

Little Andrew

We'll get there in good time, sir. While it's still daylight. That's the village, there – ey below those woods. Do you see? When we get over that ridge, the low rise as well, we'll be pretty much there.

And the young coachman waved the whip over the horses and gave a strong encouraging shout: "Giddy – giddy up!...Here we go, gentlemen!"

The four wheels of the coach splashed through the shallow mud of the country road. Its loose bodywork rattled hollow through mournful empty fields, soaked by the rain. The villager shouted out once more, shifted himself more comfortably on the chest on which he was sitting, swept his heavy coat's wet hood off his head and idly began humming under his breath

"What was your name, lad?" shouted out the fat gentleman from his enormous wolf fur coat, as he sat in the carriage.

The youth continued his humming.

"Ey Laddie!" shouted the gentleman loud and hoarse.

"What?" the youth answered

"Your name, name? What was your name?"

"Little Andrew."

"A-a – Little Andrew... You're a cunning hound, you are! You all got be like that. Sly – that's you peasants have become. You just know how to lie and scheme. And what an act you can put on! I've seen them in the courts...Looks like a little sheep, but he's a wolf through and through. They toy with the judge.

"We're simple folk is what we are, sir, it's only what we're used to. That's what you reckon, but it's not like that. Our villagers duck and dive out of pig ignorance. Pig ignorance and poverty.

"A-a-ah from poverty, from poverty...damned lump of raw wood! They're complaining of poverty, and they drink like fish."

"'Cos it's good do you think? No, not 'cos it's good. That they booze, everyone's boozing. For good, but not for good. This is what even a bloke like you can write up."

"A-ah, well you too have been drinking, friend! Though you're still young, you've not managed a moustache...Your peasants, write them off as losers and that's all."

“You write them off, sir, we don’t know how to write,” said the youth, as he turned towards his scrawny horses and shouted to them, “Gee up, go on, gentlemen,” and lost himself in thought.

The horses eased off a little and started thinking too. The gentleman lifted the big collar of his wolf fur, sank into it and also started thinking. On a solitary tree beside the road a crow with ruffled feathers landed, swung on the desiccated branch, snapped hopelessly and also began thinking. In the sky fat ragged moist dark clouds crawled and tore in front of fragments of a cold blue heaven, also lost in thought. The land was submerged in mud and damp. The scattered views of villages, streams, faraway forests and mountains darkened into lifelessness and fear. Out on the open, huge puddles gleamed cloudy, cold and glassy as the eyes of corpses. The small carriage rocked slowly through the deep thin mud, sank, pulled itself out and swayed from side to side. A loose board at the side continued its monotonous, hollow, merciless knocking and worked insistently on the nerves of the fat gentleman in his wolf fur, drove him out of all patience. He opened the hood, poked his fleshy face out and shouted, “What’s this horrible knocking, devil take it! Doesn’t leave me in peace...”

There’s a board knocking in my carriage, sir. It yaps like an educated bloke; it don’t understand itself, let alone others understand it.”

“You’re a cunning hound, Little Andrew, a cunning hound. You must know how to hoodwink the girls, if you’re not married. You all marry young and you’ve got bonny lasses.”

The gentleman pulled down the collar of his coat.

“Say what you like, sir, but the lasses are better at it. I know that very well. You, what are you doing, sir and what brings you to our village?”

“I’m a court bailiff.”

Little Andrew turned and looked at his passenger carefully. “And you’re here on the job, are you?”

“Of course I’m here on the job. One of your folk there played me for a fool but this time I’ll get through to him. A few times I’ve gone after him but he kept slipping through my fingers...I saw through his tricks and I’ll be catching up with him tonight, just so he remembers me.... I’ll sequester his wheat! Both to teach him a lesson, and to give you lot an example, so you don’t slope off another time. You fool shopkeepers, you fool customers, selling them rotten eggs and rancid butter. Hey but hang on peasant woman, you don’t fool the authorities so easily! They feel your collar – they grip hard! It’s the whip for you, a Russian knout, That’s how you’ll get the message...You’ve become drunkards, losers, bankrupts – you’ll end up unable to pay taxes and you’ll bring the country down. Ah why don’t I have a little more power? I’d turn you into angels.

The Court Bailiff unbuttoned his fur coat and his body began twitching like a hen hatching an egg.

“Hey Mr Bailiff, God made the world and he figured that woman didn’t need a beards, so he didn’t give them any...Reckoned that the donkey needed long ears so he gave it a pair,” Little Andrew answered with pretended naivety.

“You stop your drivel, and get going, because it’s getting dark already. You charged me a lot, you devil! So much money for twenty kilometres! You’ve learnt how to fleece us well...Drive on, lad, drive on, the nags are falling asleep!

“Gee up, Gee up, gentlemen!” Little Andrew shouted and waved his whip.

“You’re calling them gentlemen are you? Be better to call them brothers,” was the bailiff’s angry comment.

“They’ll get cross, Mr Bailiff! You’ll offend them if you don’t call them gentlemen. Their work is secretarial – paid by the hour. They get up on the hour, they lie down on the hour, we water them on the hour, we feed them on the hour. Then we harness them, in other words they enter the office and that’s all. And sometimes in the manger, they’re even reading newspapers.

Go on say where you drink, friend, so you don’t chatter, but drive, because we’re late. Cunning eyes you’ve got, cunning!

“There are no wolves, Mr Bailiff, don’t worry,” cried the coachman in such a turn of voice that the worthy gentleman looked around in fear.

“I’m not scared of wolves, friend, but it’s getting cold. I don’t have time to catch a cold.”

“Wrap yourself in the blanket sir. My horses never go down with colds. The blankets are really snug.

What a chatterbox! thought the bailiff and responded strongly, “Drive, drive, you beast! And once he’d blown off steam, he sank into the fur and was silent.

We-ell you’ve fallen into my hands, friend, thought little Andrew. And when he turned round he asked in a serious voice, “So you’re here on a job are you? Whose soul are you going to burn?”

The judge stayed silent a long time, then he answered angrily, “There’s just one. He’s called Stan – sort of short...with a fat neck.”

“I know him. The guy whose wheat you’re going to sequester, yes? He’s a pauper, Mr Bailiff, don’t pester him.

“Pauper – he’s a very devil”

The bailiff fell silent again. It was growing dark now. The horses scarcely crawled up over the rise behind which the village ought to be hiding. Little Andrew didn’t shout at them or wave his whip over them. He stopped talking and humming and thought to himself.

When they got over the ridge and descended out on to the plain, night had fallen and the village was still not to be seen. A thin cold wind blew over the soaking land. Broken clouds set off towards the mountains. The blue dome of the cold frozen heaven cleared, broadened and rose higher. Soon stars trembled, icy bright stars. The air grew horribly cold. But the horses walked slowly. The bailiff was forever angry.

“Drive, hey, bumpkin! We’ll freeze!”

Little Andrew gave a listless shout to the horses and lazily waved the whip over their heads. They pulled the cart with no purpose or energy, as if they’d lost their hearing. Little Andrew was thinking about poor Stan, whose wheat the bailiff was going to sequester on the morrow, the bailiff who he was now driving.

“You brought this disaster to me, Little Andrew,” Stan would say when he found out and curse him. Then he’d get depressed, buy him a drink, get drunk and weep.

I have to help him, the poor chap, have to help him, thought little Andrew. I have to tell him to hide the wheat and clear the barn, otherwise he’ll eat his ears from hunger...I’ve got to help him – He can’t get by otherwise.

It was dark and on the land you could make nothing else apart from mud, deep thick mud. The road lost itself in this mud and led nowhere, except back into it.

At one point Little Andrew pulled the reins and stopped the horses. “Wait a moment, I’ve lost the path!”

And the lad began gazing out into the dark. The bailiff looked at his serious face that betrayed no trace of a joke and spoke,

“Lad, get your wits together or I won’t be answerable...You’ll be whipped!”

Little Andrew pulled on the reins, waved the whip and shouted, “Hold on tight, Mr Bailiff!”

Far away ahead the village glowed in the dark. The dogs’ barking that came from there showed that it was close by. A few feet to the right a great expanse of stagnant water shone with a peal glaze. The carriage rolled straight towards it.

“What’s that?” asked the bailiff.

“A bog, Mr Bailiff...The road goes through it. It’s shallow, nothing to worry about at all. There are holes just here and there...I’ve gone through it so many times, with a wagon and on foot and...Giddy up gentlemen! Hold on tight Mr Bailiff.”

The horses made their way into the cold water, where the sky was reflected, and carefully splashed on, as they began to sink deeper and deeper. The deathly gleaming pearl-green marsh water rippled and came alive.

“Hold up, you beast!” the bailiff shouted once and got up, terrified in his fur coat, “You’ll drown me, bumpkin! Don’t you see the carriage is filling up with water? Stop! Stop!”

The furious bailiff began to swear.

Little Andrew stopped the horses. The carriage sank up to the floor, stuck in the marsh, whose dimensions were lost in the impenetrable darkness

“Gee up...Forward!” Little Andrew shouted at the horses. His healthy powerful voice resonated strongly through the night and was drowned in pitch dark void. Close by some wild ducks flew off and got lost with their clamour.

“We’ll have to turn into ducks to get out,” Little Andrew said pensively, “Otherwise....”

“Ey, animal! Get us out right now – I’ll thrash you! We’ll drown for sure, donkey!”

“No we won’t, we won’t, Mr Bailiff, never you fear...In this darkness anyone can get lost, whoever they are, just stay calm,” Little Andrew murmured and set to work on the harnesses, Tied, untied, swore, cursed, and at last sat on the chest, waved his whip and shouted, “Gee up, move on!”

The horses gathered strength and set off. One got detached from its traces and splashed free through the bog. The other stayed by the carriage.

“Woah! What’s going on?” shouted the bailiff.

“Stop! Dorcho...Dorcho...Dorcho” shouted little Andrew and began his deception. But the horse, frightened by the water, headed backwards and slowly, slowly lost himself in the dark over towards dry land, without listening to his master.

The bailiff stood in in the carriage, trembling and frightened.

At that moment little Andrew quickly mounted the other horse and set out in Dorcho’s wake, all the while shouting loudly and cheerfully, “Dorcho! Dorcho!”

“Where now hey! What are you doing, oaf? Savage! Ah you lousy peasant, I’ll teach you!”

His answer from the darkness was malicious laughter.

“Ey you oaf, you’re leaving me here! To die! For wild beasts to tear at me! Lad, don’t do this, please!” the bailiff began to plead with a lachrymose note in his voice.

“Don’t worry, don’t worry, Mr Bailiff,” Little Andrew called out, “Wild beasts aren’t going to get into the bog. Wrap yourself in the blanket and don’t catch cold. Tomorrow I’ll come early, early...there’s straw in in the coach, spread it out...I won’t charge you for it!

“Lad, don’t joke, please,” begged the bailiff. “Don’t leave me! Come back! Get me out of here!”

“It’s dark, Mr Bailiff, it’s dark and you can’t see a thing!... And the horse has bolted. How can I help you? I can’t.

The bailiff heard this malicious voice, which came from out of the darkness and he was horrified. How? To be abandoned here? In the middle of the bog! In the middle of this cold, green marsh water, whose margins could not be seen!

“Come back please! Little Andrew! I’ll give you money, as much as you want!...Save me!...I’ll die friend!... I’ve got children! ...Laddy, have you no heart?” he cried in desperation but no-one now replied.

And so the bailiff yelled towards the village in crazy despair.

“Ey, kid...oaf...cannibal...pig...woodentop! Come back! Rescue me!...Have pity!...Animal...peasant...ruffian!...Oh-oh!...Help, help!”

And as he sat in the carriage, he sank into his coat and cried like a child. But from the darkness came no reply.

Son

Old Nick wept tears of joy. He quietly sipped at his chilli-hot bean soup, slurped and tried to hide the tears which were spilling out and threatening to run down his honest unshaven face. A cold fog covered the town and a thin drizzle fell outside. Inside in the pub, it was packed. Country-folk sat at tables, drank, ate, shouted. The door was continually open, people coming in, going out, women holding children, wrapped up in winter coats, swaddled in cloaks. Melting with happiness, Old Nick didn’t hear the noise, didn’t see anyone. Only from time to time he ordered up more wine and didn’t know what to say to his son, beyond just repeating:

“I’m so happy, son, so happy I saw you. Like you’ve fallen from the heavens. Ten years, let’s say, you were a kid then– from that moment, no word or sight of you. If I hadn’t come to market today, who knows whether I’d ever have seen you again?”

Stoyan, his son, elbows stuck out wide on the table, scratched at the head of a nail stuck deep in the wood and sucked in his lips so hard that his cheeks swelled up. He'd gorged himself well and now turned the little glasses bottom side up, as he fidgeted restless on his chair and in his mind he made his escape.

"Where were you, son? So many years! We heard about you in America, we heard about you in the Danube ports. They gave out in the village that you'd been in prison; we even heard you were dead! We were on the point of holding a memorial. We asked, we asked again. Nothing from anywhere."

Old Nick's voice choked. He fell silent. His fatherly eyes swallowed his son whole and caressed and enjoyed him.

Stoyan avoided talking about himself. Now he tipped his crumpled cap over his forehead to shade his eyes, now nudged it back to reveal greasy unwashed curls glistening with sweat. His shirt was filthy, his frayed tie hung loose at the back of his collar and dangled down his bare neck.

"The farm's sinking son, your mother's cried her eyes out. If only you'd got in touch, dropped us a line! We've been struggling." The old man sighed deeply as tears flooded his eyes.

Someone in a uniform entered the pub, went up to the bar, asked the landlord something, drank a rakia, looked round at the people and left.

Stoyan took out a scrap of paper, pushed his cap down over his eyes and hunched his body down as close to the table as possible to scrutinize the note.

Old Nick noticed this, looked from his son to the policeman but suppressed his dark thoughts.

Warmly, naively, he pressed on.

"Don't be angry, son, but we've heard some bad things, we were ashamed, son..."

Stoyan held his tongue and smiled, but his smile was mirthless.

"One time the police came to the village, looking for you. They turned the house upside down. They were talking about some break in. Something about a safe being blown open."

"A lot of hot air," said Stoyan and straightened up.

That's how it was, what was spread around, son."

"That's not how it was, Dad!" Stoyan spoke bitterly. "I'm fighting for justice. This rotten world has to die. One person to have everything, live like a king, and another to die for a crust of bread. Where's the justice?"

The old man blinked rapidly at his son and didn't understand a word.

"OK, OK son. Justice is in people. If it's inside you, it's in the whole world. If it's not inside you, it's nowhere."

Stoyan shifted his bulk in the chair, bent over and spat on the floor.

"E-ey, what's done is done. Is it down to us to put the world to rights? We met, we saw each other, come on, let's leave off your justice and injustice, let's just you and me go back to the village. To cheer up your mum. Come home to put your shoulder to the wheel. I've grown old already..."

Stoyan pushed his hands into his pockets and puffed himself up in his faded tight clothes.

"It will, Dad, it will happen, but just now I can't."

"Come just for a day or two, come on son. Just to cheer up your Mum. Just to see your home."

"I can't Dad. It's out of the question. I've come here for a rush job. I'm working in a factory there...Kiustendil region. The boss sent me to the fair to buy a horse. I've bought one and now I have to take it back."

"E-ey, son, you've hardened your heart against us. It's good that you called out to me. Otherwise I wouldn't have recognised you," The old man sighed bitterly. "You don't want to come. I have to go before it gets too late. The weather's bad. And then I've got money on me. I sold the animals so I wouldn't have to feed them over the winter. Old Nick paid the bill, fastened his pouch, stood up and pulled on his shepherd's cloak. "OK, son, you don't want me to take you home." He spoke as if to himself and his eyes filled up once again. He offered his hand to his son.

"Goodbye, son. I'm sorry. God look after you!"

Stoyan stood up.

"No Dad. I'll see you off a little way. And I'm choked too, but that's how things are for me. I can't come now. I'll see what I can do later."

The two of them left the pub.

Thick impenetrable fog filled the streets. It was drizzling. The ground was muddy.

On the way Stoyan opened up. He'd been working. He'd got some money in the bank, when it got to be a tidy sum, he'd come home. It was just that they were hunting him because he'd fought against injustice, because he'd stood up for the poor.

The old man trudged, hunched up, listened in quiet sympathy, and from time to time tapped his chest where he'd wrapped up his money in his under clothes.

The cold damp got everywhere and Stoyan walked bent over, with his hands in his trouser pockets, because he didn't have an overcoat. His shoes were muddy, torn and let in water.

They left the town, set out on the muddy road and walked a long way.

At one point Old Nick stopped.

"You go back, son, don't tramp in this mud. I'll make my way across the fields from here – a short cut. The fog's lifting, I'm not afraid."

"I'll come a little way too and then I'll turn back. It's early."

The old man and Stoyan set off across the fields. They walked without talking over the wet grass, jumped the puddles and hurried on. When they got to the small fir forest, they took a narrow carter's path through it.

Stoyan stopped.

"This is it. I'll go back now."

The father opened his cloak and put out his hand to bid farewell.

Suddenly he felt his son's strong iron hands squeezing his windpipe, and pulling him down to the ground.

A red mist passed across his eyes. His breath stopped. Something heavy pumped at his chest, he wanted to shout but he couldn't. And then he felt the warmth wrapped around his neck disappear. The cold stabbed at his body, he opened his eyes and realised he was lying in the mud. It was dark. Black impenetrable night had swallowed everything.

The old man rubbed his eyes, wanted to stand up but couldn't. A frightful thought passed through his head. He felt his chest. His vest was undone and the money had gone.

"If only it's a dream, only it's a dream!" he thought, trying to gather his strength to get up, lifted his head and as he levered himself on his hands, he sat up. He felt some terrible

weight in his chest. He could hardly breathe. The cold damp revived him. He remembered everything. And he understood everything

“Better if he’d killed me. And now how am I going to carry on!”

Old Nick covered his face with his hands and wept bitter miserable tears.

Roast Pumpkin

By Elin Pelin

Translation©Christopher Buxton 2013

Once when Christy Goodheart, the District Council archivist, brought a document to his boss’s house for him to sign, he found the Chief Executive with his wife and children tucking into a whole roast pumpkin, fresh from the oven.

When the Chief executive had signed the document, he cut a small piece of pumpkin and kindly offered it to his archivist.

“Go ahead, Mr Christy, just you try this excellent pumpkin. It’s only a little burnt, but never mind. You’ll excuse us.”

“Oh thank you, thank you, Mr Chief Executive” the embarrassed archivist replied, “I, how can I put it...I don’t like pumpkins.”

“How can that be? You’re from a village, good Heavens, how can you not like pumpkin?”

Angel really didn’t like being reminded of his village origins. He blushed deep red from shame.

“Yes but...you know my stomach, Mr Chief Executive, it’s no longer used to such stuff,” he replied as he shook his head and frowned.

He could not keep his eyes off the sugar coated pumpkin slice with its seductively browned crispy skin and his throat filled with saliva. He didn’t dare swallow, terrified that they’d sense his weakness.

“Come on, help yourself, don’t be shy, man!” his boss urged him kindly, “It’s been so many years since I put pumpkin in my mouth, and even so my stomach can take it.”

“I can’t, Mr Chief Executive, it unsettles my stomach, I can’t taste it even!” Angel replied, thinking to himself: *look what a bumpkin I’m turning out to be, I should have accepted it!*

And so as not to be tortured a moment longer, he bowed, humbly bid goodbye and left. Only when he was out on the street, he felt free to swallow his saliva and again took himself to task.

“I’m a bumpkin, a bumpkin and there’s an end to it! If they chase you – run, if they give you something – take it, but where was your head, man!

And Christy stabbed his head with a disapproving finger. The tasty slice of pumpkin swam again before his eyes – beautiful, hot, sweet and over it all there wafted such an exquisite steam.

“Point of fact, if there’s something I love more than anything else in the world, it’s roast pumpkin,” he began to consider this as he walked down the street with head down. “I eat it like a pig! But what a bloody stupid name! Pumpkin! It sounds so cretinous, damn it. Stupid, country-bumpkin thing! They’ll say, this bloke, this bloke eats pumpkin – get rid

of him – a man with no culture, simpleton, in a word a pig. Sometime I'll go to the village, I'll just eat pumpkins! Far away from folk!

And his imagination began to set in front of him only pumpkins, sweet, lovely and savory.

From that day on, Christy became unsettled and edgy. The image of roast pumpkin began to haunt him.

Sitting at his office desk,, the thought gnawed at him. If he wrote something, he wrote till he was exhausted. But still it seemed to him that the pen as it scraped on the page, whispered pumpkin, pumpkin...

If he quarreled with his office colleagues, he'd straightaway call them roast pumpkins or "Why are you blushing like a roast pumpkin" or "Just look at yourself please, what a drunkard – there's steam coming off your cheeks like a roast pumpkin!"

At night while he slept the image of a pumpkin tormented him. He dreamt of a field, but what a field! Long and wide, you couldn't see where it finished. And those there pumpkins were rolled out over it and over each one there wafted such a sweet steam.! Christy wandered over the field, looked at the pumpkins and wanted to pick them up, but when he bent down, the pumpkin disappeared. He was walking over the field again. Field, but it wasn't a field, but some kind of office, like an enormous office! There somewhere an enormous pumpkin appeared and began to roll towards him and it was growing bigger and bigger, bigger than a house, a church, a mountain, bigger still and it began rolling stronger and quicker towards him. Christy shook with fright and his legs grew shorter and shorter. The monster pumpkin reached him and flumped on him.

The archivist shook and woke, swimming in sweat.

This dream tormented him every night.

One evening the Council clerks had a party.

They cooked a stew at Cal's pub and they got together to celebrate. They'd made the stew chili-hot so they would drink more wine. The archivist was of course invited.

Wine, speeches, songs! Love songs if you want, patriotic songs. Afterwards they raised their glasses. They drank the health of the chief Executive, provided he stayed in post of course, they drank to the beautiful women in the town, the greatness of Bulgaria, the Tsar, the Bulgarian nation, the fleas in the office etc. etc.

At last Mr Christy got up on a chair, cleared his throat and lifted his glass in high spirits.

"Good sirs, honoured folk here assembled, colleagues, my good comrades!"

But in the midst of this torrent of words that horrible roast pumpkin rolled unceremoniously into his thoughts, that same pumpkin that continually pursued him and in his head churned up the archive of ideas, gathered over forty years of service.

Christy tried to continue. He gestured strongly with his arm, and as he reached up to the low ceiling, he held his ceremonious pose a few minutes, casting his eyes excitedly over his colleagues.

"With my feet well set, so to speak...in part....more or less..."

But the pumpkin again rolled into his thought stream. Christy felt quite helpless. He let his arm drop. He turned to his colleagues and spoke in a mild, sensitive and gentle voice, far removed from any orator's pathos.

"Do you know what gentlemen, let's just once roast a pumpkin! Nice and friendly like. It doesn't cost God knows what. And we'll still enjoy ourselves."

There followed a short period of silence. Then everyone shouted Hurrah and Cal's pub erupted in applause.

“Motion passed! Motion passed.”

“This very evening!” a voice shouted out.

“Mo-otion pa-a-assed!”

And inside five minutes, they collected signatures, collected the requisite sum, bought a pumpkin and sent it to the kitchen. Christy sank into happy thoughts.

And when after an hour the pumpkin was roasted, he demanded to fetch it himself and left.

But...

Just as he was returning in the dark with the tray over which wafted the aroma of roasted pumpkin, who should he meet but the Chief Executive.

“A-ah My Christy,” he cried. “Well it’s you who’ve roasted the pumpkin...Very gratifying, It’s very gratifying. I’m sure your stomach’s now fully recovered!”

Christy swallowed his tongue and couldn’t utter a word.

When he brought the pumpkin to his colleagues, everyone of them noticed that he’d gone as yellow as a corpse.

“What’s up with you?” They asked in wonder.

“Not feeling very well!” Christy replied as he flopped onto a chair in the corner and stayed there downcast and dumb. Sunk into some dark musing, he didn’t even look at his colleagues as they ate the sweet pumpkin with joy and relish.

“Christy, won’t you take a slice, mate,” they urged him.

“I don’t feel like eating” he replied miserable and crushed as he tearfully insisted: “I’m sick. I’m really sick, lads! I’m going to to die.

<http://christopherbuxton.com/index.php/writing/translations/elin-pelin>