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Sample translation

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It is the 27th of February and the year is 1954. The lakeside innkeeper is hosting the Firemen's Ball. It is ten o'clock at night and a jury is in the process of selecting the best costume. This sort of thing did not happen before, but since the refugees and various others cast up here by war started joining the locals at events like the Firemen's Ball, new traditions have joined the old. One of these is the prize for the best costume. At the foot of the stage where the Senkendorfer Brass Band has set up, a trestle table and beer-bench are positioned, and that is where the judges are perched. They are Brustmann, the painter; Schnapp, the barber and hawker; the daughter of Lassberg, the deceased painter and sculptor; and the innkeeper himself. Two of the jury volunteered; the innkeeper, as host, is obliged to fulfil his role as judge, and it is only Brustmann, the painter, who had to be coerced into judging, being a quiet-natured chap for whom being conspicuous is torture. He had not intended to participate at all in the loud carnival hustle and bustle, had only come over from the house next door to have his evening meal as usual in the ground floor eatery. And he had only ventured up to the first floor afterwards to take a quick look at the room and the boisterousness at large to confirm that the peace of his modest studio and the consistent demands of his companion, the easel, would indeed afford him considerably more joy than this over-the-top panting and stamping. Lassberg's loud, garish daughter, Fricka, however, had espied him – he had been a student of her father's at the capital's art academy way back at the start of the century – and, unladylike as any stable wench, in front of everyone, had held him in a headlock and dragged him to the bench. He sits there, not daring to leave for fear of attracting still

more attention. And so he sits, slumped, hardly looking in the carnival spirit – and comes over as particularly well disguised.

The ball attendees stand in three rows along the four walls of one of the two large rooms, the dance hall, now cleared of the ironing table, the extra beds and bedside tables that fill it the rest of the year, and they form an arena. One by one, each introduced by a flourish from the Senkendorfers, the masked figures step into the centre, showing themselves off, turning and twirling, to audience and judges. They each have a piece of paper torn out by the innkeeper from a pad belonging to one of the three waitresses and laid on the table along with stubs of pencils. The judges note down the title of each disguise as announced by the innkeeper once he has taken an interpretative look at the costume, along the lines of princess, huntsman, sheik, Red Riding-Hood, negro chieftain, poacher, Arab, vagabond, dairy maid, Jew, pedlar, noble lady, wild cat, pirate, Hitler and so on; alongside they mark the number of crosses for the score they think the mask deserves. At the end the crosses for each mask will be totted up, and whoever has the most will be the Winner of the Ball and may eat as many sausages, cakes and as much roast pork as he, or she, can, free of charge. Drinks too. So that the innkeeper does not have to shoulder the entire expense of the winnings alone, each contestant has paid one Mark to participate, and the collected booty is on display now on the jury's table on a silver plate.

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The dark times were not far in the past. Held against the whole history of mankind, they were in the thick of it yet. But far enough, it seemed, for shoots of human wit to sprout once again in the soul of a local fellow. They still spoke in muted voices, those Franzhubers and Huberfranzens, but talking they were.

For a few years they had been compelled to be silent. Only when the innkeeper had drawn the curtains tightly shut and there were no strangers left in the inn, when enough beer and several schnapps had further softened the heads and the desire to justify what had been had intensified to an even deeper desire – then, here and there, in those last years, too, a little rebelliousness was tangible, a defiance to counter the superimposed feeling of guilt that everyone was supposed to have, according to the occupying powers, but which no one could properly embrace, nor wanted to, no one who had remained in spite of everything unbowed and unswerving.

When conditions were right, and the right people sitting together, it was an easy exercise to go over the lost war in detail and, belatedly, to win it. And those forgotten by the Führer and his men back then when time was pressing and not everything could be achieved that should have been – all that was voiced on those discreet evenings and continued to busy the thoughts when heads had sobered up. The skin might feel tight-fitting, that democratic skin the people found themselves in from one day to the next, but underneath it seethed as much as ever.

Just as the innkeeper is about to count up the votes for each contestant on the back of a menu, a gust of wind tears it out of his hand along with the judges' notes and they whirl through the air and in amongst the spectators' legs. Loud mouth Steiff, over in the large dining-hall, which faces the lake and in the summer serves as a spacious two-bedded room with additional beds for children, had thrown open the window, commenting, 'My God, it stinks in here, not even a gypsy could stand it! Who was it this time?' And at that moment the wind rips through the room as unbridled as the firestorm must have been during the bombardment of the provincial capital, if the accounts of those who experienced it are correct; table cloths are swept off the tables along with wine glasses, half-full or half-empty, particularly the latter, lighter as they are than beer tankards, and plates cradling meat, still scarce, and dumplings topple off, and it tears off costumes, from those at least for whom scarves are part of what allows them not to be themselves for once. It tugs the big drum off the stage and the downy national hats from the heads of the musicians, which are no great shakes without the down, nor with it really, and it snaps the innkeeper's patience. He bellows, in an uncharacteristically loud voice, for he is a quiet man and usually mumbles to himself. Now, however, from the dancehall where he was counting up the scores, he yells at Steiff through in the dining-hall to kindly shut the window. Who does he imagine will pay for the damage wind can wreak if weather-facing windows are opened, as just happened. Is he out of his mind, or drunk, or has he lost the plot, and if so it is time that he, Steiff, packed his things and vanished. This does not go down well with Steiff. 'What,' he yells back, 'you'd send me out to the lake in this weather? Has the pedlar turned your brain to mush?'

By pedlar he means Schnapp who was a pedlar before turning hairdresser. And Steiff, who had come over the lake from Sankt Haupter on a homemade sledge powered by a multi-function outboard motor he had got from the Americans in exchange for a crateful of whitefish, was friends with Fichtner, the Sankt Hauptner

hairdresser to whom the inhabitants of Seedorf had also gone to have their hair done, until the arrival of Schnapp. But since Schnapp started providing the same service, Fichtner has found himself in severely straitened financial circumstances. Which is why Schnapp is the object of Steiff's unleashed fury.

Other people have now become aware of the shouting match and are talking persuasively to the incensed innkeeper: 'You can't do that. In this weather! Should anything happen to Steiff! And he's drunk to boot, you'd have him on your conscience.'

The innkeeper accepts this, gentle soul that he is, and allows Steiff, the unspent Nazi, to keep celebrating, once he has bolted the window shut.

The storm has since gathered so much strength that there is word of damage and the innkeeper clambers on to the band's stage to address the people still waiting for the prize ceremony: 'We've got to postpone the presentation. A tree down by the lake has been uprooted and felled over the road, and we have to shift it to let traffic through. Music, play up! No rusting of pleasure meantime.' And with that he steps down off the stage, calls over Valentin and Viktor, who have been in charge of serving beer, and together they fetch the large two-handled saw and two axes from the workshop, make their way to the lake and get stuck into the not un-risky task at hand. For another tree could be uprooted at any time or a thick branch break off and hurtle down to injure, if not kill, one, if not all, of the three.

On the property by the lake to the south beneath the house, the storm has uprooted the mighty mountain ash – a crying shame! – which for the last one hundred years has provided shade for bathers, protecting them from sunburn and dark skin, and now it lies lengthwise across the road. Soon after the snow has melted the innkeeper will have planted a new tree, but it will take at least thirty years before it even remotely provides the spread of shade afforded by the old one. However, in these thirty years, the bronzed body will have asserted itself in fashion, and the right to life of the mountain ash will lie in nostalgic aesthetics rather than its practical strengths.

With calm and powerful momentum, the innkeeper and Valentin draw the almost two-metre-long saw steadily through the two-hundred-year-old trunk, back and forth, and again back and forth, until the mighty tree lies in two. Then they begin

the procedure again, a road's width apart towards the crown of the tree, while Victor clears the broken-off branches from the road. A petroleum barn-lantern with a windshield provides adequate, if sparse, light. Scarcely fifteen minutes later the saw has gnawed its way a second time through the perfectly healthy wood. The trio now hauls the three-metre-long section of trunk to the roadside using the rope they brought and the road is passable once more. At the moment, however, nobody is about. The storm has grown to such a pitch that no one is venturing out in it now.

None of those celebrating carnival in the lakeside inn intend to either. Loud shouts can be heard through the blustering storm: 'Service! What's taking the beer so long, for God's sake!' And the innkeeper sends Valentin and Viktor back inside to keep the beer flowing.

He himself is in a state of great restlessness. He cannot recall any storm as violent. It is quite uncanny. He is not a fearful person, but the storm is of such dimensions that he is becoming anxious about the buildings' ability to remain intact. Mighty gusts blast over from Schlehenwinkel, between Klosterried and Zeiselberg, and tangle in the crown of the other giant mountain ash, now bending far across the road and ready to crash directly upon the house should its roots not hold. The most frightening thing of all is the absent, otherwise thunderous roar of the lake's waves breaking: the lake is frozen, all the way to the far shore, and so the storm chases unimpeded over the ice and it is as though it gains still more in speed and force than would be the case on open water. The turbulent, dry air rips holes in the racing river of cloud, through which the crescent moon shines for a few seconds, caught as distorted reflection in the black gleaming ice and in the innkeeper's worried gaze. Again and again, a crisp, abrupt crack cuts through the night, turning into a whining, howling whistle over the lake that passes through the ear to the very marrow: in the storm the ice is beginning to break up. When the first slabs have eased themselves free from the frozen-together surface, when they have pushed up beneath and onto one another and an ice-free area has formed, the hurricane will drive the ice ahead of it to form great icebergs on the shore. No landing stage, no boathouse, no bank defences will be a match for it. The innkeeper knows this. He saw it happen once, on Candlemas day, in 1926. And afterwards everything was levelled, everything, as far as the road, that had stood in the path of the ice.

Leaning far forward into the wind he is standing on the narrow bathing platform beside the boathouse, and he stares through narrow slits of eyes out onto the

dark smooth surface. Particled swathes of snow and ice-crystals are propelled across the lake, just above the iced surface, and claw bitingly and burningly at his face. He becomes aware of a scraping noise. Far out on the ice, hard wood is slamming against hard surface and transposes into a rhythmic hissing scrape: fchchch… fchchch… fch.fch.fch.fch… Fchchch…fchfchfch.. fch.fch.fch.fch. This combines with the high-pitched crack of breaking ice and finally tapers into a tender, almost inaudible tone of vivid harmony when the crack, and the crack's aftermath, finish in a drawn-out whistling on the far shore, becoming one with the howling of this storm's insatiable greed.

From out of the black night, in the racing moonlight, a small flat object tears by, gliding and hopping it dances over the ice, gradually gaining in contour the closer it comes: a boat has torn free from the far side of the lake, a light jolly boat, not brought ashore before the cold came, its buoy-chain chafed by expanding ice, and now, unleashed like the whirlwind that powers it, as though its creature, it is chased over the ice at a tremendous speed, which it could never achieve with that same wind on open water, not even with its sails unfurled. Overcome by the spectacle of nature, the innkeeper stares out at the wild hunt and feels neither fear nor anxiety, so exhilarated is he by the storm. His chest is ready to burst like the ice in the lake. Brimming with Weltschmerz and amour propre, filled with a sense of responsibility and an overwhelming sense of self: *Helmsman, leave your watch, helmsman, come to me*. 'Pure Wagner weather,' he thinks earnestly, and then the boat shoots past, a hair's breadth from the landing-stage, flies like an arrow to the shore, thumps its way over the embankment, making straight for the mountain ash, where it crashes, splintering. 'That was close,' the innkeeper thinks, 'terribly close, ye gods!' And he leaves the landing stage, sobered; it frightens him now.

He makes his way to the house. Uneasiness drives him on. His head thrown back, he walks the length of the side of the house exposed to the weather and examines the canopy. He cannot see any damage yet. But he is plagued by imaginings: he always looks on the dark side. If something can go wrong, not that it necessarily will, he is keen to be the first to see it coming.

Another squall blasts over the ice, scales the bank and slams into the wall like an enormous, invisible rubber ball, shoots upwards and presses its way beneath the canopy with almost volcanic force. The martens in the attic squeeze themselves fearfully into the insulation of building debris and barley chaff; their expression both

shy and aggressive, they stare wide-eyed at the beams that creak as never before above their heads, ready to defend to the death.

The innkeeper completes his round of the farmstead, picks up a few fallen boughs from the drive to the barn and, going through the old oak doors at the back, he once again enters the inn.

Translated by Rebecca K. Morrison