

Suzana Abspoel Djodjo

Suzana Abspoel Djodjo was born in 1968 in Bjelovar (Croatia); at present she lives in the Netherlands. Though a relatively new face on her native country's literary scene, her first book already signals a direction different from the rest of the Croatian authors, offering fresh insight into a country in transition. Unexpected twists and turns, estrangement, parody, irony, the grotesque, strange word play and coinages are key devices in Djodjo's novel. *Snajperist* ('A Sniper') † won the 2004 best first Croatian novel award.

Tomislav Kuzmanovic lives and works in Iowa City, pursuing an MFA in Literary Translation at the University of Iowa. Together with Russell Valentino he has recently translated *A Castle in Romagna* by the Croatian novelist Igor Stiks (Autumn Hill Books, 2004). The translation has been nominated for 2006 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

The Day They Lit Up the Darkness in Stefa's Neighborhood --An Introduction to the Psychology of a Sniper From A Sniper

*By Suzana Abspoel Djodjo
Translated by Tomislav Kuzmanovic*

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Chapter 3

The day they lit up the darkness in Stefa's neighborhood, sometime around half past seven, the pigeons began falling from the sky. Two or three of them at once. As if they were dead. Then the phone lines in the neighborhood got cut off and the people thought--it must be an accident. They must have lit the darkness in the neighborhood next to the main post office. People switched on their TVs and turned up the radios. Husbands looked through the windows, while wives passed on the news to their husbands standing next to the windows. Around half past seven, as Kuma Snaja was coming back from the butcher's where she had bought the meat for the stuffed cabbage rolls her son liked so much, a whole nest of pigeons fell into her bag. Yuck, she thought and threw the pigeons out onto the street. As she bent down, she saw those same blind calves Njezna showed no excitement about. Kuma Snaja got excited and ran home on her fat legs. Trouble's coming, she thought. I just hope everything is all right with him. I just hope mama's feckless little precious didn't do anything foolish. And then the power went out.

The sniper was a little alienated. He loved stuffed cabbage rolls and his mama, but he'd never made it any further than that. They never liked him either in school or in boy scouts. Neither in the choir seat nor at the beach. He was a bad student, a bad singer, and a bad son. But this never stopped Kuma Snaja from loving him dearly. Some are born a little confused and what can you do about that. But the sniper, once he grew up a bit, laid his eyes on Stefa from Stefa's as she was setting the tables. And he fell head over heels in love with her gentle hands that spread and caressed the tablecloths, with her wobbly behind, with her raven-black hair, with her tight jeans, with her golden earrings, with her eyes that looked like two deadly grenades.... He wanted badly to fold her to his feckless chest, but she would not even let him have a shot of Pelinkovac, let alone have her.

A few days before they lit up the darkness in Stefa's neighborhood for the first time, the sniper had run into a beech tree. Riding his Kromos motorcycle. His mother had watched as he, all unhappy and in love, caressed his sniper rifle. She had told him, "Son, go get yourself a new toy! This sniper's a little worn out around the trigger. And it's not right for you to play with it on the balcony, people could get all kinds of ideas now that the darkness keeps lighting up all around here." So the sniper bought a motorcycle and immediately raced off to show Stefa what a hotshot he was; the wind blew the stuffed cabbage out of his hair, the pigeons flew up diligently to get out of his way, and the sniper flew madly like a piper. When he appeared at full speed before Stefa who had just come out to spread the tablecloths, her heart leapt into her mouth. Stefa knew more than well that she had caught the sniper's eye. She also knew that the sniper played with some dangerous toys: sitting leisurely in front of the pub, she'd seen some strange flashes on

Kuma Snaja's balcony. And when the sniper raced straight into the first line tables at full speed, Stefa was right to worry that the dork would run into her and crash both her and his motorcycle into the first ditch. She would be finished before you could say Pe-lin-ko-vac. So Stefa, beset with irrational fear, covered her eyes with her hand. Also, the sun just shone in her direction.

"Well, well, Stefa's waving at me," the sniper thought. So he felt warm around the heart and wanted to wave back at her, and then he took his Sarmant glove off the steering wheel and crashed into the beech tree. To make things worse, right at that moment Pluto, the neighbor's mutt, came up, lifted his leg, and peed onto the wheel. At the same time, the sniper leapt off into the ditch and, as he flew through the air, caught Pluto's leg. To make things much worse, Pluto's leg broke. The neighbor, Pluto's owner, ran up to them immediately, swearing like a trooper. Stefa was shocked and disgusted, she swore and she cursed. At that moment you could hear the cow that somebody kept in his basement, predicting trouble, "some serious shit's about to happen," while all of a sudden calving seven beautiful blind calflets.

Nothing happened to the sniper on this occasion, but his new motorcycle was completely messed up. With pee all over it and completely shattered, it lay there next to the beech tree. The sniper's instinct told him that this stupid crashing into the beech tree completely destroyed his chances with Stefa. He climbed up to his apartment and began whining next to his sniper. It was all the Kromos motorcycle's fault. And mama was not at home; she'd gone to the hairdresser's. The only consolation was--his sniper.

Mama, when she came back from the hairdresser's, could notice her son spreading the sniper all over the carpet. "What happened, my son? By god, son, what are you doing?" she asked him nervously.

"I'm putting the machine together," the sniper snapped. "I'll need it."

The sniper needed some five, six days to make his favorite toy operable. Following the instructions from the booklet in Russian. For these five, six days Kuma Snaja crossed herself and prayed, and said, "Please, son, don't, and what do you need this for, and why don't you take a ride on your motorcycle, and I'll cook you your stuffed cabbage." But the sniper did not budge. Not this time. This time he decided to do everything just right. And after that he had his mind set on stuffing himself with his mama's stuffed cabbage rolls.

After messing around with his steel toy for those five or six days, on the day they lit up the darkness in his neighborhood, the sniper woke up with black circles under his eyes. The fog slowly descended upon the neighborhood and the black auras rooted themselves around the windows in the buildings. The sniper spent the whole day polishing his perfectly adjusted sniper using the skin of the last piece of pork belly he and his mother had eaten with bread. In the late afternoon, he set the silencer on and put new Seymour leather gloves on his hands. Who cares about the darkness in other people's neighborhoods when darkness takes hold of somebody's soul? Who cares? The darkness eats you up from inside like ammonia, and it stings, and it burns, and yes, it hurts.

Around seven in the evening, after Kuma Snaja had gone to the butcher's to buy meat, the sniper was ready. From behind the cover of the old umbrella, he banged at the pigeons, he banged so much that he shivered, but he made no sound. The sniper shook quietly--loaded, empty, loaded, empty, loaded, empty. The pigeons kept falling. Kept falling. As if they were dead. Dead. As if struck by a lightning. When several hundreds of them had fallen down, the sniper said, "Enough. The show for Stefa is over for today." He laughed and felt like having the stuffed cabbage rolls made from fresh calfmeat. He waited for his mama at the door, grabbed her by the collar, more roughly than ever before and said, "Stuffed cabbage rolls, I want stuffed cabbage."

Kuma Snaja said, "Right, I've just bought the meat. Just wait a second and we'll eat dinner."

"No, no," the sniper replied meanly. "Today we'll have stuffed cabbage made with fresh calves. I've heard some roaming down there in the basement. Go, old woman, and bring me the fresh calves. Now!"

Kuma Snaja retreated into herself and became as thin as she could and opened her mouth to say something, but seeing her son's crazy face, she understood there was no more joking around with him and that maybe she had made a mistake or two while bringing him up. She got herself out quickly and ran into the basement, taking the basket she brought from the butcher's with her. In the basement she left two pounds of ground meat next to the cow and took one blind calf instead. She climbed up quickly back into the apartment, before anyone could see her.

And the sniper took the calf straight into the kitchen, ground it in the meat grinder and shouted at Kuma Snaja so loudly that she broke out in a cold sweat, "Make that stuffed cabbage, old woman, or tonight you'll sleep on the floor. I've had it with you, you old cow!"

The mother began crying as any mother would cry if her born child called her an old cow, and she soaked the stuffed cabbage with her tears and mixed the meat fiercely. The meat was falling apart, but the old lady didn't notice. Meanwhile, tired from anger, happiness, and shooting, the sniper fell into a deep sleep. And the stuffed cabbage rolls, very fortunately for his mother, did not interest him anymore.

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