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When It's Time

Story

(Original German title: Wenn es soweit ist. Erzählung)

192 pages, Clothbound

Publication date: 12 October 1998

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Sample translation by Adrian West

The ninety year old man with the grey-flecked moustache and the trimmed eyebrows told of his younger brother Friedhelm, in the meantime grown eighty five years old, who served in the SS in the Second World War and even today is proud of having done so, that, as a five month old child, he had caught pneumonia with a high fever, the family doctor could not help him further and recommended that the parents, as a last resort, break the ice from the village stream with a hatchet, soak a blanket in the ice cold water, and wrap the child up in the wet blanket. Either the child will live or he'll die in any case! the doctor said. Maximilian's grandmother Elisabeth followed the doctor's orders in desperation, sank a big blanket in the ice-clogged village creek and wrapped the five month old child in the wrung-out, cold, damp blanket. A while later, she took him back out. She soon noted that the fever had dropped, the child had actually survived the grave and usually deadly pneumonia—there was still no penicillin in those days.

Decades later, the child saved by the ice cold water became a warrior, a fact of which he is still proud, in the Second World War—not a lowly soldier in the Wehrmacht, but an SS man. Immediately after the end of the Second World War, his father took a knife and scraped off the

lightning bolt buttons from his coat collar and the shining death's head with the two crossed bones on the peak of his cap in the photos his son had sent him from the war, in which he appears in his office in Nuremburg and on furlough in Carinthia, out of fear of the allies. In one of the photos, his SS-insignia is only half-covered by the naked arm of his daughter, who embraces him. He wasn't a war criminal, he always stresses: I did nothing, I was in an office in Nuremburg, I spent the whole war seated at a desk. In two other photos, in which the soldier, in a long cape, sits beneath a linden with a circle of friends, they forgot to rub out the crossed bones, the death's head, and the lightning bolt insignia. Maximilian found a photo of his parents' house from they had also scratched out the flag with the swastika that hung from the attic window. Maximilian's father always had this photo of his parents' house with the swastika flag with him, with a little prayer book that his mother Elisabeth had given him during the war. While the others played cards, I read in the prayer book. Without the Lord God, I should not have survived the war. Sometimes it was a matter of millimeters, and I would have been done for, the ninety year old man with the trimmed eyebrows recollected.

His brother Friedhelm goes to Pulsnitz every year for All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day with his black American car, decades old, but looking ever fresh and polished to a glow, to pray at the graves of his parents, now three decades dead, and to take part in the blessing of the tombs. The two brothers go, after sinking a pheasant's feather in the bucket that sits below the blazing flames of hell, full of the bone stock rendered up in a bone furnace from the bones of the dead in the town built in the form of a cross, spread the black, viscous mass, smelling of rot, around their eyes, and after having fed themselves on the devil's ears, with their brother-in-law Klaus, of the same age, as on every All Saints' Day after the blessing of the tombs, when the priest, flanked by his acolytes, with a copper aspersorium, has gone from tomb to tomb and with the damp, grey

bristled twig has sprinkled holy water on the yellow and white All Saints' Day flowers and the burning wax candles, and taken the vertical beam of the town built in the form of a cross to the village fountain, where, decades ago, as children, sons, and farmhands, day after day, night and morning, standing between the heads of the horses, they held onto the bridles while the restless horses sank their snouts in the full water trough and, snorting and slurping, sucked water into their mouths. The young farmhand, standing between the horses' heads, would breathe in the two animals' foul smelling breath. The horses would shake their heads, so that their slaver, trailing in long threads from their black snouts, mixed with the fresh, cool spring water, landed on the child's face like cobwebs, until the sweating and reeking horses, guided by the boys holding the bridles, turned heavily around and stomped back to the stalls in the knee-high snow.

The three old men, who survived two world wars and are ready for a third — Get ready, you'll see, it's already getting started. Look at Yugoslavia over there. One world war already sparked off there—they go, after the blessing of the tombs, their eyelids blackened with stock from the bones of their dead neighbors, and the hairy rinds of the devil's ears in their mouths— *In those days, when I was twenty, I was so hungry, I would gladly have eaten the Devil's ears*—to the Kirchheimer estate, take off their coats in the kitchen, hang their hats on the red porcelain knob of the coat rack, seat themselves at the kitchen table and, within a few minutes—as every year on All Saints' Day, after the blessing of the tombs, for decades—begin to talk about the war, while the two mentally ill women, mother and daughter, start the preparations for lunch. Under the Herrgottswinkel next to a burning wax candle, a memorial to the family dead, stand four freshly plucked chrysanthemums, yellow and bushy, in a jar, blessed with holy water and incense by the pastor and his acolytes. One of the three old men at the table begins leafing through the splayed out day's paper and commenting on his reading.

THE FIRST OLD MAN: *Lord, have mercy upon us! Christ, have mercy upon us! Lord, have mercy upon us! Jesus, hear us! Jesus, heed our prayers!* Take a look at our parliament, a bunch of nobodies and do-nothings, sitting around, cashing checks, only once in a while lifting a hand.

THE SECOND OLD MAN: *God, our Father in Heaven, have mercy upon us! Son of God, savior of the world, have mercy upon us! Blessed Holy Ghost, have mercy upon us!* That parliament should be eradicated. The best thing would be a robust dictatorship, not a weak one, we need a healthy dictatorship.

THE THID OLD MAN: *O God, ever disposed to mercy and to forgiveness, accept our most humble prayer, that your noble benevolence may redeem us and all of your servants bound by the chain of sin!* The Turks and the Yugos should be cleared out. We should close off the borders so that rabble with their twisty moustaches can no longer get in. We used to have the Italians, now we have the Russian and Rumanian mafia here too.

THE SECOND OLD MAN: *Eternal God, all-powerful, who rules over the living and the dead, showing mercy to all who, by their faith and their good works, you recognize to be your servants, we humbly beg you, on behalf of those still dwelling in the world in mortal flesh and those who, freed from this life, have been already received into the other world, that, through the intercession of the saints, they receive your benevolent forgiveness for all their sins.* We have work enough here. Austria can feed herself. If the citizens won't take the jobs they are offered, let them go out in the streets and beg, maybe some foreigner will walk by passing out alms for the needy. There are plenty of citizens in need.

THE THIRD OLD MAN: *Most merciful Christ, my soul's sweet savior, who has loved me throughout eternity, who from love became flesh and spilled thy precious blood, open for me the*

gates of Heaven. The thirties were hard. We had high unemployment. When Hitler came, everyone had a job, and they opened back up the factory on the other bank of the Drava.

THE THIRD OLD MAN: *On the way of the cross, which my savior and redeemer paved with his bloody footsteps, I shall hasten to my Fatherland, Heaven.* Who gave Adam the Third the new roof for his hay barn? Hitler! No one but Hitler!

THE FIRST OLD MAN: *O most holy Jesus, your lifeless body, which you gave over to blows and humiliation, could only find worthy repose in your pure mother's lap. Have I not often asked you, with your exalted body, to come into my heart, full of sin and impurity? O, make a new heart in me, that I may be worthy to receive your body in the blessed sacrament at the altar.* Nowadays the mailman delivers the money to the vagrants and the do-nothings at their homes, so they can keep lying back on the couch counting the bills. The layabouts have lost the will to find a job.

THE SECOND OLD MAN: *O Jesus, who will give water to my head and torrents of tears to my eyes, so that, day and night, I may cry away my sins? I pray thee that through thy bitter, bloody tears, thou concedest me the grace of penitence and my heart so repents, that abundant tears may flow from my eyes, and throughout my life I may cry away your suffering and even more so, my sinfulness, which caused it.* What was it like in our day? Seven kilometers I had to walk to school, in summer and in winter. After school, I was ten or twelve years old, I herded the sheep out in the fields for the farmers, and picked blackberries by the kilo along the way. I sold the blackberries, that was my pocket money. At fifteen I had to work with the lumberjacks in the forest from four in the morning on.

THE THIRD OLD MAN: *O, with what great pain was the skin ripped off with the garments, which dried in the wounds and on the blood. The garments were torn from Jesus, that he would die poor and naked. How serenely would I die as well, if stripping off man's clothes I had stripped*

away as well his wicked inclinations. How nice it used to be before, at the autumn fair in Kindelbrücken, where we bought wool coats, Goiserer shoes, leather gaiters, and wide suspenders. We brought the children home cream horns and Turkish honey. And now? Every three or four stalls there's a nigger selling plastic tractors and black dolls, pistols and gingerbread hearts.

THE SECOND OLD MAN: *Empty me from myself and fill me with your endless good. Live in me, O crucified Jesus, and remain in me, so that I may boast that the world no longer possesses me.* They should run the profiteers out on a rail. Under Hitler there was no such thing. Butter and bread, the basics, cost the same everywhere.

THE FIRST OLD MAN: *O worthy Jesus, who will make it that I too may die from love for you! Let me at least be dead to the world!* It's the filthy Jews' fault. Nowadays the Jews run the world from America.

THE SECOND OLD MAN: *Thou art the head, we the members, through the wonderful appointment and worthy acceptance of this holy mystery. You have led us into glory, wherein we, your members, must follow you.* My friend, Hitler knew what to do with lawbreakers! For the hard criminals, we should bring back the death penalty. The electric chair's the only thing that will sort them out properly.

THE THIRD OLD MAN: *Burn, O Lord, our kidneys and our heart with the fire of the Holy Spirit, that we may serve you with chaste body and please you with pure heart.* A shot in the ass would do the trick too.

THE FIRST OLD MAN: *O God, from whom proceed holy judgments and good works, give your servants that serenity, that the world cannot give, so that our hearts may live out your commandments and, free from fear of the enemy, live on tranquilly under your protection.* Just imagine, in the war we had a pastor who told us to kill as many enemies as possible. A pastor said

that! One of my comrades told the priest he was a Christian and was sworn to keep the Ten Commandments. Do you know what the fifth commandment is? my comrade asked the priest. Thou shalt not kill! Since that time, I don't have any respect for pantywaists. In the end, the comrade took a bullet in the head. They shot out both his eyes. In the military hospital he cried out: I want to see my family again!

THE SECOND OLD MAN: *Veronica offers to Jesus, as devotion and mercy, the veil over her head as a kerchief, so that he may dry his death-pale face, covered in spit and blood, and he leaves impressed in the veil the image of his most holy countenance. A small service, and a very great reward.* The murderers and hardened criminals should be lined up along a wall and shot. That will teach them.

THE THIRD OLD MAN: *Would that I could be a friend to Christ, though I am an enemy of the cross! O dear beloved cross, I accept you with joy from the hand of God. Far be it from me, hereforth to esteem myself happy in whatever lies outside the cross. Through this I want the world to be crucified, that I, Jesus, may be yours.* Why should the state put up with this riffraff for decades? Who pays for them? Us with our taxes, and no one else.

THE FIRST OLD MAN: *Be constant in good and do not stray from the cross. Who perseveres to the end, shall be rewarded.* We need a little Hitler to bring back peace and quiet to the country. Someone needs to crack down.

THE THIRD OLD MAN: *O Jesus, merciful lamb! I must repent of my weakness and impatience. I curse them. Take up my flesh and crucify it with your zeal. Cut me, burn me, torment me in this life, if you will, only spare me for eternity.* Hitler wasn't so bad, it's the little Hitlers that messed everything up, that's why we lost the war.

THE FIRST OLD MAN: *Therefore I renounce the devil, the world, and the flesh and detest all infernal temptations, all the vanities of the world and sinful lusts, for now and for ever.* If Hitler hadn't gone after the Jews, we would have won the war, we would have pushed on through Stalingrad. There was no relying on Mussolini.

THE THIRD OLD MAN: *With your holy grace, I promise you henceforth to keep free from sin, not from fear of Hell, not from the promise of eternal glory, but from love for thee, because thou art my God, of infinite love worthy.* You can still see it today. The farm people get less and less from the Italians for their meat and wood. The Italian is almost like another Jew.

THE SECOND OLD MAN: *O Jesus, he is not worthy of you who will not take up his cross and follow you. I will help you bear your cross. I will be your friend and companion in your via crucis. I will step in your bloody footprints and follow you.* Hitler should have exterminated twice as many Jews.

THE FIRST OLD MAN: *Whoever, in this life, had no place to rest his head has not a grave of his own in this world, because he was not of this world. You, who cling to this world, eschew it, so that you do not meet your end with it.* Take a look at all the money the chancellor has shipped off to Israel. Now the state has to care for the Jewish cemetery too.

THE SECOND OLD MAN: *Ay, sinless Jesus, I have sinned. Yet you accept the judgment of death so that I may live. How am I to live, then, but for you alone? So long as I try to please men, I cannot be your servant. Then I will displease men and the world, so that I may please you alone, O Jesus.* They closed down Mauthausen much too early.

Even before the water drops on their coats had dried into the green loden and the seeped-in smell of the smoking grave candles, the aroma of the yellow and white chrysanthemums on their clothes

and the rotting smell of the bone stock around their eyes with the aroma of the kitchen, growing stronger, mixed with the scent of frying omelets and chopped onions—as every year on All Saints’ Day after the blessing of the tombs—the body of a soldier, cut in half, was again picked up under the armpits by his comrades after an air raid among the howls of others and placed on the peak of a waste heap, where it remained more than an hour, in the middle of the laughter, praying, and singing of his comrades, before it tipped forward and his face, blood-smearred and streaked with soot, already blue with rigor mortis, landed in the mass of rotting food scraps. Beside the bisected corpse, lying with his face in the waste heap—as had been done for decades on All Saints’ Day, after the blessing of the tombs—a soldier once more had his head shaved for having stolen from his comrades, was stripped naked, and tied to a stake for twelve hours in the pouring rain near the waste heap, where the soldier lay with his body ripped in half. Around his neck hung a placard that read: I stole from my comrades! The mentally ill daughter of the ninety year old man who licking a red and hairy devil’s ear, with trimmed eyebrows and eyes surrounded by black bone stock, laid out bloody pork chop after pork chop, thawed out the night before All Saints’ Day, on a cutting board and beat them with a wood mallet, the striking face of which was covered in a serrated iron plate. The mute, mentally ill wife of the ninety year old man—who had lost three brothers, cut down in the full flower of youth, in the Second World War—was slicing thin strips of frittata as long as plates on a cutting board, and heard in the background, intermitted by the blows of her daughter’s mallet against the pork chops—as every year on All Saints’ Day, after the blessing of the tombs—out of the mouth with the grey moustache, in a familiar voice, that already during the buildup to the war—Just try and imagine it!—a Panzer rolled over a hole in the ground where a man was huddling, the Panzer rolled left and right several times over the hole in the ground, but the narrator, whose head and shoulders were covered with dirt, stretched his head out

of the hole in the ground and was able to crawl out of the tomb alive. The mute woman, seventy years old, heard in the background, while she cut the thin, plate-length strips of frittata on the wood cutting board—every year on All Saints’ Day, after the blessing of the tombs, the same lunch was prepared—intermitted again and again by her daughter’s mallet blows against the pork chops, from the Herrgottswinkel, decorated with All Saints’ Day flowers, where the three old men sat, gnawing on hairy rinds of the Devil’s ears and slurping, staring attentively at each other’s faces, their eyes ringed in black, that over another hole in the ground, in which a soldier huddled, a Panzer skidded likewise back and forth, so that the earth crumbled over the head and shoulders of the soldier, but this time the supple earth gave way and the tank sank into the hole and crushed the soldier. While the seventy year old farmwife cut the next frittata, as long as a plate, into thin strips, her daughter lay the next bloody piece of pork on the wood cutting board and struck it with short, precise blows, so that the blood drained from the crushed meat into the grain of the wood, and the war reporter shouted louder, gazing alternately at the white aprons of the two women preparing the midday meal and the faces of the two other old men gnawing on the hairy red devil’s ears amid the ever-louder hammering of the mallet: He was squashed like a mouse, like a mouse, imagine, and that was just in the buildup to the war and not in the war itself, like a mouse.... The drops of holy water had in the meantime soaked into the coats of the gentlemen war correspondents and the drops of wax on the green loden, hardened by the cold of the graveyard, slowly softened in the warm, humid kitchen, smelling of bone-stock and candle wax, All Saints’ Day flowers and simmering cow’s bones. The daughter of the ninety year old man of the house cracked an egg against the hard edge of a white enamel bowl, spilled the white from the two halves of the eggshell, brown and serrated, in the first enamel bowl and the yoke in another, lay the pounded pork in the bowl with the yellow egg yolks, which she had beaten together with a fork, and breaded the meat

in a third enamel bowl filled with bread crumbs. The breaded schnitzel lay in the loudly crackling lard, already cooking in the pan, and its scent mixed with that of the bone stock, which the three gentlemen smeared around their eyes in front of the calvary on All Saints' Day, immediately after the blessing of the graves, in the middle of town, with the words, *Beloved Jesus, in your travails, I wait to anoint and succor you.* The seventy year old farmwife had cut all the frittata, opened the oven door, and lay one knotty spruce branch after another on the fire, while in the background of the kitchen, in front of the windows already steamed over by the boiling stock of cow's bones, the three bald-headed old men, telling war stories, were pulling their chairs closer and closer together, leaning their heads in, as if each wanted to suck the trench dirt and the blood of comrades from the damp, grey-flecked moustache of the other, or lick from his companions' eyes the black bone stock, smelling of decay, which was rendered from the bones of the town's dead, or as if they wanted, like fighting dogs, to tear a morsel from the others' mouths, to suck, chew, savor an especially succulent, hairy red devil's ear—....*I was so hungry, I would gladly have eaten the devil's ears.* One of the bald-headed war correspondents told his two attentive listeners that, in a work camp in Siberia, his long-dead brother-in-law, Willibald Zitterer and his comrades had to drag the bodies of prisoners, worked to death, from a coal mine, but they couldn't bury them, because it was deep winter and the ground was frozen through—allegedly it was forty degrees below zero—and they had to stack the frozen dead like firewood, one on top of another, in an outbuilding, so that in spring, when the temperature rose, they could bury them in a mass grave. Not far from the labor camp stood an outbuilding, in which more than a hundred dead, frozen stiff—like firewood! the old man repeated, pulling the slimy devil's ear from his mouth—lay side by side and piled up. The old man, who used for a third time the word firewood to describe the frozen corpses of the prisoners, stacked up one over the other, all the while striking the hairy pink

devil's ear against the table in indignation, pulled his chair aside as his wife opened the drawer and lay the knives, spoons and forks on the table with a clang in such a way that the tines of the forks became entangled and one of the old men—the long hairs of the devil's ear hung over his lower lip like sloppily extracted sutures—in a higher voice, because of the noise of the clanging silverware, informed his old listeners, their mouths half-opened and their heads pressed together, that not far from their position, a pastor cowered in a church tower, giving up information to the English, who flew over their position and firebombed it. The Dutch must have made them aware of the treacherous priest. It was night time, so said the old farmer with the wide-open eyes, circled with black bone stock, when we aimed the barrel of the cannon at the church tower, two kilometers away. First we launched a flare to get it in our sights, and then we fired on it. The tower fell over like a blade of straw, and the priest was done for, he didn't even have time to say an Our Father, so the grinning old man told his two listeners, gnawing on devil's ears. He took a ladle of frittata soup from the steaming enamel bowl, stirred the hot soup, swimming with grease bubbles from the boiled cow bones, with a spoon, and, arching his eyebrows, told his two listeners, who kept dipping their spoons in the frittata soup and lifting them to their mouths—the appetizers, pink and hairy, sucked dry, lay on the table before their plates—that he had once taken a train home and seen the burning cathedral in Cologne, which had been hit with incendiary bombs. From the train, he had seen people trying to flee in the streets, but, not far from the cathedral, they had gotten stuck in the searing hot asphalt and been slowly burned alive. The seventy year old mute wife of the ninety year old man with the grey-flecked moustache and the trimmed eyebrows collected with her bare hands the spent pink devil's ears of the three gourmands and war reporters, turned away from the Herrgottswinkel and the All Saints' Day flowers and went to the stove. She opened the chromed oven door and threw the devil's ears, gnawed and sucked-clean, into the leaping flames.

The two mentally ill women—mother and daughter—arranging the chairs and sitting down at the lunch table with the three old men spooning their frittata soup and nodding with wide-open eyes, and began slowly to slice and eat the devils' tongue, breaded but nearly raw. On the blade of the knife and the white enamel bowl, thin as a thread, stretched the blood trail of the devil incarnate.

Père adoptif de ceux qu'en sa noire colère / Du paradis terrestre a chassés Dieu le Père, / Ô Satan, prends pitié de ma longue misère!