a payment, not a gift or even mercy, but a miracle that somebody else feels the same as you.” The novel ends with Elica’s flight with her lover. Her husband believes, until his death, that his wife was taken by the waves of the Mura River.

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All morning, on the postal road from Sóbota to Beltinci, gentlemen's carriages raised such a quantity of dust that horsemen and pedestrians preferred to walk across the fields, looking for the shortest way among the ruts. From afar, the plains appeared as vast as a fairground, and a foreigner, not hearing the funeral bells, might have thought that a new front began here and the people were fleeing from war. Szapáry's, Esterhazys, Batthyánys, Voglers, and Kodolitsches arrived from all the nearby estates. Nobility came from as far as Keszthely, Szombathely, Graz, Čakovec, and Varaždin. Guildsmen from Sóbota and the surrounding market towns came, priests and all the bishops as well because his Excellency Bishop János Mikes led a high mass at the funeral. Ordinary people, who mostly came on foot, stood by and watched the noble pomp. The jangling bells, which, on the plains, sounded like the birth of invisible insects, almost made everyone believe that death had its own special holiday.

The Duchess Theodora Zichy had died in Vienna at the age of twenty nine. After the shots in Sarajevo that had brought down Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne, and his wife Sofia Hohenberg, and roused all the centaurs in Europe, the Duchess entered the imperial sanatorium to tend to the wounded. Her decision, which at first might have been understood as merely noblesse oblige, ended up becoming an exemplary expression of selflessness as it was in the sanatorium that she contracted tuberculosis. The people all around had heard of her sacrifice: that she had not stopped tending to the wounded even when she was herself was dying. Which is why it seemed that now, at the beginning of April in 1915 the year of our lord, the beautiful Beltinci duchess was not leaving through the dark doors of this world but rather entering an illuminated legend where she would live forever.

The old gardener had cut all the red flowers in the great castle greenhouse. They were sprinkled all along the procession to the open grave.

Thus the duchess was celebrated with the colour of vital power and flame that she had given to others and that destiny had failed to give back to her. Exactly one hundred twenty girls in starched white dresses walked in a column past her coffin. They represented the colour of purity that she maintained until the very end. Or the colour of the soul pursuing grace as none among the thousands of mourners questioned her station and origins – and this was a rarity in these parts – and none prayed only for her peace and rest but rather for her elevation to a higher place, which seemed like the only just payment for her service in life.

Elica Sreš, who was among the last of the girls in white, concluded with some relief that she was far from the eldest among them. Also the dress that she had taken that morning from her wardrobe, fell against her body in a modest way that caused her no shame. And yet it was somehow strange to her that she was here at all participating in the ritual, because indeed the reason for which she had come was strange. She had decided because of a dream that had left a lively and agitating impression on her.

It went like this: a woman, who was most likely one of the Fates, came during the night and placed a silken lady's shoe with a golden buckle under Elica's pear tree. The people who went past in the morning paused to look at the elegant shoe and to guess where it had come from,

why it had no mate, and what it could mean. They began to impatiently knock on the glass and scratch at the walls. Their violent curiosity frightened her since she didn't know anymore than they did about what had been found. But the more she cowered behind the curtains, retreating into a corner, the more aggressive they became. One after another pushed through the doors and in the end they pulled out her into courtyard.

Among them was a woman who had picked up in the lady's shoe and said with barely suppressed rage: "I found this same shoe one morning at my man's bedside and since then he has had nothing more to do with me. Since then, he has sat idle, gazing at the stars, instead of working in his smithy. Night after night, I wander below all the maidens' windows looking for the shoe's mate. I've cried my eyes out and lost my senses. Woe upon you if this slipper fits you."

There was a hush among the gathered crowd as they pressed forward to see her step into the silken shoe the strange woman had placed before her. They pushed and elbowed, shouted at her and shook their fists. All the strength drained out of her and it looked as if they might force her to do as the woman bid. Although she knew that the shoe wasn't hers, she was terrified that it would fit her and she would be falsely condemned. With all the strength that remained in her, she attempted to tear herself from the crowd, telling them that the woman had imagined it all and probably meant her ill. But at this moment, she felt suddenly weak in the knees and collapsed to the floor.

The crowd grew wild and surged over her. From her position on the floor, she studied the silken shoe in the dewy grass and recognized it: it had been worn by the Duchess Theodora when she, as a child, had seen her standing in front of the church of Saint Ladislav in Beltinci the first time. But she said nothing, feeling at first a sense of horror, and then a determination to hide the lady's sin. The thought that she only need point the finger at her now and save herself made her resist all the more. She even felt that must go the Duchess and warn her so that she might evade her accusers. She reached for the silken shoe in the hope of hiding it in her bosom, but those gathered round saw her and pinned her mercilessly to the ground...

She screamed in powerless terror and woke up.

She sat on the edge of the bed and ran deadly cold fingers through her hair, strands of which were glued to her damp forehead. The bluish moonlight shone through the glass and between the white canvas curtains, drawing a sharp shadow. Her room was unusually bright and permeated with a strange presence that filled her with fear. The desire left from the nightmarish dream that she must get to the castle as quickly as possible and the fact that the duchess was already dead contradicted each other and she could not quite square them in her mind. First of all, it struck her that everything might be different if she had come in time and an unbearable sense of guilt clutched at her heart. Then she suddenly realized that there had been a crack in time that meant she would have been late in any case and this comforted her a little. After a while and despite her dizziness, she stood up and opened the curtains all the way in order to reassure herself that it had all been a dream. But an anxious feeling remained with her that she had been touched by something evil and that the misfortune at the Beltinci castle

was somehow connected to her, and she remained overcome with a painful wakefulness until morning.

“Blessed Virgin Mary.” She crossed herself as she sat beside her mother to whom, at dawn, she confided her dream. “Our duchess lost a shoe at the hour of her death and that certainly must mean something.” She stared toward the yellowed image of the virgin mother in the corner altar and, in her emotion, crossed herself several times again.

“What does it mean?” The words emerged from Elica’s gut, which was still filled with anxiety and longing for a redemptive word. Just the feeling that it might mean something good relaxed her as she squatted beside the old woman and expectantly stroked her hand.

“I only know that you must be grateful for this great gift.” Her mother squeezed her fingers until they hurt. “Of all virgins, our beloved duchess thought especially of you and this will remain etched in your life forever.” She compulsively squeezed her daughter’s hand and stared closely into her eyes.

“I’ll go,” her whole body seemed to agree, “you know I’ll go.” Even the night before she knew she would dress in white and be ready.

Her mother pulled her close in mute gratitude, kissing her hair over and over again. This unexpected touch swept her away to a long ago time, to almost forgotten childhood memories, and, before she knew it, she was nearly crying. She stood up and moved toward the only wardrobe that was in the house and now she was here – in a grove of cut flowers, whispering gilt, quivering candles, and harmonious singing, an earthly paradise in which death is miraculously transformed into an intoxicating experience, into thousands of hues of aristocratic variations. Of course, it was true that Elica had never been to such a funeral and knew only those ordinary, humble, and inexorable plebeian deaths that in their finality triggered despair and caused people to wail, ululate, and act mad, which was why it seemed so strange now. The faces around this coffin were immersed in a different sort of sadness than she had known and their lifted gazes were probably seeing something she could not see. It seemed to her that she should at least feel grateful to be present at this dignified ceremony and soon abandoned herself to its sound and spirit and meditation...

That day, when his daughter Theodora had come home for the last time, the old Duke Augustus Zichy had stepped bareheaded into the dry Pannonian dust and, with his arms spread, had searched for the invisible hand of his dead wife. The Duchess Hedwiga, who had married out of the noble Wimpffen clan of lower Austria, had died in 1892 when she was thirty-one years old, leaving him with three young daughters. The next year, he had ordered a plan from the celebrated Vienna architect, Baron Max von Ferstel, for a chapel of the Holy Mother with a sepulchre to which the Duchess’s body was brought in 1894. Since that time, he spent most of his free hours in the shrine and people began over the years to somehow believe that his great love gave him a connection to the other side and that he and his wife were in some mysterious way still linked. It was because of this that now, as he set out on foot after his daughter’s coffin from Sóbota to Beltinci, nobody took note of his slightly unusual posture and many were prepared to believe that the footsteps of his invisible escort could be made out in the dusty street.

Also now, with the Bishop's exultant speech, the bearded face of the Duke glowed with the special light that he carried within him and spoke of the power of his heart for which there was otherwise no explanation. This is how the centuries would look back and see this day of sadness, or would it be a stone that is the hardest flesh on earth, or would a wizened old man see such a thing – this Elica did not know. Which is why it seemed to her that she was standing before a living saint, a saint in the midst of a living altar, and she felt, before this monumental Beltinci gentleman, even more insignificant. She knew so very little about the world. She could hardly explain it. Her soul was the soul of a rabbit quivering in the face of unknown, and was seized by a quiet anger, even fury. Her fate was like the fate of a gray egret listening and listening, and always fleeing, only daring to lift its head when alone. She was given only reeds and wild plants covered with moisture, covered with lichen, the mud drying under her nails. If she thought she would one day be more wise, she also knew that this was just a fantasy. Or a dream to which one must not surrender because then reality only seemed more cruel.

"I have to go," the girl beside her whispered. "I have to go really bad." She said again after a while. "I don't know if I can hold it." She started to cry.

"Of course, you can," Elica poked her. "You must."

"But I can't." The girl crossed her hands over her belly.

"You will die if you are the first to leave the side of the coffin." Elica tried to frighten her.

"God will know why I went," she pleaded.

"He'll know but he won't like it." Elica was relentless.

Now the girl squatted among the others and peed on the ground. Certainly none of the mourners saw her, but it could be heard. Oh God! Elica was horrified. Who are we? What are we? the questions throbbed in her chest. In this life, we are summoned only rarely, when we are really needed, and even then we cannot behave ourselves. The girls shifted around the puddle that spread under their feet. A hole, that probably only the birds would notice, spread in the middle of the assembly of virgins. Nothing terrible had happened and even the relieved girl was again able to pray, but Elica felt that the hole was filled with a shame that she could never suppress and she was sorry she came.

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During the sprinkling of holy water, Elica felt a gaze travelling over the girls in white and coming to rest on her. It might have been the gaze of a man who had noticed what had happened among the girls and perhaps even suspected that she was the careless one. But then it seemed to her, meeting his gaze defiantly, that this was not the case. There was no disgust in his regard, no judgement or mockery. His eyes were light, half closed, and didn't share in the sadness all around, which was perhaps why they seemed so different. She would have even said that the man was slightly bored and wished to make the time pass, which is why she looked away and dedicated herself to the common feelings again. But his eyes were still there. During this single fleeting glance, they had made an imprint on her that she could not forget.

When she looked up at him again, he smiled.

She squeezed her lips closed and raised her chin. She had no other way to tell him that she thought his behaviour a little indecent under the circumstances. And yet his behaviour made her so angry that she yielded, forgetting herself in her curiosity, and did something for which she had no explanation. Nobody who observed their long look could have thought anything good about it. As if all was damned, she involuntarily gave the impression of being something that she in fact was not. Except for this: the stranger stood on the other side, among those who were allowed to approach the coffin. His black suit had been cut at a city tailor's and the golden cufflinks on his white shirt announced that he would certainly be going home to a different sort of place than she. Only his beguiling eyes would graze in this village, on her quite wild and seductive beauty, and then he would return to his pale woman who had never run barefoot in the grass, and he would sweetly tell her once again that she was the most beautiful, the only one for him.

Yes, that's how it was with him – but nevertheless she turned her head and looked at him again.

And she met a gaze that she hoped would evoke her pity – but in truth could not. Because in his eyes were the colours of the pure spring sky above the plains. Or they were the colour of the blue cornflowers that blossomed alone in the summer amidst the crops, defiantly nursing their black bitter seeds.

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After the funeral, the singers, horsemen and girls were served blue Franken wine and poppy seed cake at the southern estate. The supervisor of the manor house came to thank them. The mourners felt as if they had performed their work well, and the fine wine loosened their tongues. After the first few tentative sips, the cheeks of the girls reddened. As it had been on other such occasions, the sadness turned into tears that dried up, the blood ran through the veins a little faster, and temptation began to stir in the soul. Only Elica did not feel at home in the lavish courtyard. She felt as if the carousel had been spinning too quickly and now she was on solid ground trying to catch her balance. Or that she was waiting and hoping that what had begun yesterday would finally happen in an incomprehensible but inexorable way. Maybe it was simply that in recent years she had so rarely been among people, but now, both in dreams and reality, there were too many pushy faces. Or maybe the gaze of the stranger was responsible for her discomfort, which perhaps hadn't even been the flirtation of a single man, but something altogether different.

"Elica, Elica," Juš winked at her. She recognized him from the estate as he often joked with you. "What will become of you if you are eaten by a wolf?" He teased her with the laughing question that was used to calm naughty children. "Or perhaps you are afraid that the spirit of the Mura will take you during a drought?" He had raised his voice so everybody could hear.

"You're a poor thing, Juš!" She slapped his hand away. "One day one of your jokes will stick in your throat and no one will be able to help you!" She could think of nothing more insulting than that to say.

The second teasing question he had drawn from the common memory of a time when people at the river were convinced that only virgins could pray for rain. This is how they did it: village men brought twenty girls to the river each of which had to swear that she had never had anything with a man. After the promise, each girl placed a crucifix in her willow basket, lined it with dried leaves, and lit the tinder afire. During the prayer, the little burning boats were pushed out into the river stream and sacrificed to the spirit of the Mura. If it rained during the next three days, that meant the sacrifice had been accepted. If the drought persisted, it was clear that one of the girls had lied and the men brought them to the river bank again. The one who was suspected was tied fast to the bottom of a wooden boat and pushed into the current. If the unhappy girl was able to save herself that was a sign of her innocence. If the waves swallowed her, the villagers were convinced she had been taken by the spirit of the Mura.

“Hey, Elica, Elica,” Juš called, even more lively now. “I would resent it, as God is my witness, if you did not defend yourself now. But I’ll resent it even more if you remain a maiden forever.”

“Crazy boy!” she cried hotly. “What does it have to do with you? It’s none of your business!” She would have liked to strike him in his belly that was covered by a too tight shirt making the buttonholes into snake eyes.

“My business!” he cried, as if she had said something unbelievable. “Who says it’s not my business?” He turned toward the crowd, searching for help.

“You and everybody else!” she erupted. “You should all leave me alone!” She shook her fist at him and stormed out of the courtyard in helpless anger.

“Well, well,” the men laughed who could not understand her anger and, of course, were themselves guilty of nothing. “What’s the matter with her now?” They wondered more to hear the sound of their own voices than to get an answer. “But no, poor thing, she cries at the drop of a hat!” And they waved her away.

As she departed, Elica took off her best shoes and ran barefoot through the fields. The only just awakened soil was so hard and sharp that she almost fell to her knees from the pain, but that too was something that she mustn’t allow herself. But what pursued her was not anger, not even desperation, but something more like a spell. She was pursued by something that had no doubt been gathering inside of her for years without her being aware of it. Usually she just swallowed it and withdrew, but this time she recognized the disgusting taste of man’s flattering humour and she needed to spit it out. It got on her nerves that they could talk about what was happening inside of her as if it belonged to them. It made her angry that they could simply claim something that in reality they respected not at all, something that even was in their way. She could feel the beginning of a lusty hunger which was not merely blind animal impulse but a fully humanized right. And in between, of course, there was a void that they neither desired nor were able to fill. And probably because of that, their life was the way it was – naked and muddy, like cut turnips in an autumn furrow ...

At last, completely out of breath, she no longer looked back.

It was true, she hated them because of this manor house and now at least she could admit it.

The manor house and the fields around it were fertile and wide as the sea and yet had become a cage to her over the years. She was condemned to the deceptive expense, and she could only dream about the worlds beyond the gray horizon. And even in these dreams, it was different now, because there was war; bad news was coming from both east and west and it was clear that there was no longer a pristine place in the world where things would be better for her. But even though she was trapped and everything was going to the devil, she was still convinced that she had behaved correctly, and that, despite her feelings of horror and her too quick step now racing inside of her, she must never bow down to them. Such a heartfelt promise was perhaps calling misfortune but it kept hope alive. It was hidden and tiny just as the white-clad girl in the middle of the plains was tiny but it was – and if someone wanted to take it from her that they would have had to cut it out of her with a knife.

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A carriage followed her deep into the furrows but did not pass her. The approaching thunder of horses hooves changed into a light trot and then barely audible steps as the rattling of wheels grew silent. Not looking back, she stepped aside and retreated into the grass. She thought that one of the manor boys had set out after her and would try to lure her back. She had firmly decided that she would not return despite any kind words – that she would never go back. Now the coachman suddenly pulled the bridle and the wheel stopped right beside her.

“You!?” she whispered, though her body cried out and the surprise went straight to her heart.

“And you who don’t heed my efforts,” he smiled, greeting her with a lifted hat. “Or perhaps today you heed nothing in the world?” He lowered his head and studied her between half open lids. “If it’s like that—” he lifted his eyebrows “—if you now say that I have made a mistake, I shall never forgive you.”

She stood there and felt his gaze travel down to her bare feet that had gathered dust along the way, and showed a bit of dried blood oozing between the toes. It was unpleasant to her that he had found her like this, all hot and dishevelled, but she couldn’t tell him so. She also could not complain about her horrified reaction to the bold behaviour of the boys at the estate and explain to him that her bad mood had nothing to do with him. She bit her lip and remained silent. She sensed, though, that he realized she was just taking time to master her feminine embarrassment. When at last he stepped toward her, it was as if an invisible door opened between their two worlds, and it was like a miracle for her.

“True, a man contemplates all sorts of thing after such a sad occasion,” he said gravely, breaking the silence. “It’s perfectly understandable that a person might prefer to be alone at such a time,” he added, as if he were trying to find an excuse for her. “But, you see—” now he opened his hands “—they told me you had gone on foot, and I didn’t want to miss this opportunity to offer you a ride.”

She glanced at his horse, which was well-trained, since its hadn’t stamped its hooves once during the length of their conversation, and she studied the carriage which was as polished as

a tabernacle and doubtless brand new. A wooden box perched on the rear wheel, so there was only a small space where a passenger could sit. Just the thought of climbing on and being carried through the village made her cringe. It might have happened that he had just incidentally picked her up, but it seemed to her that everyone would know that they had hardly met by accident. It was clear they did not belong together so people would seek an explanation for it.

“Well?” he asked.

“No, no,” she whispered.

“May I help you?” He stretched out his hand.

“I think not,” she shook her head. “Don’t hold it against me—” she looked pleadingly into his blue eyes that were so close to her now that they were like one deep mystery “—I don’t understand what you want of me.”

“I won’t ask you for anything in exchange if that’s what you’re thinking.” He took her hand and guided her over the carriage wheel. “The air on your face will do you good and your pretty feet will be spared.” He smiled as he lifted her on to seat.

“Oh God.” Her hand passed over her brow like someone whose fate had been decided. She knew that she hadn’t insisted on her no and she didn’t resent him for not wanting to hear it, but it would certainly be better if she could stick to the dust that her bare feet had been patiently kneading her whole life. And now this same dust, like a wispy Mura fog, lifted up in the wake of the carriage and could no doubt be seen from a great distance.

He took off his wide-rimmed hat and hung it on a hook above the shaft, ran his fingers through his hair and let the wind blow past his ears. A smile flickered across his narrow, almost bony face, that told how much he enjoyed speaking to her. He seemed younger to her now than he had on first sight, though still a good deal older than she. Despite his quick movements, he had a manly and serious posture that suggested that, however old he was, he was a gentleman, as he had to be to drive around in such a coach. She didn’t hazard a guess about his profession or situation as he among those that she only rarely met and she could never have gleaned this information from his appearance or manners.

“Hie, Hydra!” he urged the horse on.

“Hydra?” she asked in amazement. “What kind of name is that?”

“What do I know?” He looked at her sideways. “It was once the mythical name for a water snake with seven head that grew back if you cut them off. Today that’s what we call a great river with many tributaries and changeable currents like the Mūra.”

“But your Hydra is a mare?” she asked, still surprised.

“Yes, she is” he nodded and shrugged. “You might wonder why I gave her such a name. But it is the first one that came into my mind and into her ear.” Then after a pause, he added: “But, then again, what else would come to a person’s mind who day after day murmurs thought the water?”

“Through the water?” she repeated.

“It’s true,” he sat up in the seat and took the bridle. “But, what am I thinking, I haven’t even introduced myself yet—” he leaned over to her and offered his hand “—I am the surveyor Ivan Spransky, an employee of the Radgona Water Works.”

“Aha?” she answered. “I am Elica.” Only at this point did she remember to place her fingers in his hand. “The daughter of the late Sreš, Beltinci stable man.” She stopped because there was nothing else to add to the name. In the meantime, the carriage began to move and the movement of air across her cooled the blush she felt rising to her cheeks. She was certain that she had soured his mood, that he had quietly hoped that she was barefoot just by chance, that she had decided to walk out of some fit of stubbornness. But she didn’t mind. The truth was now between them. It could not be avoided and it seemed to her entirely appropriate that it had emerged so quickly.

“Now we are acquainted with each other a little.” He looked at her as if he were reading her thoughts.

“Yes.” Her shoulders trembled slightly. “Now we are acquainted.” She endeavoured to hide her sudden awkwardness.

“All the same,” he continued without withdrawing his gaze, “I hope that our acquaintance won’t end with this ride. Might that be possible?” He let the question hang in the air. “Would you allow it? Would it please you too?”

She let her hand pass across her brow and stared out at the plains. In her head, she repeated the questions so she might hear them again and again, and really understand them. It seemed to her inconceivable that he had any interest in her and that he was so persistent in pursuing it.

“I bet your pardon,” he said as if from a distance. “Perhaps I have offended you.”

“No, no,” she shook her head. “It just seems strange to me. I have no idea what it is that you want.”

“What I want is,” he started to answer her question, “what I really want—” his voice had become determined “—well, I suppose I just can’t imagine anything nicer than to be able to chat with you again.”

“Perhaps we might chat again,” she shrugged.

“There, you see,” he cheered up and shook the bridle making the mare step high and fast. “What are these flowers and meadows to a man if he has nobody with whom to share their beauty?” He raised his voice and looked curiously around him. “Very soon I will also be able to show you Mūra pastures the likes of which you have never seen, I know black groves where the egrets nest and calm hollows in which swans have their young, and I’ve also found a grebe that nests upon the water each summer.”

She listened to him and forgot to tell him to turn down a small road as she was no longer in such a hurry to step down from the carriage that hovered like a feather above the road, rocking pleasantly. The stragglers from the funeral returning on foot struck her as distant and lonesome as crows. She felt oddly undisturbed that some of the women recognized her and would certainly spread gossip. They could say what they liked but the truth belonged only to her and that was what mattered.

