

FERI LAINŠČEK; *THE UNTOUCHABLES* (excerpt)

Then they went to lie in wait for her.

For Sladjana Miltojević, a post office employee. While working out their plan they'd been sneaking glimpses of her through the wire mesh window of the Co-op building. They also knew which path she took in the mornings, with mists still wafting above the plain, and in the early afternoons, with the sun still above the poplar trees. She had to cross an overgrown brook, the railway embankment, and the Co-op *slivik*, the plum orchard, and these were the places where they could lay her down in tall grass or drag her into some bushes. On the way they decided to intercept her by the brook; she'd have to traverse a wooden footbridge there and would descend into their trap, so to speak. Once she was cornered, they could also come to an agreement together about where they were going to do it. The principal thing was to create a situation that would allow them to negotiate. Or so the two stalkers felt, only wanting to leave their sperm in her. Were it possible, they'd have gladly brought it in a *voder*, a whetstone sheath, and let her insert it herself. Because, their foresworn vengeance was not lust for the woman; they'd also told that to each other several times.

"What if we paid somebody else to do it instead?" Suli had the idea at the last moment. "He'd enjoy it and make money to boot," he warmed to the idea. "Väpi would do it at the drop of a hat, and Kobza too ..."

"It has to be us!" Jorga spoke between his teeth.

"Us, us," he grimaced. "Väpi is darker than either of us, and Kobza has mouse ears and a harelip ..."

"Be quiet!" cried out Mirga and put a finger to his lips at the same time. "If we blow it now, you'll have to do it all by yourself the next time," he threatened.

Suli caught his lip between his teeth and fell silent.

But it was too late.

The woman, coming down the path with long, somewhat manly strides, had noticed them and evidently also got an inkling that they were up to no good. She slowed down, then paused for a moment to glance around for someone who could help her. The realization that they had met in an isolated spot indeed spurred her to make a sudden about-turn like a doe and bolt back in the direction she'd come from. Jorga grabbed Suli by his sleeve so that the seams popped and pulled him along. And then they sprinted one after another, in broad daylight, across the plain, as though a house were on fire somewhere or the high waters were coming. For a while only the thudding of their feet could be heard and their increasingly

labored breathing. At first the woman gained the advantage, making it seem her youthfulness would win this mad race. But then all of a sudden her strength began to ebb. She was obviously too agitated, fear must have engulfed her; they could hear her whimpers and moans amidst the stomping. Suli, who was faster than Jorga and now the fastest of the three, had almost managed to grab her by her hair. But then, out of some childish exuberance, he changed his mind and tripped her up. She tumbled down hunched like a squirrel, rolled over her head into the grass, and, without stopping, squirmed away from them on her back and bottom, kicking in panic.

Her beautiful face was blotchy from her feverish flight and sweat.

Her large eyes brimmed with terror and tears.

“No, please! No!” her quivering mouth begged even after her strength had completely deserted her and she only writhed like a gulping fish out of water. But at the very moment when they could have reached for her without fear that she might scratch or bite them, the men suddenly halted and went stock-still, as though petrified. The first one, who had tripped her up, stopped with his hands raised above his head, as though admitting defeat, and the second, older one, covered his mouth with his palm – and thus they stayed. After a while, a silence started up all around them, the kind of silence that had reigned before their encounter, only now perhaps more obvious and more audible, and a strange peace settled on the plain, a peace the woman could not understand. She looked around and saw there still wasn't anyone who could have scared the men off. She slowly got up and waited uncertainly, but her pursuers remained stone-like.

She bent, pulled her skirt over her knees and smoothed it.

Then she took a step backwards, made a questioning pout, and softly, so as not to awaken them from their miraculous stupefaction, stole away over the grass.

“Did you see it too?” Jorga Mirga asked under his breath after a while.

“I did,” Suli Barjaktari nodded in fear.

Translated by Tamara M. Soban