

Translated extract from

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Als der Tod zu uns kam

Peter Hammer Verlag, Wuppertal 2011

ISBN 978-3-7795-0312-5

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When Death came calling

Translated by John Reddick



There was once a time when we didn't even know his name. Death? Never heard of him. There was no such thing in those days as the final few hours. There was just the first hour, the second, the third, the thousandth ... always one more hour. Hour upon hour as far ahead as we could possibly imagine. Once anything was born it was fully alive, and that was that. Once anything was made it was there forever, whole and lovely: our saucepans, our chairs, our clothes. Our teeth didn't get holes; our foreheads didn't have wrinkles. We didn't need to wish each other Good morning, for every morning was always good.



Then one evening he came up the road. On foot.
Or came, rather, on two very dusty feet. He
seemed to be passing through, a stranger just like
any other.

Then he tripped over, right there by our front
door. We laughed. We thought it was very funny,
the way he tripped over. We'd never seen anyone
trip before.

Death settled himself down by our doorway.
He rubbed his foot and he grimaced and groaned.
You shouldn't be laughing, he said.

Mischievous bystanders aped his tumble.

But they banged their noses, their knees, their
elbows. We saw their red blood drip, drip,
dripping. It was no laughing matter, that's for
sure. But what sort of a matter was it then?

One thing was clear: Death couldn't continue his
journey. And it was already getting dark. He
would have to spend the night in the village.

He didn't need a bed. He preferred the hayloft.

Once in the hayloft, he laid himself down. He started groaning all over again. He couldn't sleep. He lit a cigarette to while away the time.



By next morning our house had burnt down. We stood there coughing amidst the blackened, broken beams. My little brother was lying on his front; he wasn't moving. We turned him over and shook him to wake him up. His face was covered with soot. His open eyes were staring up at the sky. No laughter was called for here. 'What's happened to his life?' we cried.

Death had no ready reply. He flapped his hand in a vague sort of way. In truth he hadn't the least idea. He held my little brother on his knee and looked down at him. With his hankie and a bit of spit he wiped the soot from his face. 'What trouble I've caused, and not for the first time', he sighed, weeping tear after tear.

My little brother was drenched. 'This happens to me time and again', he said. 'I take a glass in my hand, and it breaks. I turn on a tap, and at once there's a flood. I pick up a knife, and disaster strikes.' Death helped us make a small wooden box - a coffin it's called. We all jumped when he hit his thumb with the hammer.

Death grew fully fit again. 'Time I was on my way, dear people', he said, swinging the broom he used as a walking stick.

When we all said goodbye there were tears in our eyes as well as in his. I waved a tea-towel.

When Death went away he left us presents: grief, fellow-feeling and solace.

Ever since then we wish one another Good morning! at the start of each day.

We call out Bless you! when anyone sneezes. And to those that leave we say Have a good journey!

