

THE LOCKMASTER

by Christoph Ransmayr

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Christoph Ransmayr returns with a short tale about killing.

A longboat plunges down the raging rapids and over the White River's dreaded cascades. Five people drown. The man who tends the sluice gates, known respectfully in the riverside villages as the 'lockmaster', lord of life and death, ought to have prevented this disaster. When the lockmaster subsequently disappears, his son begins to suspect that it wasn't an accident.

Has this irascible man, so obsessed by the past, turned to murder? The son's quest for the truth takes him back to long-forgotten days and to his beloved sister. Like his father, he is familiar with the incredible forces of water through his work as a hydraulic engineer on the planet's great rivers, the focal points of the new water wars. His search takes him across a European continent that has disintegrated into a mosaic of megalomaniac small states.

Christoph Ransmayr has written a consummate, gripping tale about a world on the brink of breakdown, a tale of guilt and forgiveness.

Christoph Ransmayr, born in Austria in 1954, studied philosophy and ethnology in Vienna. Alongside popular and internationally acclaimed novels such as *Die letzte Welt*, *Cox oder Der Lauf der Zeit* and *Atlas eines ängstlichen Mannes* (Atlas of an Anxious Man) he has published ten works of prose in which he experiments with narrative form, including *Damen und Herren unter Wasser*, *Geständnisse eines Touristen* and *Der Wolfsjäger*. The edited volume *Bericht am Feuer* is dedicated to his work.

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English sample translation by Simon Pare

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The Great Falls

My father killed five people. Like most murderers who use nothing but keyboards, levers or switches to elevate themselves for one unrestrained instant to the status of rulers over life and death, he touched not a single one of his victims or so much as look them in the eye, instead activating a series of polished winding handles to flood a channel used by boats plying their way up and down the river.

The surge of water released by the open sluice gates transformed this narrow channel built of larch beams into a raging flood. Instead of gliding gently through it from the upper to the lower reaches of the White River, a languid longboat with twelve people on board suddenly gathered speed and shot downstream between moss-covered cliffs. Then, where the passage rejoined the old riverbed, the longboat flipped over in the torrent as if it had been struck by a giant fist, and hurtled bottom-up through the seething whirlpools and currents.

The roar of the Great Falls, a cascade over 120 feet high which boats were able to bypass via a system of canals my father had regulated — no, ruled over — for almost thirty years, drowned out the horrified yells of the witnesses gathered on the craggy banks as well as the screams and cries for help of the capsized and drowning passengers. All sound not produced by the eddies or the spray or the echo of the white water pounding against the rocks was swallowed by the White River and its falls, a centuries-old source of dread for rafters and watermen.

It was a warm and slightly cloudy early summer's day, a Friday in May on which, according to a *Calendar of the Martyrs* observed both then and now, many

villages and towns on the banks of the almost 2,000-mile-long river celebrated the feast of St Nepomuk — the patron saint of rafters, bridge-builders and lockkeepers, but above all the keeper of secrets. According to one legend stamped in hand-sized gilded letters into a rock beside the Great Falls, Nepomuk, the bishop and imperial confessor of Prague, had refused to divulge a crime an emperor had avowed to him, and had as a result been tortured and thrown into the swollen Vltava with a grindstone around his neck.

Even though most ferry connections were already discontinued and many bridges that had once spanned the White River on its way to the Black Sea had been destroyed by the time of his feast, the spirit of the bridge protector seemed to hover over dynamited and flooded pillars and shattered steel arches, over remains that were rust-eaten or crumbling under blankets of moss, smothered with deep-green thickets in the summer months, while in winter they loomed cold and black from the clouds of spray like the ghosts of a world that had sunk into infamy.

Over forty languages were spoken along the White River, but the number of bridges that had once linked its banks dwindled with every passing year, a clear and dramatic sign of an age of division and borders. The loss of the bridges had been accompanied by the disappearance of most alliances and ties between states on the European continent, which had splintered into a plethora of micro-states, tiny principalities, counties and tribal territories, each boasting its own flag and coat of arms. The White River flowed as calmly and relentlessly as ever towards a future in which only the occasional rotten barge or cable ferry ran between those gurgling, frothing eddies that licked the rubble protruding from its waters.

Five dead. Whether my father had actually intended to cause this many or a similarly alarming number of casualties, or was perhaps even willing to countenance the death of all twelve of the longboat's passengers, will presumably remain a mystery unless a confession from him or some other scrap of evidence turns up nailed to the sluice gate or among the driftwood and jetsam along the gravel banks to confirm or refute my suspicions. All questions to him echo away into the void. On the first anniversary of his deed, as if after precisely one year's penance he had resolved to atone, he glided along the upper reaches of the White River past the horrified eyes of a fly fisherman, who shouted a warning as the rock-salt-laden barge, similar to the

longboat in which my father's victims had capsized, headed for the veils of spray of the Great Falls.

He didn't so much as glance at the frantically gesticulating fly fisherman and, according to the man's statement, did not make a single stroke with his oars to avert the inevitable. And with his cargo he plunged into the thundering depths.

Smashed planks from his barge were found on three different sandbanks and gravel shoals, but despite the deployment of frogmen, who had only ever retrieved corpses along this stretch of the river, his corpse was not. And now too much time has passed to find in the deep or hidden under an overgrown patch of riverbank a single shard of bone that might be traced back to the missing man.

The dissolved rock salt he was transporting must, I imagine, have also killed entire shoals of freshwater fish — rainbow trout, pike and char which, in their panic to escape the gill-corroding salt dissolved in the swirling currents, beat their fins so frenetically that they squandered their energy in a demonstration of how my father's victims must have drowned.

Reminiscent of a Venetian gondola in shape, the nearly 30-foot-long larchwood barge in which my father vanished silently into the Great Falls like a boatman paralysed by guilt, was drawn from the stocks of the open-air museum dedicated to river navigation that he had run for decades with an unappeasable hatred of all things modern. After all, if one thing could be said with any certainty about my father, an enthusiastic and sometimes kindly man whose days-long silences were punctuated by frequent fits of rage, it was that he was a man of the past, not only as the administrator of an extensive museum complex but also to the very core of his being.

At the latest after he became curator of the Great Falls Museum with his appointment as lockmaster in Bandon county, our home district, the current of his life seemed to have changed direction and, rather than flowing into a perilous future, seemed to run backwards out of the fog of this future into a yesteryear that seemed entirely familiar, predictable and amenable.

Centuries earlier, in times that lived on only in my father's mind, *lockmaster* had been an honorific job title granted to the lockkeepers who had diverted the White River around the Great Falls into boat channels built along the cliffs like watery

balconies. These had allowed the salt skippers to skirt the Great Falls in their longboats via a series of stepped canals.

A lockmaster's job was to let just the right amount of water into these passages by opening and closing a system of sluice gates so that even heavily laden salt punts could be carried past the roaring falls and into the lower reaches of the White River on a shallow surge whose strength lessened by the yard. This was so that by the end of the deviation, the surge would be sapped by the staggered opening of drain valves and a barge, slowed only by wet larchwood boards, would glide gently back out onto the river.

A master, a lockmaster, was someone who had such a grasp of the sequential opening and closing of the sluice gates, the valves, flooding and discharge that the boatmen in their descending punts floated around the Great Falls as if in a cradle or the basket of a hot-air balloon. But woe betide him if he made even a single mistake during this descent! A longboat could shoot downstream like a harpoon before capsizing and sinking in the whitewater at the bottom. The sailors who had drowned in the centuries of transporting salt had been commemorated on plaques screwed into a bare rockface by the Great Falls or in fancy, now moss-coated ornaments hammered into the stone as the legend of St Nepomuk's drowning had been.

But although the days of the lockmasters were long gone, the mouths of the salt mines in the Totengebirge mountain — which bounded the county's southern horizon with their towering, cloud-shrouded walls — nothing but overgrown or blocked-up portals, and the boat passages overhanging the river mere artefacts to be admired for a modest entry fee, even as curator, my father stubbornly insisted on being addressed as 'lockmaster'.

Shortly before the latest ethnic laws forced my mother Jana to leave him and return to her native Adriatic shores, she embroidered the chest pocket of one of his shirts, where he always kept the river-flow chart handy, with his title in silver thread: *Lockmaster*. I know now that Jana would probably have left my father even without the ethnic cleansing measures because she could no longer stand Bandon's all-pervading hatred for anything foreign, or my father's hatred for every aspect of contemporary life.

Lockmaster! To me and my sister Mira, who had overheard the sarcastic jibes and giggling about the curator's self-appointed title in Bandon, it seemed at the time

as if our mother had embroidered a mocking nickname on his chest, and he took it with him to his watery grave.

I first heard about the disaster on the feast of St Nepomuk during a videoconference with Mira that was interrupted by screen blackouts and the crackle of interference. At the time I was working in Brazil as a hydraulic engineer on various dams across the Rio Xingu, a tributary of the Amazon, and learnt about events in Bandon, usually with a few days' delay, from these conversations with my sister via an unstable internet connection that could be relied upon, more or less, only during the oppressively hot night-time hours.

During the months I spent there, the Kayapó, a forest people living on the banks of the Rio Xingu, were waging a desperate war with arrows, spears and axes against a dam that would drown their villages, hunting grounds and sacred sites, and thus their entire world. It was only when I visited the building lots scattered here and there in the tropical wilderness that it dawned on me that my work was contributing to this apocalypse. I had never heard of the Kayapó *indios* until, two weeks after my arrival, they destroyed the satellite receivers and glass-fibre cables of the electric company that was laying the groundwork for the impending deluge. From then on, the surveying team responsible for installing the penstocks, to which I had been assigned, only ever left the camp with a guard of Brazilian army pioneers, their fingers ready on the triggers.

Mira was disappointed, angry in fact, that even after the news of our father's disappearance I could not leave my Amazonian building site to be with her and help her to clear the lockmaster's house by the Great Falls. Our mother Jana had not once mentioned this house since her departure, neither in her electronic mail nor in her video conversations with Mira, and according to a message she only sent to my sister, she was now living on the Adriatic island of Cres with a *water warrior* who fought at monthly intervals as a mercenary on dammed sections of the river Jordan. She had no wish to accompany the final journey of a husband chained to the past, whom she had long loved in vain and eventually come to hate. Neither then nor now would she have known that this man was not just obsessed with the past; he was also a murderer.