

## Jiří Klobouk / THE HOMECOMING

It was midday when I reached the house. The front door was ajar, but no one was moving around inside. A spider was letting himself down from the ceiling. When he saw me in the doorway, he stopped motionless. The empty whitewashed room seemed somehow distorted. In one corner on the floor lay a ball of wool. A pinkish thread, like a slender tongue, stretched to the cat's mouth. The poor creature had choked on it. There was no one to welcome me home.

I took a short rest and woke with my legs astride and my head hanging back loosely between my shoulders. The spider let himself down a little further. He appeared bigger now, his back was adorned with a black cross. But I couldn't delay too long. There was work to be done. I lost count of how many times I went into the kitchen that day. The only running water was in the stream, and that gave off a foul smell. When I was a child, it had teemed with trout that slithered fearlessly through my chubby fingers. I found a piece of rag and ran to moisten it. Every time I returned, the spider set himself rocking ominously.

They were piled on top of one another, all filthy and covered with blood. Not one of them had survived. Father, the biggest and strongest of them, had some unuttered word frozen on his lips. I tore open his shirt and put my ear to his chest, but his heart had stopped for good. Mother was the cleanest. There was some blood on her forehead and around her nose, and there were little balls of spider's bristles behind her fingernails. They had tried to defend themselves, but none of them had succeeded in killing the intruder.

Around the kitchen table were the usual number of chairs. The seventh, on which I had always sat, lay on its back by the tiled stove. The crockery had slipped off the shelf and smashed on the floor.

When they were all washed and clean, I lit a candle for the dead. Then I fished a small bottle out of my pocket and, unwrapping the paper round it, I placed it on the alcove windowsill. It was filled to the stopper with strong poison. The warm wax trickled into the palm of my hand, like a tear held back for too long.

The worst part of it still remained to be done. I had to find some boards and nails and dig a common grave for them in the orchard. By now the spider was close to the floor. When he saw me, he pawed in the air a couple of times with his hairy legs. It looked as though he was being strangled by his own thread, and was begging for help.

I needed the longest boards for Father. He was over six feet tall and, standing in the kitchen, he could support the ceiling in the palms of his hands. I'd always been convinced he was strong enough to lift it off. Both my brother and sister were smaller, like Mother. Last of all, I got the boards ready for my wife. I washed her and she lay on my knees, small and diminutive, even more translucent than when we had first met.

Our house stood on a slight slope in a large orchard. Spring, it seemed, was still far, far away. The branches of the trees bore no blossom, although it was long overdue. I laid the boards out under the old apple-tree and stared up at the sky. Even more than a bottomless pit, it was enticing me to leap into eternity.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon. I couldn't afford to take another rest. For several days and nights my mouth had been parched with thirst and I hadn't eaten a thing. Everywhere the water was foul, the food was decomposing. My strength was rapidly failing, but I was still strong enough to dig a grave and bury my family. I chose the prettiest spot in the orchard, where the washing used to flap between the trees. The spade slipped easily into the soft, springy soil.

When I returned to the livingroom, it was already half-dark and the spider was no longer hanging from the ceiling. In the murky corner he had the cat in his embrace and now the dead animal seemed smaller than the spider. No doubt the cat's body had shrunk as the spider sucked its blood.

First I carried my son out into the orchard. He was as light as a feather and I hugged him as close as I could. His arms, which had so often clasped me round my neck, dangled helplessly above the ground. Gently I laid him in the empty box that smelt so sweetly of pine-wood. It didn't even cross my mind that I could no longer cause him any pain. I left Mother till last. She had always been smiling and even now there was a trace of a smile on her lips. I stumbled out with her and straightened her arms alongside her body, but when I knelt beside her no tears came to my eyes.

I didn't have much strength left to get back to the house. Crawling on all fours, I reached the porch and, with one final effort, stood up. The door was ajar as it had been at midday, and seemed to welcome me. It was too dark inside now to see the cat, but the wild eyes of the intruder glittered in the murk. I decided to act with all the determination I could muster.

"Get out," I said. "Go back where you came from."

The spider didn't move. I went into the kitchen and slammed the door behind me. In the livingroom I had retained a certain amount of dignity, but out in the kitchen I felt I had to go through with it as quickly as possible. I gulped down the contents of the bottle and made myself comfortable in the chair. My arms were trembling from my shoulders to my finger-tips. The candle had already burned down. In the orchard the moon was dancing on tip-toe with the breeze.

The feeling that I wasn't alone in the kitchen awoke me. I raised my head from the table-top, which still smelled strongly of Mother's cooking. The intruder was moving around me silently, hardly breathing. When the spider stopped circling, he blocked my view out of the window. The moon and the breeze had come to the end of their dance. First he fingered me gently, with his hairs lying parallel to one another, as if we were friends. But as soon as he realized that my body was leaning towards him and that I didn't intend to resist, he sank his talons into me mercilessly. Slowly he dragged me across the table-top until I slipped into his embrace. It was all I could do to prevent myself from crying out with the pain. He never suspected the trap I had set for him. He smacked his lips and whinnied, making it quite clear that to him the mixture of blood and poison was a delicacy that he had never tasted before.

When day broke, I was still alive. The fragrance of the orchard was overpowering. At long last the trees had blossomed, more magnificently than ever before. I was lying under the table and when I raised my head, I could see my shoes not far away. Somehow I felt small, as if only a quarter of me was left, in spite of the fact that I had grown as tall as Dad. The dead murderer was beyond my reach. Swarms of flies were buzzing happily as they squeezed their way through the ball of spiky bristles. All sense of fear had left them.

Note: Translated from the Czech by Stuart R. Amor.