

# Brought by the Fog

## (Excerpt in English)

Translated by: Olivia Hellewell

Contact of the translator: [olivia.hellewell@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:olivia.hellewell@nottingham.ac.uk)

3.

By the time he had finally reached the incline, which led softly up to the courtyard of the isolated homestead, it was completely dark. All he could make out was the shadowy, hunched curve of the thatched roof, supported by the walls of the outbuilding. It was the inners of the courtyard that continued to light his way forward. In some sort of open barn or workshop there hung a paraffin lamp. It could be seen, therefore, that the family were yet to down their tools for the day, in spite of the dusk. Whether they had become preoccupied with the livestock, or something else had kept them on their feet, he could only guess. For even after he'd stepped into the light and stood, once again somewhat hesitantly beneath the lamp, there was no-one to be seen. He looked around, listened, and waited. The space lit by the glowing lamp was most probably a blacksmith's workshop. In its depths he saw the gaping, sooty mouth of a fireplace; there were black tools scattered and hanging on the shelves by the anvil. It occurred to him that this may well have been the blacksmith's workshop he had heard speak of – and now, without delay, he wanted to find out. Yet there was still not a single cursed soul in the courtyard, and its walls gave nothing away. He stamped his feet to shake the mud from his tight shoes. It rather clung to his soles, and so he tried to wipe them on the grass. Eventually he gave up, and as he was, muddy and dishevelled, stepped under the entranceway and up to the only door. He knocked – and then again, several times more, louder. When no answer came, he reached impatiently for the large handle. The door was locked.

He closed his eyes and slumped down with his back against the wall.

What utter madness this all was! – he no longer had the will nor the energy to question.

Under the thatched roof above, horseshoes hung from a pole. They were of wildly differing dimensions – from that of a man's hand to some truly enormous ones – and some had worn paper-thin. Against the column there, right next to him, leant a harrow. Its long, worn teeth glistened like menacing tips of spears. A wire ran overhead across the courtyard, all the way from the entrance up to the workshop. On it hung the dead weight of a dog's chain. The dog, which had most probably broken free, given that there was neither hook nor collar at the end of the chain, was fortunately nowhere to be seen. But what could it mean, if the homestead really was abandoned? He, in spite of it all, was destined to wait. Stepping back out into the night, into the unknown, was not something he dared consider. Yet nor could he force entry, just like that, without knowing exactly where he found himself. And besides: as much as he longed for safety and warmth, the silent, pitch-dark interior filled him with an equal measure of fear. And it was that strange fear yet again, a fear he'd never known before, which first came over him on the plain. A fear borne of the feeling that someone was watching him, delighting in his confusion and luring him deeper into the unseen, into ruin. Yet it was also a frightening sense that, right now, at this very moment, he could stand no more; that this threat would consume him, even cause him to lose his mind. But then, of course – would he even still be able to return to the heather, where the suitcase was concealed, and would he ever make it to Mokuš? It was, at this moment, the thing he yearned for most of all. He wanted it more than ever. For he slowly began to realise, during those tense moments, that he could not continue alone, especially not without God's mercy. If his faith in Father Boniface had not been absolute, when he had said

only a few days before that only Mokuš could be his penance, now he increasingly trusted the supposition that Mokuš really was his fate. And so persevere he must. He at least had to try. Which was why, without question, he was left with no option other than to turn and face all that was repulsive and strange once again. But as he looked up, searching for newfound strength in this acceptance, it seemed as if there, in the darkness, something stirred...

Yes!

He hoisted himself up and his eyes scoured his surroundings.

It was still there. And through the courtyard ahead it was moving.

And made a sound.

*Mmmooooo!* it groaned.

*Oh come on!* – muttered Jon Urski – *a cow?*

And a cow it was. And beside her, into the light emanating from the blacksmith workshop, covering the courtyard, stepped a slender and stooping old man. The leash was wrapped around his hand in such a way that left a good length of thick rope, which he was using there and then to whip the animal's neck. He was seemingly angry about something, as if there, in the darkness, he and the cow had come to serious blows. Yet the animal appeared, in complete contrast, lazy and compliant to the extreme. With each blow it didn't so much as flinch, let alone move any faster. Only her head would occasionally turn, as if all her remaining strength were being used to stay upright. And it was then that her wide eyes appeared even wider. They were the most sorrowful eyes he had ever seen, Jon Urski thought. Not that sorrow was the only emotion he could have attributed to them. It seemed only a matter of time before the cow might cry... the old man, meanwhile, with even less mercy than before, thrust her towards the wall with his fists, and he tied her up in front of the workshop on a very short leash.

Jon Urski cleared his throat and stepped out towards the overhang of the roof.

The old man, who must have noticed him by now, didn't so much as turn around.

*I did think it strange that there was nobody to be found around here,* he attempted to explain, and at the same time excuse, his embarrassment.

But the man was yet to cast so much as a glance. He rubbed the palm of his hand, the one that had tugged and wielded the rope. The cracking of knuckles could be heard. *I'll show you!* he hissed at the cow. *Just you wait!* he threatened to strike her again. And then, dragging his feet across the threshold to scrape the mud from his shoes, he stepped into the workshop.

No longer knowing what to do, Jon Urski stood there, by the wall. Did the stranger really take so much pleasure in anger that he had no use for other emotions? Or was he perhaps so very engrossed in those intentions of his, that he really was deaf and blind? Whatever the reason – what else could it be? – he attempted to approach him once more. *I just followed the light!* he exclaimed. *It was the only beacon for miles around!* he shrugged, palms outspread wide. *I would surely have become lost otherwise.*

*So this cow is not yours, then?* The old man twitched, and finally looked up.

*Mine?* he said in consternation, and looking into the tiny, strangely grey eyes of the old man.

*Well so it appeared to me!* replied the other. *Well, what else was I to think?* he said, bowing his head again as he embarked on tidying the hearth. He was intent on lighting a fire, so it seemed...

*So if you assumed that the animal was mine, Jon Urski reasoned, that must mean, in that case, that she doesn't belong to you either?*

*Come on, give over!* He cast another sharp glance. *She's been bellowing around here all day long!* he cried, angrily tossing a log into the fireplace. *Right here, under the window she was lying, as if she thought I couldn't see her. But as soon as I grabbed hold of the whip, she ran off, the coward! And then she started bleating and dancing around down there again! How can a man know up from down after all that?*

Jon Urski gave an assenting nod, even though he did not understand. The old man was clearly talking about something which to him seemed obvious. And so he wasted no words on further explanation. He stacked the hefty logs on the hearth, before chopping the remaining pieces with an axe. He was muttering under his breath as he did so, occasionally cursing the cow. Jon Urski, who was loitering beside him like a stray dog, began to feel the cold again. He waited just a little longer, for the slight man to finally light the fire. But the devil did not pay the slightest bit of attention to Jon's chattering teeth, and was now even tidying up around the anvil. And nor did he appear to be in such a hurry as before. All of his skills, and undoubtedly ritual behaviours, slowly transformed into some kind of ceremonial scene, where every last detail had to be considered and composed. Such meticulous behaviour was characteristic of all good craftsmen, the newcomer knew that; yet in this moment he was unable to fathom the precise reason for this small man's pedantry. What seemed most obvious to him was that old animal would be slaughtered before too long. After considerable hesitation, he nevertheless decided to ask him about that too.

The man straightened up his hunched back for the first time, and stared at him, blinking, straight in the eyes. Bewilderment and self-satisfied scorn were etched not only into his drooping, wrinkled forehead, but into the very wrinkles themselves. *Not the sharpest tool, are you!* he said through narrowly pursed lips. *And there was I thinking that maybe you'd come to my assistance!*

*But I'm telling you, I simply got lost,* he hastened add. *I wanted to ask for directions, but then I was caught by nightfall...* he said, defending his course of action. *Even now I'd be off on my way, if you could only explain to me how to get to Mokuš from here!*

*To Mokuš?* he heard the old man say.

Yes, he nodded.

*To Mokuš itself?* he asked, evidently surprised.

Yes. All he could do was give another nod. *I've been searching for a route all day.*

Now the old man turned away, and for a long time said nothing. But then he turned back around, and simply laughed in his face. *If that really is where you wish to head,* waving his hand in some direction. *If that is really want you want,* he said, his voice altered. *Then you'd better wait here for me to shoe her properly – pointing to the cow – and then, to be sure, as far as I'm concerned, you can go ahead and ride her there! She's going to wander off that way anyway! I mean, where else would this old girl go?*

[...]

7.

Father Jon Urski scraped around with the ladle – but the large vessel was almost empty. This caused him to down his spoon and thrust his plate away in one swift action. Lanščak, the clerk, took a quick glance at the pile of goose bones picked clean and smiled. Their frantic eating mirrored their chatter. And – so it seemed – they had not yet had their fill. Fortunately, the surly wife of their host had no intention of bringing them anything more.

*So then,* — sighed the priest.

*Yes, so!* the clerk perked up. *So, first came the letter. And with it, news from Magda that she is expecting a child.*

*Oh —!* Jon Urski let out a belch.

*Yes, yes!* nodded the other, enthusiastically. *Marika Straj even claimed there were countless letters like this one. But that none of them were – well, not particularly nice and not at all pleasant.*

The priest belched again, and had to be careful to keep his dinner down.

Had he really been so unsettled by the man's story, or was too much goose fat to blame? Whatever the reason, the sensation could now be felt as much in his chest and throat as in his stomach. It was as if he wanted to let himself out at the seams. And so he sat himself down, blankly scratching and swallowing. Yet this only made things worse.

*Is it not sitting so well with you?* The clerk asked, concerned.

*No, no*, he rebuffed. *I'm just thinking*, he frowned - *but tell me: was she expecting his child?*

*Aha!* Lanščak now gestured. *Didn't I tell you that we'd have a little more to say!* He continued, shrugging his shoulders. *Only who would know that for sure? However – he then scratched his bald patch – that's not the point at all! Marika Straj proceeded to find, some time later, a bundle on her doorstep.*

Father Jon Urski got to his feet and clutched his stomach. It was unpleasant and unbearable to hear, but he had to listen. *A bundle?* he sighed. *But what does that mean – a bundle?* he asked, despite having some idea already.

*There was a child in there, of course!* the narrator nodded.

He was now feeling so constrained he could barely feel anything at all. A revolting sensation spread throughout his body, rising up from his stomach, and at first causing him to stop dead. And then, when he realised that he really was going to be sick, it was already too late. With both hands he reached for the empty bowl, out of which they had both just eaten, and vomited into it. All of his muscles constricted, and so it continued, several times more. These relentless cramps brought tears to his eyes and left him breathless, until his surroundings appeared to have only a dream-like quality. The puny man was leaping and fussing around him, while his wife meanwhile stood in the doorway and shouted at the top of her voice. Her horror sounded like the squawking of an enormous, unknown, imaginary bird. And everything about her had changed: scruffy and in an evil rage...

*It did rather seem like you weren't so good*, the clerk's voice came from somewhere.

But he was now much improved already.

And he wasn't the slightest bit bothered.

He sat himself down on the cushioned seat and covered his face with crossed arms. He thought of a thousand things to say, and just as many things to ask. Yet somehow he lacked the strength to think it all through. He had, without a doubt, been unsettled by the recent story. And he had been no less affected by all that had taken place around him in recent days. But – what? Everything? Was it sin to love, or to hate? Did she save a life or a death? Was it God's fate – or the Devil's? – that had been invoked? Had something completely different taken place – something entirely coincidental, at that?

*Do you, Mr Lanščak, believe it?*

*Believe what?* he stared at him, as close as could be.

*The whole thing*, he said, maintaining eye contact. *That it really was... like that. That there really was a child. And that she used it to blackmail him...*

*You know, even if I didn't wish to —!* whispered the clerk. *The child nevertheless grew up and is still around today. But now – did the late Father Janoš Talaber really intend to drown it? Was the good heart of the young Marika Straj really the only thing to save it, as she took it in as her own? That's something we'll just likely never know. And which is why we can continue to make our own conclusions.*

*What about —?* it occurred to him. *What about Magda?*

*That's what I'm saying!* he said, drawing closer. *There are countless tales – and now it's merely a matter of choosing which one to believe. Is she still alive, crying inconsolably somewhere beyond the hills? Or that here somewhere, between heaven and earth, still she wanders, inflicting her wrath upon us?*

Father Jon Urski could now only look away and rub his eyes.

*And which do you believe?* he continued to ask.

*Me—?! sighed the clerk. I, of course, believe that it really is her. Why else would I cling to you and work my fingers to the bone for this wretched church?*

*Hang on!* he grabbed his cold palm. *How do you mean – her?*

*Her,* stammered the clerk. *The one brought by the fog.*

