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Ildikó von Kürthy

Es wird Zeit

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“What’s left in life?” Judith is almost 50 and can’t think of a satisfying answer to that question. Her children have grown up and her husband is getting old. Not to mention her love life and aging body. Then her mother dies and Judith returns for the first time in 20 years to the place of her birth. She left behind a well-kept secret, an empty grave and a collection of hopes, dreams and nightmares.

Suddenly, everything seems to fall apart. A life-long lie turns out to be the truth. A rediscovered friend hopes she will live to see the next summer and wants to know what really happened all those years ago. A youthful love sparkles anew while an urn goes on an improbable journey. Judith realises it’s better to get excited too early than not get excited at all. It’s Time is a story about remorse and friendship, aging and staying young, a sense of home and belonging, love, death and the realisation that in the end nothing is lost.

Ildikó von Kürthy is a journalist and columnist for Brigitte magazine. She lives in Hamburg with her husband and two sons. Her novels have sold over six million copies and were translated into 21 languages.

- No.1 bestseller for weeks!
- More than 300,000 copies sold.
- Rights sold to Hungary (*Animus*).



ILDIKÓ VON KÜRTHY

IT'S TIME

This isn't how I imagined it.

For years, I asked myself what would happen if we saw each other again. For years, I feared - and hoped for - nothing more than to find myself suddenly standing before you.

And this is it, is it, this monumental moment?

I'm very disappointed.

Mainly in myself. As usual. I love to blame myself. I've spent years getting it down to a fine art. My mother taught me when I was still in nappies. Like a sniffer dog, I track down every mistake. My mistakes.

As far as the great events of my life are concerned, they have only occasionally turned out the way I might have imagined them. I'm not the only one for whom this is the case, I've witnessed often enough how people courageously rewrite reality after the fact, transforming honeymoons, births, anniversaries and their own childhoods into precisely the magical moments they yearn to tell others about, full of urgent humility, and at some point they come to believe in these stories themselves.

I myself am always astonished whenever I find myself enthusing – unfortunately, often unbidden - about the births of my children. To hear me talk, you'd think I practically popped out these extraordinarily beautiful infants, perfect and uncreased. They had to use a suction cup on my eldest, and one of the twins came out looking like a bad cross between Chucky and Sitting Bull. Every birth saw me hastily transported to a remote delivery room straight after the first contraction, so that my bellowing didn't traumatise the other mothers on the ward.

My husband and I provoke great astonishment with our accounts of our wedding. I could almost be led to believe that we married for love. In reality, I'm happy that there were few witnesses to this event and that we relied absolutely on my mother and her talent for taking absurdly awful photos, in which it is, for the most part, impossible to make out a single face. I feature in the photos as little more than a mustard-yellow smudge in batwings and a cowl neck, and these photos of me have never been hung or displayed anywhere, as far as I know. This is as much to do with a lack of feeling on the part of the bride, as a lack of quality in the photos. No-one who was there has ever enthused over our wedding. If anything, most of them suspected that something wasn't quite right. And they did so despite the fact that I have never spoken to anyone of my guilt to this day.

It was a bloody long time ago, too. Twenty years ago.

It's as if it all happened to someone else, a stranger. I was a different person back then. I would have been a different person today, too, if I had made a different choice. But the matter is consigned to the past now. Time has passed and thoroughly trampled over a good number of my dreams, and my nightmares.

And now, this meeting. Just a few seconds ago, I would have claimed with absolute conviction that the old wound had healed, restored somehow to its original state; I would greet an unexpected reunion with you with utmost confidence, serenity and cheer, I'd wager.

But I'd obviously been fooling myself. I'd spent years of functioning mostly without issue and then, like a tyre bursting at 200 km/h, my defence mechanism blew up in my face. I knew, now, that I had to stay calm, or risk considerable material and personal damage.

I recognised you at once, back there between the holly bushes. In spite of the distance, in spite of the fact that I never quite get on with the bifocals I've worn for the past three years. My useless specs make everything that should be clear blurry, and vice versa. It's why I got so terribly lost in the reputedly unmissable alleyways of Aix-en-Provence when I visited two years ago; I couldn't decipher the street names on the city map, nor those on the street signs. I seemed to be surrounded by a billowing, blurry, purple sea of little lavender-scented bags and was eventually obliged to send my location to the rest of the family via Whatsapp and allow myself to be picked up. My sons have spent some time mocking me for the size of the text on my mobile phone, because, apparently, you can read my messages from miles away. I still have unpleasant memories of one episode where I landed myself in the men's dressing room at the outdoor pool despite wearing lenses, then clattered against the turnstile after trying to leave the wrong way.

I've thought of you from time to time, of course, and sometimes it even hurts me a little to do so. October the First was a regular stumbling block in the rhythm of the year, the anniversary of the funeral. I didn't go, of course, and I never visited the grave afterwards. It's an empty hole, home not to a body but all my buried dreams.

I thought that, on the whole, I had made my peace with what happened. But now that I see you, I know I was wrong. That peace is long gone.

You still hold yourself the same way. Proud and commanding. The stance of a man who has never had to fight for anything. The good life fell straight into your lap.

It didn't for me.

In the intervening years, I've grown up, grown mature, at least parts of me have. I really do have every reason to meet you with my head held high. Upright and proud.

Instinctively, I duck behind a rock and hold my breath. Is this really who I am? This devious little thing? I screw my eyes up tight. It's stupid. As if shutting my eyes could make me invisible. I'm acting like a two-year-old, scared of an evil witch. Not a mature woman who religiously avoids full sun and has regular dental check-ups. In this moment, I only really feel my age in my knees and my lower back. In every other way, it's as if I'm twenty again and not quite of sound mind.

No, I can't do this! Two decades is clearly not long enough. Please, dear Fates, not yet! Maybe tomorrow. Or preferably the next day, or – even better – never! I can't bring myself to look you in the eye and lie to you, confidently and with conviction.

So, that's how I found myself crouching in the shadow of this rock with my legs feeling as if they're starting to decay, while the whole of my pelvis and lower back silently protest against the strange curve they're in. The lower sections of cartilage grind together, threatening to give way. My heels sink slowly into the soil, sending me increasingly into a bizarre tilt. I wrench open my eyes and in a last, desperate attempt to save myself, reach for a birch branch hanging picturesquely in front of me.

I manage it. I seem to have put off my complete collapse for the time being. My lips are slightly parted, and I let my breath escape slowly, in juddering gasps, the way my therapist and I have practised scores of times, for times of tension and inner turmoil.

Before yesterday, I had thought monotony and routine were my biggest problems. If I escape this situation unscathed – physically and psychologically - I promise to never again be so impetuous and arrogant as to wish for more drama in my life.

You can never be too careful what you wish for. A friend of mine, Helga, fancied a nice little fling, and now she's having twins with her delivery man. So, I officially take it all back. I love my life just the way it is, and in the future I hope to get my fill of excitement and distraction from Netflix, my annual supervision of the primary school nativity play and other people's problems; half of my friends are recently separated, and it's only a matter of time for the ones who aren't.

At least I've got luck on my side this time. The flimsy branch I've been clinging to seems to be holding and my breathing is gradually returning to normal.

Then the nasty old thing gives way with no warning, with a ferocity that's almost gleeful, and it's as if the tree is nudging me quite deliberately towards my doom. Early bloomers. You know what they're like. They're all jerks. And birch trees are the most aggressive of the lot.

I topple backwards like a character in a Klimbin sketch from the seventies, with Ingrid Steeger and Peer Augustinski, falling slowly but irrevocably backwards, as if in slow motion, but with devastating force. Something clatters and breaks. It could well be my fragile sense of self-worth.

I shut my eyes again, as a precaution. Why haven't you noticed? It seems unlikely, but perhaps the approach of age has blessed you with bad hearing and cataracts. We can but hope.

I breathe in positivity, hoping to optimise my karma. It doesn't seem to do much good. I can hear steps coming my way. Closer and closer. Then silence again.

I feel your gaze on me before I hear your voice. Familiar. Perhaps a little rougher than it used to be.

"Judith."

It's not a question, it's a statement.

I wait another two seconds, then I realise that it makes no sense to spend any more time hoping that this situation is happening to someone else entirely, or that it's a scene in some miserable film, miraculously rewinding itself back to the point where everything went so inexorably wrong.

All those years ago. In this place, perhaps precisely this spot, where my life became what it is now, otherwise known as my fate.

I open my eyes reluctantly. This is what reality looks like: me, lying on a poorly maintained grave in the shade of a sneaky silver birch. When I fell, I managed to break two porcelain angels and put out an everlasting candle. The large, black gravestone bears an inscription, lit by the afternoon sun as if by a spotlight:

Everything has its time

Tears and laughter

Lamentations and dancing

Laughter and separation

Seeking, losing, finding

The names on the gravestone seem familiar to me: Wilma and Herbert Kallensee. They owned a construction shop on Wilhelmstraße, before old Kallensee himself became the biggest building contractor in the Jülich area at the end of the seventies and started an affair with Ms Jürgensmeyer, my mother's unmarried chiropodist. Why the old philanderer chose to spend eternity lying next to his wife, I'll never know. Miss Jürgensmeyer lies in a single plot three rows along. The pair don't seem to have had anything special.

I always feel sorry for people who have a grave all to themselves. A gravestone with only one name on it has the same air of melancholy as the pictures of women on dating websites who take photos of themselves with their favourite house plant or their cat. Nothing makes me sadder than a gravestone-for-one. It's another good reason not to split up without a second thought as you get older. Your husband will end up in an expansive family plot with his second, and final, wife, your lover will be unable to choose between you and his ex even in death and will try to exempt himself from the affair by choosing to be buried anonymously at sea, despite never having been to the sea with you in his life.

I like the voluminous gravestones, as big as the sunbathing lawns at swingers' clubs, where whole generations romp merrily. It seems a fulfilling sort of life to me, having children and grandchildren and a husband who you still get on well enough with to want to be buried next to him.

Of course, many people stop wanting to lie side-by-side with their husbands, even while they're still alive. Many an ageing partner will start making noises which seem barely human, like a pug straining for breath after a trip around the block. One of my mother's colleagues became a lesbian in her mid-sixties because she could no longer cope with her seventy-year-old husband's damp wheezing.

"He groaned all the time, no matter what he was doing," she confided in my mother in a moment of sudden candour. "And he kept getting white scurf at the corners of his mouth. I'm telling you, it's unreasonable to expect us to live with old men. They moan and they smell and it's not the sort of smell you can get a handle on with better hygiene. It's death, seeping out of their pores. My only wish for you, darling Uschi, is that you make the leap before it's too late."

My father was sixty-eight when he died, a little before he reached that unpleasant age of scurf and stench. My mother's colleague's groaning husband has since found himself six feet under and lies somewhere to the left of the chapel. It's somewhat alarming that I've come to know more people lying in the graveyard of my hometown than those among the living. And next Thursday, another of my acquaintances will make the switch from one side to the other: my mother.

Whenever we spoke about death, she insisted that she be buried here. "Why should I have to settle into a new place all over again once I'm dead. I'm far too old for that," she said. Perhaps it was her way of forcing me to come back here in the end.

I have often wondered whether she suspected, or perhaps even knew. Perhaps she found the book at some point? If not, then it must still be there, where I hid it twenty years ago. I will look for it today and then throw it away, burn it, rip it to shreds, dunk it in hydrochloric acid, whatever it takes to dispose of it thoroughly enough that it can't cause any more damage. I should have done it ages ago. It would be downright tragic if it fell into the wrong hands now.

Twenty years ago, I wouldn't have had the heart to destroy it. It would have seemed to me like betraying my dream, and the love of my life. At least, that's how I saw it back then. Dear God, I was happy, unhappy, pathetic and naïve, in love, lost and hopelessly romantic.

I'm not any of those anymore. Except, perhaps, unhappy. Only a little bit, though. No more than anyone else.

A broken angel wing sticks painfully into my backside, forcing me to confront the intolerable present. I blink in the sunshine.

"Judith."

You look down at me. Just like you used to.

I say, "Hello. Long time, no see."

It has taken me twenty years to get to this sentence.

No, I didn't imagine it would be like this when we saw one another again.

THIS GRAVE LEASE HAS EXPIRED. RELATIVES PLEASE REPORT TO THE CEMETERY OFFICE.

My mother's burial was a disaster. Ditto, the sex with Heiko. Neither ritual went entirely according to plan.

The grave was already taken. As was Heiko. Michael was partly to blame for this, and was responsible for scenes which I can guarantee had never been seen in our local graveyard before.

It seems to me that the heavenly contingent in charge of my fate might have made a mistake and accidentally scheduled the next few years' worth of catastrophes to all take place on this one weekend. I'm fully booked.

I met the undertaker at the funeral parlour just before ten. The urn stood on a little table, shrouded in a black velvet cloth and almost completely covered by a wreath of white lilies and red roses, as big as a cartwheel. I didn't have to read the text on the dark-blue ribbons to know that Erdal and his mother, Renate Gökmen-Küppers, had had free reign over the proceedings as far as taste was concerned.

My own bunch of flowers and the wreath from Anne and her parents looked positively puny next to the Küppers' floral monument. I had to laugh. Erdal always took himself so seriously. I could have found it tasteless, but it was a comfort, because it was so familiar.

"Good Lord," said Anne, who had walked over to me in silence and was staring at Erdal's wreath with indignation.

"Can we start?" asked the undertaker, evidently in a hurry. His colleague who was supposed to be dealing with me was ill, he explained apologetically, and the business was all over the place.

"The Küppers family should be here any minute," I said, "We could slowly make our way towards the grave." The undertaker picked up my mother's urn and proceeded with measured steps.

"Just so you know, I don't want flowers on my grave," whispered Anne. "What a waste. Just stick a couple of piggy banks by my coffin, then everyone can make a donation to Feed the World."

"No flowers? I'm not coming," I said, and we smiled to chase away our fears of death.

"Kids, wait!" roared a husky-voiced woman across the graveyard. "Judith, my love, I hope we're not too late, I could never forgive myself! Erdal, get those brambles out of the way of my wheel!"

The Küppers family had arrived.

Renate cleaved a path through the graves for herself – first and foremost - with her zimmer-frame, which was no easy task, since one of the wheels had got tangled up in the ribbon attached to a floral wreath. Erdal and the children knelt around the frame, trying to free her.

Karsten was clearly unsure as to how to greet Anne, who placed her hands resolutely on his shoulders; the two embraced like old friends which, after all, they were.

"Here we are again," she murmured.

"Sorry we're late," said Karsten. "Erdal's in a complete tizz. He had a last-minute meeting with his producer yesterday. It's not looking good for his show. Not that that's important right now, Judith, please don't misunderstand me. Just prepare yourself, he might start acting even weirder from now on."

Renate and Erdal had turned towards us and I had no time to respond. I saw with horror that Joseph had brought his saxophone and Hans had brought his recorder. If the boys had shown themselves to have some kind of remarkable musical talent, it was news to me.

“Judith, darling, let me give you a hug!” cried Erdal, storming over to me. “You must be strong. Losing your mother, it’s just horrendous. Your childhood’s well and truly over. You know you can always count on me,” he spluttered, still choked up, then threw himself – crying – into my arms.

Anne looked with consternation on the little, chubby half-Turk, whose shoulders were juddering. Slowly, Erdal pulled away from me and looked at Anne with his bright blue eyes.

“Sorry, you must be Anne. Karsten always speaks so highly of you. I’m so pleased to finally meet you.”

Anne went to give Erdal her hand, but he took no notice of her silly reserve. To him, Anne was immediately part of the family. He pressed her to him and I saw in Anne’s face how her reservations melted away and she set about seeking refuge in his big, soft heart.

“Can we get going?” asked the undertaker.

“Young man, this is a funeral, not Formula One,” roared Renate Gökmen-Küppers, pressing me then Anne to her mighty bosom.

“My sons have prepared something,” Erdal said to the undertaker. “Would you mind if the boys walked behind you and the urn and played a little something?”

The undertaker shook his head, resigned. And so we set off, to the tune of “What shall we do with a drunken sailor?”.

I was moved. In fact, I was almost happy, walking through the graveyard in late summer, surrounded by my loved ones. I had lost my mother, but I had regained my best friend. And I felt a new sense of confidence and determination rising within me. I hooked my arm through Anne’s and noted her growing unease.

“So where is your mother’s grave?” she asked.

“Plot No. 4, I think. There was a free space there, handily.”

“It’s just, this place seems so familiar to me. I think...”

The undertaker came to an abrupt halt. “Shit,” he said.

“Louder, please!” called Renate from the back. “What’s the man saying? Is this the priest?”

“Something’s not right here,” said the undertaker. “I don’t understand why my colleague didn’t inform me about this. The grave isn’t available.”

I pushed my way past the undertaker and the children, who had stopped playing. The grave had clearly been left untended for many years. The stone had sunk halfway into the ground and was teetering ominously. The visible portion bore an orange sticker: “This grave lease has expired. Relatives please report to the cemetery office.”

I pushed aside a string of ivy covering the name of the deceased.

I reeled.

A weak ‘Oh!’ escaped Anne’s lips.

Karsten sighed.

“I can only apologise. We’ll have to make you a new appointment,” the undertaker said, sounding abashed. Renate declared that she had been to many burials, but she had never experienced anything like this in her life.

“Whose grave is it, anyway?” asked Erdal.

The grave at our feet was Michael’s.