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**When We Believed in Miracles**

Novel

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Sample translation by Joel Scott

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**1**

Guste went on.

“Down by the Devil’s Hole there’s a weathered old moor hut hidden between gnarled beeches and blackberry bushes. You know the one. That’s where the barracks are too. It’s a bad place.”

Betty wanted to say something, but Guste placed her finger against her lips. “The hut has always been crooked, like it might collapse at any moment, but it’s just crouching beneath the fog. It’s floating on the moor, otherwise it would have long since rotted or fallen to pieces.” Guste paused for a moment. She was having a hard time breathing today. When she went on, she was almost impossible to understand. Betty edged closer.

“The first settlers, they knew how to build a moor hut like that. They didn’t bother with carpenter’s squares or perfect plumbines, they just made sure the hut was supple, that it had some give. A moor hut like that looks like a mangy animal, but they can do more than just float, they can dance, too.” Guste chuckled and then started coughing again. She was a good storyteller and she was whimsical too. Those two things seemed to go together. Betty thought

nothing of it though, because she knew Guste and she knew grown-ups. They all had their quirks. That's why she didn't want to grow up, but what are you going to do.

“Those first settlers must've been brave. But if you've got no other roof over your head, you can't be choosy about your life. So lots of them headed for the moor, because the king of Prussia could only lease this measly landscape to the most miserable. These people weren't afraid of death. It was always waiting for them round the corner anyway. With nothing but reeds, peat sods, and clay, a few tree trunks, crooked and warped, they cobbled together makeshift housing, just good enough to catch yourself a case of consumption and then run to the shepherd, who would heal them with his little sayings—or not. They didn't have anything else.”

Guste wheezed. She'd breathed in too many heavy fogs in her life. Betty asked: “Were you there when the first settlers came?”

“In a way.”

She must have been as old as the hills. She looked it too. Her face was wrinkled like the bark of an oak tree. When she laughed, you could see her teeth and all the gaps between them. Enough to gnaw on a hunk of bread though. She lived alone in the old smokehouse, which didn't even have a proper fireplace, just an open hearth with pothooks over it, like in the olden days. No one lived like this anymore, not even here, in this little village on a moor, and so soon after the war. Most people at least had a chimney and an oven, with a soup bubbling away on top of it. At Guste's place, the smoke still drifted out the owl hole, and when the fog was lying on everything like a wet blanket, she'd get smoked like the sausages and hams hanging from the rafters. They didn't belong to her. Other people would bring meat for her to hang in the smoke, and she would get to keep some. A sausage here, a ham there.

Betty's mother would send her over every now and then with a pot of potatoes or a soup. They hardly had enough to eat themselves, but Guste had even less, and someone had to look after her. She didn't have anyone else anymore. And besides, it was a pain to cook for yourself

over an open fire, particularly for Guste, what with her lungs and all. She was barely able to keep the embers from going out and put the iron covering over the fire at night so that none of her cats would catch fire and then spread the flames to the roof. Plenty of huts had burnt down that way.

“A hundred years,” said Betty. “Are you that old?”

“I’ve forgotten. Now shut your mouth or go on home.”

But Betty didn’t want to go home. Her mother would be waiting there with work. She wanted to hear what happened next, just a little bit more, and Guste obliged her.

“At one point, there were as many old huts here as there were hungry mouths walking about. Then the first people started to build in stone. Out back, where the peat has all been dug up.” Guste pointed out the window. You couldn’t see much, because the roof hung too low, but Betty knew that old Fritz the Spook was building out there, because his farm had gotten too small for him.

“Course, that means the new government is giving him money for something bigger, and because he’s building outside of the village. The devil always shits on the biggest pile, I tell ya.”

Fritz the Spook’s real name was Fritz Renken. He was no shepherd, but he wasn’t just eating bread and water either. When Dr Till had given up on someone, Fritz’d make them healthy again, and he also used to make cows give milk again, but you weren’t allowed to talk about it. Never! Otherwise something really bad would happen.

“Let’s not talk about that anymore,” said Guste. As if she’d read Betty’s mind. Maybe she could actually do that; in the village they called her the ole witch who told children terrible stories. Betty wasn’t afraid of her.

“Weren’t you going to tell me about the old hut?” urged Betty, because Guste seemed like she might get lost in her thoughts. “Yes, yes. You’re right. I was. Well listen in: the third son of a farmer from around Bremen and his wife, it was them who built the hut. Poor as beggars

the both of 'em. They had nothing but hopes and dreams. Pioneers, they were. When the woman lit the fire in the hearth and the two of them warmed their hands in front of it, the hut seemed like a palace to them. After all, it only had to be enough to survive.”

“And did they?”

“Well... They were deceived and betrayed, as tends to be the way. The man, the woman, and all the others who his highness himself lured into the moor to drain it. The truth of it was that he needed land and he needed money for his wars. Signing the lease was a fool’s errand. That’s why they say: the first one in is the first one to die.”

Guste closed her eyes.

“What happened next?” Betty wanted to know. “Nothing’s happening next today.” And she plonked her head on the table, the way that all the moor women did when they took their afternoon nap, because their tiredness sat so deep in their bones that they always had to fear death, even in broad daylight. So none of them ever lay down.

“Run along home,” said Guste. “I need to rest a bit, the end of the world’s coming soon.”

## 2

It’s supposed to happen here too on Thursday. It was even in the newspaper. Theo knew about it. He wrote for the *Moorboten*, after all. The most important pages were hung up in display cases; the death notices, the family announcements, the proclamations from the government, and reports about Unnenmoor. Hardly anybody got the paper delivered to their home, but this way everyone found out most of the news. Through Theo, Edith and Betty Abels knew that the world was supposed to end today in Unnenmoor too. Theo often stopped by. He lived right next door. He would sit in the kitchen almost every day, his dodgy leg stretched out under the table, watching Edith as she sewed and did the washing. And he’d tell her about the latest news,

because back at his place he was all alone. His Lise had passed last year. They didn't have any kids. It was more or less the same for Edith, because Otto Abels had never come back from the battlefield. Of course she had Betty.

"In the villages across the way, the world's already ended. It's just that nobody's noticed." Theo shook his head. "What a load of codswallop. As if we hadn't been through enough doom and destruction already."

Edith was mending his corduroy trousers. One of the seams had torn, so Theo was sitting there in his long johns waiting for his pants to be finished. He only had two pairs, these ones and his good ones.

"They say this Professor he can heal all kinds of ailments," said Edith. "That's why everyone's always chasing after him." She broke the thread with her teeth. "I was wondering if I should go see him for my headaches. They've gotten worse again." She held the trousers up to the light and examined her work. "But apparently he's not so cheap, is what I've heard." She passed Theo his trousers. "There you go. All done."

"Good as new." Theo pulled them on.

"Well, if the world does end today, at least you won't be standing in front of your maker in your underpants," said Betty.

"Now you watch yourself!"

The whole end of the world thing spread like wildfire. Preachers came crawling out of every nook and cranny prophesying not just the end of the world but also the Last Judgment. There were certainly plenty of grounds for it, and people started to fear that there might just be something to it. After all, the war had only just ended and the sins that had been committed weighed so heavy that nothing could be forgiven. The Devil would get them all. Of course, nobody said this out loud, but lots of people thought it. Itinerant preachers dressed people down and called upon them to atone and to cleanse their souls before the big showdown arrived and

God sent a comet to hand down his judgment, on the living and dead alike. When the end of the end came, said the preachers, you'd best have done your penance, otherwise you'd roast for all eternity in purgatory, and then you're in a right pickle. Some of these prophets were famous, could fill entire stadiums.

As for Professor Asmodi, he was not proceeded by any great reputation. He couldn't compete with his famous colleague Conradi – who even got to speak on the radio – despite the fact that he'd copied plenty of things from him, including the catchy surname and the way he spoke and dressed. But anyone with a pair of eyes could tell the copy from the original. There was enough yearning for redemption to go round for everybody – and then some. And so, from the early hours of the morning, the Pennig was besieged by people who wanted to see the Professor, people who hoped for the alleviation of their ailments, for a miracle. Some had come the evening before, on foot, by bicycle, in wheelchairs, or sprawled on hay carts. Harm Cordugas, the innkeeper, didn't know what had hit him, the Pennig was bursting at the seams. He had multiple guests in each of the upstairs rooms. Since midday, a sign had been hanging at the entrance. "Closed – too full". People were pushing and shoving each other in the hall, even though the Professor wasn't due to appear until three in the afternoon, and it cost a pfennig to get in, with children free of charge. Soon enough, the beer was running low, and so were the meatballs and sausages.

"First the Professor will talk to the people, then everyone'll head to the chapel, that's where the healing will happen, and then the world will end. That's the plan." Theo closed his belt buckle.

"There's just one thing I don't understand," said Edith, "why in that order? Why the healing first and then the end of the world?"

"The other way round'd be pretty daft as well. But ask the Professor. He went to university."

Edith laughed. "I'm not going. I've had enough doom and destruction already."

The last round of destruction had only just ended, and the ruins were still smouldering. Which is why Edith and Theo preferred to go dancing. There were plenty of places to go, too. Every barn that was still halfway standing was turned into a ballroom. And if there were no musicians about, they'd sing the old classics themselves. *Das ist die Liebe der Matrosen* or *Veronika, der Lenz ist da*. Once a month, a mobile film theatre would visit the village. The operator would set up the projector in the hall, and it would make a beautiful purring sound. The most popular flicks were the old comedies with Theo Lingen. It had been too long since people last had a good laugh. There was cake too, and when the place was more or less full, Cordugas would give out a round on the house. The innkeeper liked to splash out. Last winter, he had even invited everyone for a *Grünkohlessen*. They were finally officially allowed to slaughter animals again. You no longer had to worry about ending up in prison for it. The meat trays had been heaving under the weight of the *speck* and *pinkelwurst*, as people later recounted. The orchestra played their fingers to the bone before the first few figures with guts gorged finally dragged themselves onto the dancefloor. Then things really took off. Later on, they had to transport Fritz the Spook in a wheelbarrow to get him into bed, three sheets to the wind and blood dripping from his nose, because he'd tried to get into Anni's knickers. Of all people! She had a hell of a left hook. Old Fritz, who always seemed to know everything else, didn't see that coming.

When Theo relayed the anecdote later at Edith's kitchen table, laughing and with tears in his eyes, she had clicked her tongue and thrown an admonishing look in Betty's direction, for while her daughter was allowed to eat everything, she wasn't yet allowed to know everything. She was eleven, still a child. Betty disagreed about that. She'd be twelve soon and was almost grown up, but the adults sometimes saw things differently, depending on what they wanted from her. That's how it was with everything. Today the end of the world, tomorrow a tea dance, anything to distract them from their guilty consciences, because they had all failed. You just had to take a look at what was awaiting the Professor. The crippled and the maimed.

And plenty of other havoc had been wrought as well. All the displaced people, the orphans, the whole roaming rabble that no longer had a place to lay their heads. One great, aimless migration. While many were searching for a place to stay, the stone mills in the cities were grinding all the debris from the war down to a pulp, turning and turning till the crows came home. There was just too much that had been wiped out. Cities, villages, people. They were still finding missing people under the rubble. They were sitting in the cellars on chairs with their suitcases on their laps, waiting for someone to give the all-clear. Theo had seen them. He got around a lot because of the newspaper. "They'll never find peace, they can be as dead as they like. Just like the dead people from the barracks in the Devil's Hole."

They used to come out on the full moon, they'd climb out of their ponds with their shovels and pitchforks and curse the people who'd put them in there. Nobody wanted to know anything about them, but old Guste was always going on about them. Cordugas had already thrown her out of the Pennig more than once for it. And yet she was only there to buy beer dregs for a beer soup, as she would always say. Usually there were enough people sitting in the bar to give her an audience, but she never got past the first sentence.

"Shut ya gob y'ole witch!"

Theo headed off and Edith grabbed Anni's old coat.

"What's Guste up to?" she asked, as she fed a new thread onto the sewing machine.

"Lots of coughing."

Betty grabbed the skillet from the stove and placed it on the table. There were a few fried potatoes left from lunch, though they were a little black. She ate them anyway. Betty was always hungry.

Her mother clamped the sleeve of the coat under the foot of the sewing machine and stepped on the pedal. The machine rattled into action. She sighed. "I can't mend this one again. I can just about read the newspaper through the fabric." The thread snapped. She loaded it back



on. By the time Betty put the skillet back and pulled out the basin to wash up, the seam was done. Edith folded up the coat. "It's about time Anni got herself a new one." She placed it in the egg basket she'd got out earlier. "Leave the washing up for me. You run over to Anni's place and take her coat. She needs it. And get her to give you some eggs. She promised me half a dozen for all the mending. And I wouldn't say no to an extra one if she's got some with a cracked shell."

Edith mended Willi's trousers as well. That was Anni's son. Same age as Betty. He was always tearing something. Betty didn't protest. If she was lucky, she'd get to see a bit of the end of the world, and if she was really lucky, there'd be scrambled eggs for dinner.