

SAMPLE
TRANSLATION

FERI LAINŠČEK
THE SCARAB AND THE
VESTAL VIRGIN
NOVEL ABOUT
PREDATORS OF SOULS

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Feri Lainšček: The Scarab And The Vestal Virgin

Novel about predators of souls

Short description of novel

The central character is Karla Marchlewska who carries with her the burden and fate shared by almost all of Lainšček's characters – namely, lost ethnic identity as her parents are Polish refugees in the United States, and her family is broken by the divorce of her mother and father. Thus she must embark on the painful, almost pathological, search for the meaning of her own life. This is the realistic narrative level of *The Scarab and the Vestal Virgin*. In part because of her social, familial, and psychological characteristics – she has been going to a psychiatrist for years – Karla Marchlewska becomes the victim of a mysterious cult, the tyranny of which Lainšček had already shown in *Man in a Passion Play*. The so-called 'plunderers of souls' want to use to Klara to carry out medical-technological experiments aimed at controlling the human soul. At this point the realistic story about the fate of a woman lost geographically, socially, and spiritually shifts into crime genre, dealing with the criminal acts of scientific-ideological fanatics against anybody who tries to thwart their control. Doctor Guy Labriola ends up saving Karla from the claws of these medical psychoanalytical technologists. She escapes to Europe with him, hides in monasteries, and experiences a sensual and emotional love story. But the scientific order finds her even in the land of her origins and, in order to finally end the ongoing cycle of crimes, she gives herself up to them.

In addition to the two levels of narrative discussed above, *The Scarab and the Vestal Virgin* also has elements of the mystical-fantastic world. Namely, there is the inserted story of a girl named Njo written as if from the time of mythical prehistory, in the style of ancient myths and divine transfiguration of nature that breathes like a woman still driven by the impulse to give herself to a man. This episode, which is beyond any spatial and temporal reality, intervenes in Karla's story. Njo (which means "her" in Slovenian) is actually a subconscious mirror image of Karla herself, and the writer shows how the two are driven by one and the same force: love.

Excerpt from novel

Karla Marchlewski saw her father exactly fifty-three times after 1974. Her memory on this point was so precise because for many years it seemed that Patryk Marchlewski was the only person she could trust.

It would be difficult for her to say now that this conviction was mistaken, but it certainly was irrational. Slightly less than three years after their escape to America when she was barely nine years old, her parents separated and she remained with her mother. These fateful events, which happened very quickly and reminded her of the crazed reality of animated films, took place on a wide street named Jackson Avenue. The only thing that stayed with her from that place was the rattle of the train that she heard every night – as if it were a train that rumbled back into her past though she knew that trains could not cross the ocean – and, of course, her father's promise that he would never forget her.

Patryk Marchlewski left her mother who, in her avaricious anger, threw plates and cut their only sofa to pieces with a knife.

That was the first reason that struck her as decisive. In time, she would discover and add many more because Ana Marchlewski, in her pained dissatisfaction, was unforgiving to herself and to others. The whole of their brief marriage was a collection of his increasingly eager and in the end desperate efforts to make her happy and, on the other side, her eternal misery. And so it was also in their departure for *the Promised Land* as everyone called it in those days. It is true that it was her father's idea but then both of them planned it and lived in their dreams, until her mother on that first cold morning said: *If I had known this before...*

In 1977, Patryk Marchlewski married the radio announcer Jodie Pullman and settled in New Bedford. That same autumn, he also visited Karla who was eleven years old at the time. That was the first of their fifty-three meetings, one that she still remembered precisely today since the date was recorded in her canvas book of memories. It was a secret that she entrusted to nobody, with the exception, of course, of her mother, and later Ali Ester. It was, otherwise, impossible to talk about – that is how much the meeting meant to her. Even she did not realize this at the time and would have been unable to explain this dependency on her father with much clarity.

Though, of course, she loved to look at her father simply because he was her father.

But she also looked at him because she saw in his light, almost azure, eyes the barefoot girl who ran through the high summer grass and plucked one-eyed blossoms somewhere long ago and far away. Only in them were written the hidden feelings of beauty of the moments when both felt that the world existed only because of the two of them. And though this experience seemed odd and impossible to put in words, without it, the only thing she could say about herself was that she was born on October 5, 1996 in Olszystn by the River Lyn somewhere in Poland. That was a place that for her, as for many others, existed only on a map somewhere in the region of Mazurska Lake. Without him who now sometimes even came for a visit, she herself would be just an apathetic and pimply little girl for whom even her warder had not the least interest though she often stole right from under his nose.

Like her mother, who had been employed at the counter of the Long Island Railroad since the divorce, and lived only for food and Mexican beer.

Ana Marchlewski, who, in recent years, weighed one hundred fifteen kilograms.

Ana Marchlewski who died hungry.

That happened in January of 1987, which Karla Marchlewski would also remember for the fact that she met her father for the forty-sixth time at the funeral. That was the first time he came with Jodie Pullman who she had otherwise only seen in photographs in women's magazines. In her long black coat of cashmere wool and a black tissue paper rose in her hair, she seemed like the sort of woman that her father would like. Though then, in that quiet and dreadful moment, she couldn't say so.

Maybe it's my fault that Anika and I didn't get along, Patryk Marchlewski said at the lunch after the funeral. I can accept that responsibility and in the end can even explain it, he continued, though she wasn't in the mood for it and it even seemed inappropriate to her. I was afraid she would slide into the vice from which I had only managed to escape.

But how could you have any influence on my relationship with my mother? She dismissed him. You were only there so I could complain to you on occasion and even then you didn't say much.

I was on your side, Karla, whatever you might have thought, he said. And you made up many things, as you know. Because: if I was her first defeat, you were probably her second. In light of her sad departure, that is something that hardly leaves me indifferent.

This thought, which she neither expected nor fully understood, surprised her. After he left, mother was quite calm and never spoke of her emotions. Year after year, each of them learned to live on her own, until eventually she no longer even asked about what her mother did. Only once – it was during the spring of last year – she had inadvertently seen her mother in a moment of sadness. She was sitting completely naked by the open window of the bedroom and singing in her mother tongue. That time – for the first time – she realized that Ana Marchlewski might have entrusted her with her anxieties and nightmares. But it was far too late for such intimacy and the scene was so strangely ominous and unreal that she preferred to flee.

That year I took care of the money and arranged for your return to Poland, Patryk Marchlewski said, once he had gathered his thoughts. I didn't realize then that I was offering her something that she could not accept, he continued with a changed voice. Only a short time later did I realize that she had written a letter to her family in which she had described our happiness together...

She wrote to them that we were all together?

That I earned a lot of money and that we had bought a big house, he nodded and kept nodding.

But that really is crazy! she exclaimed.

Crazy, he confirmed, but no less tragic because of it. It means that she preferred to grow sick and die here, rather than that they would know of her defeat at home.

It was after her mother's death that Karla Marchlewski first visited the psychiatrist Werner Hartung, the person who would later bring her into the company of the followers of Janus. It was the beginning of February, after she had dreamt three nights in a row that she heard her mother's song.

Ana Marchlewski, naked and obese, ready for death that indeed came to relieve her nine months later, had sung in the language that her daughter hardly understood, which is why, even then, she did not try to decipher the verses. But the song that haunted her dreams was sung in a language that she did understand, and when she woke she was able to recite the words as if she had known them forever. It was a simple fact and that only added to the ominous feeling that the song aroused in her.

*Everything will be as it was,
tomorrow will come, the wind too,
that makes the lily bloom,
oh, white, white flower.*

*Everything will be as it was,
tomorrow will come, the wind too,
that searches for the lily,
and withers its pale bloom.*

*Everything will be as it was,
tomorrow will come, the wind too,
that sings a sad song,
but never mind, never mind...*

The psychiatrist typed the lyrics into his computer and then tackled the music. Karla Marchlewski also remembered, of course, the melody, which was simple enough, a pleasing air that was easy on the ears. It seemed to her now, even when they hummed it together, like a lost inspiration that had moved her only in her dreams. It amazed her that Werner Hartung found the song so interesting. The story about the wind and the lilies was such a simple folk motif about virginity and purity, or about male aggression and restlessness. That her mother who, one way or another, always blamed others for her unhappiness, adopted this song, only provided more evidence of the self-pity and pathos that had destroyed her.

We must realize that now we are speaking of your dreams and that such interpretations refer to your feelings, the psychiatrist spoke gently. *After all, you are not even certain that the words you heard in your dreams are actually the words to the song that your deceased mother sang.*

But what else could they be? She shook her head. *Did I just dream the song up out of thin air? I've never written a song, have never had the slightest talent for it.*

Of course, we will confirm it, he nodded. In a few days, I'll know with more certainty whether some Polish folk melody exists or another sort of song with that melody.

You'll check even that? She couldn't imagine it.

I can, though, of course, it is not essential. He was quite sure of himself. In any case, the song belongs to you now, and your dreams themselves tell me that you are not as indifferent to it as you would like to be.

The dreams he mentioned did not strike Karla Marchlewski as so telling. Night after night, she was gazing into a white unreal light that was drawn around a horizon almost within her reach. In these moments, it seemed as if she were standing in the bottom of a big empty egg with a transparent shell, but when she moved and extended her hand, she always realized that the light was shifting like mist moving along the horizon. She walked for a long time after that, pursued by the feeling that she was about to arrive somewhere, and she would finally set eyes on the image of the one who had been singing all this time about the wind and the flowers. But the voice that was singing – not completely a man's and not completely a woman's and gave the impression of an enormous space there behind the light – was not her mother's.

Let us try then to describe the dominant emotion that you feel during the dream, continued the aging psychiatrist who had been recommended and arranged by Jodie Pullman. *Is it fear, or perhaps uncertainty, or is it something else?*

Fear is definitely not the right word, she said. It has more to do with a feeling of something inexorable and fateful. Something that will probably hurt me, or even destroy me, and I won't have the will or the power to escape it. She tried to describe the feeling although she doubted that she could. But – is this merely curiosity that tempts me? Do I really want to find out, to understand? she wondered aloud. I would be more inclined to say that I wander and wander and wait like someone who has become the last person on Earth...

This – about the last person on Earth – I don't understand unfortunately, the psychiatrist interrupted. *Is that a thought that terrifies you?*

Of course not, she said hastily. I only wanted to illustrate my feelings with a sort of borderline situation. If, for example, you were alone, the last one, without hope that anybody else survived and that everything would begin again, would you view your death in the same that you might today?

O! the old psychiatrist exclaimed. Where did you get that idea?

Oh! She was angry because she sensed he had lost the thread of her thoughts. It is possible that such a thing could happen.

Quite right. He smiled at her sudden anger. But let's say that we agree on this point. He stood up and began to pace. You're alone there, in the egg, in a seemingly incomprehensible situation, given over to some destructive power that you cannot or just don't want to resist. Only one voice speaks about this. A voice that you claim is not your mother's, but uses her words to speak to you. Or her story...He approached her. Does it still seem to you that the fable of the wind and the flower is really a warning? Or are you warning yourself?

Of course, the late psychiatrist Werner Hartung, and one of the first three Janus brothers, never found the Polish folk song or any other song that was close enough to Karla's song. But in the first year after her mother's death, he was the most reliable interlocutor that she could call whenever she felt desperate or bored. Only later did she learn that he was actually paid by her father's second wife who had not taken his name but still called herself Jodie Pullman.

The old man had fled from Europe in 1938 and his birthplace – Wittenberg, Germany – was on the map not far from her Olsztyn. However, Karla Marchlewski did not know very much about historical events on that distant continent so these facts did not particularly move her, but nevertheless reports about Adolf Hitler, about the man who had created the most magnificently satanic orgies in this century, left their mark on her. It seemed absolutely inconceivable to her that someone, whom Werner Hartung had described as a *third-class magus*, had created conditions so evil that they had crippled almost a whole continent and threatened to pull the whole world down into the maelstrom. It was especially significant that this could have happened in a part of the world that had been the source of civilization's main accomplishments and, through the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church, the very centre of humanism.

Up until 1936, when he had publically protested because Adolf Hitler had dissolved certain undesirable youth organizations, Werner Hartung had been a member of Hitler Youth and, as a young psychiatrist, had worked in the inner circle of the National Socialists. He had earned their trust during an intellectual discussion at an inn about whether black athletes should be allowed to participate in the upcoming Olympic games. He had stated that it would be dishonest and unfair to allow wild hares to race on the same track as domestic ones. The notion that black athletes enjoyed an advantage in physical disciplines because of their primitiveness soon became a truism and it provided its author with more fame than all his educational and scientific achievements. His fame and a few overlooked or forgotten coincidences even brought him into the men's organization Masters of Fire, the sworn-in members of which were Hitler's closest collaborators and advisors.

Although the old man had slipped out of this company and crossed the whole of Europe the moment he sensed their evil plans and the first manifestation of the summoning of demons into political life, his knowledge of the historical situation was nevertheless unique. He knew about the carefully concealed background to the catastrophe that generations of historians and other academics had more or less imperfectly analysed and explained for more than half a century. He told her about the black masses, also called the *forges of evil* that were attended by the most trusted members of the *Hitler youth organization, special forces, the Order of the Death Heads* and other specialized organizations that grew perfidiously under the initials of HJ and SS. He told her about the collective initiation into evil that had enveloped the whole nation and nearly burnt all of Europe in the 1940s. But it did not burn because, as it was written in many books, a crazed painter wanted to dominate the World; it burned because a *third-rate magus* wanted to perform the greatest sacrifice that any man had ever offered Satan.

Karla Marchlewski was also a child of this Europe. That was the conclusion she came to and it explained her situation better than any previous intuition or guesswork. Above all, it made her accept her the misfortune that had turned her into the loneliest ant in the world. Since 1990, not even a plumber had crossed the threshold of the apartment that had been left to her by Ana Marchlewski. The only person who regularly called was the old psychiatrist. Her father came by on rare occasions of his own choosing when he felt his freedom would not be threatened. He was also a child of this Europe and, if he finally a little more content, she could only be happy for him.

Can we thus conclude that Adolf Hitler died happy? she asked Werner Hartung.

Well we can say that he died in the fire that he dearly loved, the old man responded ambiguously, who was at the time still concealing his own collaboration with Ali Ester by that time.

So we are mistaken to comfort ourselves that he got the punishment he deserved and that he paid at least a little for the mayhem he caused and for its consequences? She prodded the old man.

We are mistaken and not mistaken, he finally responded. *Because Hitler foresaw his own death and, in 1941, when everything seemed to be going his way, when the parade was marching along, he was even planning for it. But such a plan can have errors, of course, and that is what interests us.* He hinted here at what she would understand in full only much later. *To a certain degree, our insight casts Satan as a demiurgic external power and interprets him as an evil that has been accumulating for thousands of years in man's subconscious.*