



Hans-Ulrich Treichel

Daybreak

Story

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Sample translation by Laura Wagner

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August has always been our favourite month. You were born in August, you were a summer's child, a child of heat. You felt most comfortable in August. Come to think of it, summer was the only time you weren't shivering. Otherwise you were usually cold. In autumn, in winter, in spring, it was always too cold for you, you were constantly shivering, and you always wanted me to turn up the heat, more than I already had anyway. Which isn't a problem with central heating. You turn the controller, turn it from one to two or from two to three, and soon it'll be getting warmer. Just as it wasn't a problem over the last months, where I kept the heat going day and night, for your sake, for the sake of the patient, almost always turned up to three, all throughout the summer and up until tonight, until I lifted you up and pulled you onto my lap, which is where you're lying still. It wasn't any trouble, light as you are. Light as a feather. Flyweight. It's only your head that's heavy. So heavy that I have to hold it like I did in the past when I gave you something to drink. And how you drank! You were a thirsty child, couldn't get enough sometimes. And I was a good mother. As good as a mother can be.

I have always kept the heating going, even in times when there was no central heating yet and no controller that I could just turn from one to two or from two to three. I did not turn any controller, but threw a scoop of coal into the oven and sometimes a briquette, depending on whether I was feeding the stove in the kitchen or the tiled stove in the living room. The kitchen stove was fed with coal, egg coals best of all. The tiled stove with briquettes. The kitchen stove was always warm, it served for cooking and for heating, whereas the tiled stove usually remained cold. We were saving these briquettes. Who had time to sit around the living room in those days. Not us. Neither I nor your father. We had to take care of the business.

When business was thriving, I did the bookkeeping in the living room, in the evenings and often on weekends as well. But without turning on the heating, if at all possible. I worked at the round table. At the coffee table, at which we only ever drank coffee on Sundays and only if we had visitors. Other than that, the table was reserved for the bookkeeping. I took off the beautifully embroidered table cloth, spread out the business documents in front of me and did the accounts. Your father with his prosthesis couldn't very well do it. Especially since it was his right arm that was missing. And therefore his writing hand. Occasionally, he would write with his left hand, but those were mostly signatures that looked clumsy and childlike. Like they were done in one's best handwriting. All of this was no pleasure, to be seeing your father like that.

I don't even want to start talking about getting dressed and undressed. I never have talked about it. You don't have to discuss everything with your children. Even though it's completely normal for a wife to help her injured husband with getting dressed and undressed. How is he supposed to button up his trousers with one hand? Or close the belt buckle? Tie the shoelaces? Virtually impossible. Or the corset. At some point, your father had to wear a corset. His back, his stomach, everything had to be supported and held up with the aid of the corset. As if the missing arm had also thrown back and stomach out of balance. And it is quite possible that there'd be problems with your balance if you're missing your right arm. The body then tilts to the left, and it's this tilt that you're trying to compensate for. With your back or your stomach. Or with a prosthesis. Which your father had to become accustomed to first.

He didn't have to become accustomed to the corset, he felt comfortable with it from day one. Even though it isn't an especially beautiful piece of clothing, a corset isn't. A men's corset. It's different for women, they have the most beautiful corsets one can imagine at their disposal. Black corsets, white ones, corsets in bleu and rosé, with a silky sheen. Corsets for men, on the other hand, are flesh-coloured, all of them. Yellowish. Brownish. With boning made from fish bones, almost as thick as a finger. Even when they're coming in straight from the factory, they're already looking grimy. As if the sweat stains were delivered with them.

But a corset like that is still helpful, it gave your father posture and a confident demeanour. Despite his weight problems. After the war, he wasn't the young, lean man he was before the war. Maybe during the time right after, if that. After all, there wasn't anything to eat. But later, when business was thriving, he became overweight. One-armed and overweight. Not a nice condition. But still imposing. An imposing man who knew how to dress well. Who never left the house without a tie and a hat. I was proud of your father then, with his tie and hat and the heavy, black, but still elegant, leather shoes. More than proud. But

you don't know anything about that. Nothing about the pride and nothing about the love. The fact that your father was one-armed, overweight and wearing a corset didn't change anything about my love for him. Nor about the physical love. I can tell you now. But we weren't always capable of it. For different reasons, which I don't want to talk about. You don't have to discuss everything. Especially not with your own child, whose head is lying on my chest and whose forehead I feel. There are things you withhold even from the dead.

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The cold living room was my territory and my refuge. It's where I was left in peace. It's where I spread out the business documents and did the accounting. Even though it's also the place where the two inspectors from the tax office sat down every couple of years. Then they would be sitting at the round table in our living room and checked if my books were correct. When the tax inspectors came, I turned on the heating in the living room. In summer, it would have been alright without the heating. But the inspectors always came in either spring or autumn. Both cold seasons. At least they were in our living room, which was always a bit too cold in any case. Facing north. The tax inspectors were meant to feel warm and comfortable. I served them coffee, which they always accepted with gestures of refusal and an »Oh, but you shouldn't have«. And would gladly accept a second pot as well. I didn't offer them cake. That would have looked like a bribe. Yet, I can imagine that they would have accepted cake with a declining »Oh, but you shouldn't have« as well. But still feel bribed afterwards and audit that much more strictly in order to prove their incorruptibility. So, better not to serve cake.

Which worked, incidentally. They only found a mistake in the books one single time, and we were asked for back pay. A rather large sum at that. Many thousands of Marks. A great many thousands of Marks. This back pay almost killed your father. His heart. Ever since the back payment, he was suffering from a heart condition. He probably had been suffering from that before. But he didn't realize until that time. After all, his weight wasn't good for his heart either. And neither was the diabetes. Your father got diabetes early on. But all in all I have to say that his whole life hadn't been good for his heart. Not the war, not the displacement, not being overweight, not the diabetes, not the business, not the tax back payment, nothing. And everything else, about which I never told you, wasn't either. What this was? You don't have to discuss everything with your children. You have to be able to keep silent. But it almost killed him. Him and me. Now I can tell you. Now, that you are resting here with me, and your forehead cools my chest on this dawning late summer's day.

Already, it has become a little lighter outside. The birds are starting to make themselves heard, the birds are highly sensitive, they know exactly when dawn sets in and it's their turn to sing. For some of them that's very early, long before sunrise, the thrush, for example. You can set your watch to the thrush. The thrush sings now and an hour later the sun rises.

What would we be without the animals. Your father was prone to going giddy what with all his love for animals. Even though he didn't always show it. After all, he was a farmer before he became a businessman. At first a farmer loves his animal, and then takes it to be slaughtered. It was before the war that your father was a farmer. On his parents' farm. In Volhynia. And later in Poland, as a caretaker. At that point, his parents, that is, your grandparents, weren't with him anymore. That's when your father had already lost his right arm and got a farm for it, as a substitute, in a manner of speaking. A Polish farm. The Poles' warm milk was still sitting on the stove, he later told me once. That moved him, I realised that. Then he never spoke of it again.

There wasn't anything to talk about. I knew about it all anyway, all of the horror. That of others and ours as well. We didn't tell you anything about it, at least not in detail, you don't have to talk about everything with your children. You also can't explain everything. Not only can you not explain everything to your children, you can't even explain it to yourself. Not the sinister things. And sometimes not even that which is less sinister. Not even anything to do with Volhynia and Poland. I should actually have consulted the history books on that. Your father should have consulted them as well.

Your father's place of birth was called Rozhyshche. And mine was called Remki. Remki and Rozhyshche aren't mentioned in the history books, we're not a case for the history books. The best thing is to keep quiet. Our parents could maybe have explained to us why we were born where we were born. But they probably didn't really know themselves. They weren't educated people after all. They lived where they lived. They relied on god. And that was that. In Poland, in Volhynia, in the Ukraine, in Russia, wherever, they relied on god. Farmland is farmland. And their parents in turn, my grandparents and your great-grandparents, certainly didn't tell them anything either. What was there to tell. You had a little land that had to be tilled, you worked in order to be able to eat, that was all. Talking didn't help. The only thing that helped were cows that gave plenty of milk, a few pigs and a good potato crop.

Now the first thrush has begun to sing. First the thrush sings, then the blackbird and finally the wren. When the wren sings, it's not long until sunrise. When the wren sings, I am going to call the doctor. Maybe I'll wait for the chaffinch. A picture hangs on my living room wall, a graphic piece entitled »The Bird Clock«. A present from your father. Who seldom gave me presents other than that. Never, actually. As opposed to the pre-war time, back when he was courting me. Back then, he brought me a scarf or perfume and one time even gloves made from finest leather. I remember them well, these gloves. There wasn't anything like that in our house. What should us children do with delicate leather gloves on a farm. Our mother didn't have any nice gloves either. Not even for going to church on Sundays. She wore, as did we all, either gloves made from wool or work gloves. These could also be made from leather, but it was rough and durable leather. And so the gloves your father gave me were the first nice gloves I received in my life.

After the war, we didn't give each other presents anymore, what could we have given one another. We had been given life, first it had almost been taken from us and then was given as a present. It was a whim. The whim of three Russian soldiers. But what am I saying, given, it was thrown in front of our feet. Like dirt. Our own life.

But you don't know anything about that. You didn't even know that the picture was a gift from your father. Since he had given it to me, it had been lying rolled-up in a cardboard roll on the wardrobe for many years. Back then I didn't have a place for it, no place on the wall or none in my heart. So to speak. None of us had any place for it. When the day began, the worries came, so the birds could sing as much as they wanted. And your father didn't inquire about it any further. But I still cherished the picture. Kept it safe in the cardboard roll for many years and finally brought it with me to the new apartment and hung it on the wall, in a glass frame.

In the flat I got in order to grow old in it. Where I often wake up very early, even though I have absolutely no duties anymore. No books to keep, no goods arriving, no deliveries, no opening times, no customers who want to be served after business hours and come across the yard and into the house. Directly into the kitchen. And no tax inspectors in the cold living room.

It wasn't until I lived here that I listened to the birds at dawn for the first time and used the bird clock as guidance while doing so. Blackbird, thrush, finch and starling, as the children's song goes. On the bird clock, it's blackbird, thrush, wren and chaffinch. And before that, during the night still, the nightingale. If she sings at all. And at the very end, which has always amused me, the sparrow. The late riser. Who doesn't sing, actually, but chirps.

They're all arranged in a circle on there, from the nightingale to the sparrow. Each bird has its place on the clock. The birds know exactly when they have to sing. The birds also know exactly when they have to die. Animals in general know this. Then they look for a quiet place and die. If they haven't been slain, ran over or butchered before that.

I never wanted anything to do with that, with the butchering, which, after all, is common practice on a farm. My parents butchered animals as well, for the family and for the merchant they sold the meat to. The best meat was for the merchant. I'd have loved nothing more than to become a teacher. German, history, music. A person never knows when they have to die. People usually die untimely, you also died an untimely death.

I'm going to take the picture with the bird clock off the wall. I don't need it any longer. I've memorised it all. You always just used to mock the bird clock and spoiled my delight in it a little. You also smiled derisively at a lot of other things in the small flat in which I'm spending my old age, after we sold the business. The bouquets of dried flowers, the pewter plates, the vases and bowls. But most of all you mocked the blankets and doilies, especially the ones I knitted myself and that I placed on the backs of the armchairs and the settee. And why shouldn't I. I liked to knit. But you always mocked it all on your rare, all too rare, visits. Even though there's a guestroom, you only visited me rarely and fewer and fewer times during the last years before your fell ill. A guestroom especially for you.

I would never have moved into a flat I was going to spend my old age in that didn't have a guestroom. So that you could come visit me. I admit that I secretly hoped you wouldn't just come for a visit but also live with me at times. Especially in times when I needed help. But these were my secret thoughts that I never voiced. They would only have scared you off. I couldn't have known that the guestroom was going to become a sickroom.

As soon as the doctor will have left, I'm going to take the picture with the bird clock off the wall. For you. To please you. Even though it's too late. And maybe the wall plates along with it. But not the picture of the two playing foals. So lovely. And probably tacky. But what is that supposed to mean anyway. Besides, it's a present from my neighbours. Lovely people. Very lovely people. With adorable children. A boy and a girl. The girl, Zahra, visits me regularly and calls me grandma. You never gave me grandchildren that could have called me grandma. My neighbours don't mind Zahra visiting me. On the contrary, sometimes they even ask me to look after her for an hour or two. I'd like nothing better. By now, I have a lot of drawers filled with toys. But the child is modest. She takes pleasure in the simplest games. Singing. Guessing games. Finger games. Things like these, for which one doesn't need toys.

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