

Uwe Tellkamp, *Der Turm*

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Sample translation of chapter 15 by Henry Holland

### Who's got the loveliest Christmas tree

You could tell by looking at the Rector, Scheffler, that he didn't exactly know which way to turn. Comrade Leonid Iljitsch had been dead less than two months and the great ship of socialism was now drifting on without a captain. Christmas, on the other hand, was drawing nigh – and any form of cut-back that went beyond a particular point wouldn't be seen as ascetic piety but as weakness, an admission and expression of paralysis. Richard let his eyes wonder through the Rector's room, Brezhnev's gorilla face with his sly-looking, deep-set eyes underneath bottle-brush eyebrows, the black stripe in the corner of the photograph, beside that Comrade Chairman Honecker in a grey suit in front of a sky-blue background with a *winning* smile on his face; then a row of Scheffler's predecessors.

“So you're rejecting my predictions.”

“Herr Hoffmann, please.” Scheffler gestured involuntarily. “Do try and understand my situation, you know, what with this daft Christmas tree war starting again and everything.”

“We've hardly got any painkiller left, Comrade Rector.”

“I know, yes. The pharmacist was round here this morning. But Herr Hoffmann I would like to ask you not to panic. We will get emergency support. I've got an appointment for today already with Barsano. And with his wife. I'm going to request help from Friedrich Wolf” - although that hospital had never helped them before, a fact that both Scheffler and Richard knew. “Don't panic, that's the most important thing just now. There are enough rumours going around already. And I'd like all of this to stay just between you and me.”

While washing their hands together outside the operating theatre Wernstein said to Richard, “Gastro are meant to have found a lovely pine tree.”

“And what about ours?”

“The Sister’s been out looking for trees at Striezel Street Market, but they’re all lame, bent or crippled.”

That meant that Surgery was now faced with losing the prestigious contest for the loveliest tree to Gastro, of all people. They hastily organised a team-meeting and decided that wasn’t acceptable. Wernstein had discovered a specimen in Orthopaedics that seemed to have rickets, which had probably been forested on the barren plains of Brandenburg; Eye Services had a comely, well-proportioned conifer, but less than five dioptries high; Urology had a bulky Douglas fir, three metres wide at the bottom, but only two metres fifty high, and topped with three tufty, sticking-up branches. Neurology had come up with a specimen from Striezel Street Market, one metre wide by three metres fifty tall, slim, unwieldy and sensitive – it had started losing its needles straight away and hadn’t stopped yet.

That evening, Richard walked down Planet Lane. Kühnast didn’t have a phone at home and the porter in the pharmaceutical works hadn’t been able to put him through. Richard had phoned up Thousand Eyes House and had asked Alois Lange to put a note on the chemist’s door. There were note boxes on all the doors of the neighbourhood, with pencils and pieces of string besides them for this purpose. Under Kühnast’s name-plate was written: bell broken – please knock.

“Ah, Herr Hoffmann, come on in. Yes I got Herr Lange’s note. – No, no, you needn’t take your shoes off. Come along this way please.” They went into the sitting room past hordes of books, among which were ticking gas and electricity metres, past cut-glass doors, damp patches on the corridor’s ceiling, fine cracks and cornices which were slowly crumbling away. “My wife’s prepared a few open sandwiches for us.” Kühnast gestured to a tray. “What are you drinking?”

“One of your liqueurs if that’s all right.”

A flash of joy crossed Kühnast’s face. “Well, we’re still in the experimental phase. So the ehmm ... ,” the chemist straightened his glasses, mended with sticking plaster, “liqueur

news has got through to you, eh?” Kühnast poured the drinks and watched Richard, who threw back the glass filled with wild, red-evening coloured liquid. “Strong stuff.”

“Isn’t it?” The chemist sat down and crossed his legs. “So how I help you, Herr Hoffmann.”

Richard explained the problem. “ ... and we thought, as you work in the pharmaceutical works ...”

“Right at the source.” Herr Kühnast nodded and, after a little moment, took off his glasses, letting them hang down by the mended arm. “Christmas will be here soon enough,” he said in a measured tone. Richard didn’t quite get him. Kühnast went on – the Dresden Stollen Cake was famous and deservedly so. Butter, sugar, flour, candied peel and sultanas – every year it got harder to locate those exotic ingredients. Walther the baker now felt increasingly forced to only bake for people who delivered the ingredients in advance. Sultanas ... but where from? Stollen needs enough fat, when you squeeze a slice between your fingers it has to feel moist; and stollen needs to be heavy, nourishing you pleasantly in your stomach for a while; your digestive enzymes need time to work on it, sweetly, but not cloyingly. And stollen has to be full of sultanas – stollen really has to come from Walther the baker. “I need twenty cakes, Herr Hoffmann. My relatives – you understand.”

Together with Wernstein and Dreyssiger, the most adventurous young doctors from surgery, Richard visited Malivor Marroquin’s Costume Hire – and everyone hired a Father Christmas outfit. “Not very comfy, but it’ll be OK. You need a disguise.”

They parked the car and trailer on the edge of the heath. The moon lunged out from between tree tops and lit up the snow on the forest track like a sheet of wavy zinc. Dreyssiger shouldered the joiner’s saw, Wernstein was carrying the axe and Richard the bolt clippers.

“Hope it works,” said Wernstein, fishing for reassurance. “We’ll be had up if we’re caught.”

“Rubbish, it’ll be fine,” said Dreyssiger who was clearly on edge.

“Like they say, he who dares, wins – or do you want to bottle it now Thomas?”

“Would be fine if this bloody beard didn’t itch so much. Bet it’s been laid in tonnes of moth powder. Smells like it.”

“We’ve got to watch from now on lads,” warned Richard. “It’s about ten minutes up to the plantation from here and it’s guarded by Busse the forester who sits up in a raised hide, and by a soldier – the local vicar let me in on that. It’s possible that Busse has got his dog with him.”

Wernstein held up half of a whole salami sausage and grinned.

“Go on my son.”

“I hate salami – you know that don’t you.”

“The loveliest tree is standing pretty much by itself in the middle of the nursery. You’ll be able to get a good look at it from the little rise before the plantation.”

“Your Reverend’s well informed.”

“Well there’s no one to stop him making observations on his walks through the woods. Let’s keep on going. The plantation is fenced off, Busse’s raised hide is about fifty metres off the track and the soldier patrols along the outside of the fence. We’re going to carefully stalk up to the fence – and then use these here” – Richard held up the bolt clippers – “snip snip. Dreyssiger, me and you will slither up to the Corpus delicti and start sawing. Herr Wernstein keeps watch. Wernstein, can you imitate a screech owl?”

Wernstein put his fingers together and blew into the hollow under his two parallel thumbs.

“Sounds convincing,” said Richard, nodding approval. “Twit-oo-woo twice if things get dodgy. And from now on just whispers and what’s necessary!”

Walther the baker had a mother with heart problems. That made him basically sympathetic to Richard’s request. He was, after all, a baker – and, what’s more, a private baker. “Taxes,” he said raising his floury hands, “the taxes, Doctor Hoffmann. We actually need a new oven but they take everything off us in tax.” Richard gave him the sultanas out of Alice and Sandor’s parcel.

“Doctor, I’ll bake you the twenty stollen cakes, but I’ll need medicines for my mother.”

“Then I’ll write you a prescription.”

“No, no, they’re special ones prescribed by Dr. Tietze. From the Other Side. Actually from here, but manufactured for the Other Side. And then sent from the Other Side back home here.”

They waited behind a tree atop a small mound above the plantation, and observed things from there. They couldn't see the forester but they saw the soldier, wrapped up warmly with a Kalashnikov over his shoulder, pacing up and down in front of a gate in the fence. Every now and then he swung his arms, switched on a torch to illuminate the surrounding area and rubbed his hands together. He looked at his watch; and when the full hour came again he started off on his usual round.

"I'll bet he's back within fifteen minutes." Richard licked his forefinger and held it up to the breeze. It was blowing towards him, meaning Busse's dog wouldn't get wind of them. As soon as the soldier was out of sight, Richard gave the sign. Wernstein stayed behind. Dreyssiger and Richard flitted over to the fence in the shadows beside the track, Richard felt the tension on the fence and cut it open, almost without a sound. Criminal! – he thought, but the hole had to be big enough to get the spruce through. Hope no one will see the cut and I hope that uniformed idiot doesn't happen to flash on his torch right here when he comes back. They crawled into the plantation and straightened up again, wearily, amid densely-planted trees. They hung the Father Christmas coats on a bough – they'd only be in the way inside here and get torn – and started to work their way carefully towards the middle of the plantation. They could see the trees there, standing in more light, with a little white square hanging from each one. Dreyssiger put something over the front of his torch and lit the way warily. Names were written on each of the tags, all from high up people in the party – the name on the tag of the loveliest blue spruce was that of "Barsano". It was about three metres tall and was absolutely symmetrical.

The nurse from North Block 1 opened up the last packet of painkiller. Herr Kühnast was basically sympathetic to Richard's situation – "We could run a special shift. The real problem is that I can't get the workers. And it would have to be on a Saturday when the big bosses never show their faces." So Richard rounded up his students and took charge of a voluntary, unpaid Saturday shift at the pharmaceutical works. He loved these types of outings. As a university lecturer he was of the opinion that his students must know where they were studying, what they were studying and why they were studying it. Germany had once acted as the world's pharmacist and Dresden as the birthplace of pharmacology. The pharmaceutical works had grown up out of a merger between Madams Pharmaceuticals, Ghee Pharmaceuticals and Heyden Chemicals.

Heyden had been the first ever company to run industrial-scale production of acetylsalicylic acid, the raw material for Aspirin, the world's best selling medicine. Their main factory had been in Leipzig Street, in the plant of Gehe Pharmaceuticals, who had specialised in medical dressings. Now the factory's gutters hung down bent, the windows wore ties made of ash and the smiles on the faces of the prize-winning workers on the photos on Factory Street had been gnawed away at by sulphuric cancer. As had the notice *Temporary Workers Needed* written in chalk on the *Job Opportunities* blackboard, hanging on the outside of the porter's lodge.

"Pssst!" whispered Dreyssiger, raising his arm. They heard sticks snapping on the forest floor and scurried for cover.

"Have a look at that, there's your vicar, Reverend Magenstock," said Richard, ducking down, "the man himself together with one of his sons!"

Father and son crept stealthily straight towards the most beautiful blue spruce, stood still and listened for a second, in which Richard and Dreyssiger held their tongues, and then began to saw. Richard thought for a moment – should they leap out and say stop! We were here first! But Dreyssiger was moving already, walking with great, lunging steps towards Reverend Magenstock. "Who are you then?" exclaimed the Reverend in a bewildered tone. Dreyssiger flashed the torch in their faces. They were wearing black make-up, like they were Red Indians. "We were here first!" protested Dreyssiger, struggling to keep his temper.

"Oh . . . Herr Hoffmann," murmured Magenstock, putting his hand to his chest, "so this is what you had in mind when you asked me those questions." Richard gestured to Dreyssiger to switch off the torch. The four men stood in uncomfortable silence, with nothing to be heard but the whisperings of the trees.

"Herr Hoffmann, I suppose you're . . . doing this in the interests of your clinic." Reverend Magenstock breathed heavily. "You see, I'm doing this in the interest of my faith. This tradition emerged out of the lap of Christianity!"

Wernstein's "Twit-oo-woo," rang out that very moment. Magenstock and his son ran over to Barsano's blue spruce and swiftly finished sawing. Rich-ratch, rich-ratch. A dog added his bark to the medley. "Go on, beat it," barked Magenstock, in a remarkably coarse tone. Dreyssiger grabbed the joiner's saw but Richard forgot the bolt clippers in

the panic. Then you started seeing torch light pouring through the branches of the younger fir trees and the four men were running flat out over the forest floor, with cries of “stay where you are!” and “get them Rudo!” following behind them. A branch that his son running in front of him had held out recoiled to slap Magenstock in the face. In between the barks you heard Wernstein’s unceasing “Twit-oo-woos” which Richard thought quite pointless – they sounded like a doped-up cuckoo. “Stay where you are! Sta-ha-ay where you a-a-har!”

“This just isn’t on, Herr Kühnast, you can’t just allow God knows what kind of people in here. We’ve got hygiene regulations to follow, machine operation plans ...”

“They were only going to carry out tasks suitable for temporary workers,” retorted the chemist, defending himself. “We’ve been having difficulties in the Packaging Department for months.”

“Got nothing to do with it. What if something breaks or happens – what do you do then? The fact is that you should have discussed it with me first.” The expression on the face of Herr Kühnast’s boss changed. “On the other hand, you’re here now. Come and have a look at this Herr Hoffmann” he said, leading Richard into a walk-in cupboard full of typewriters. “All kaput! I’ve been trying for the last year-and-a-half to get a technician to come from your brother-in-law’s factory! You’ll get the heart medication and pain killers you need, if you get our typewriters fixed at last. And do give your brother my regards.”

“I’ll let you go, gentlemen, but only under one condition. One of you has to play Father Christmas for my boys,” grunted the forester, Busse. “The scallywags don’t believe a thing I do anymore.” Wernstein lost the toss.

Richard went to see Ulrich – with the First Party Secretary’s tree in tow – who’d said that he was prepared to send a technician to the pharmaceutical works. But only if he got a Christmas tree in return, with which his department could win the Socialist Challenge Cup, “Who’s got the loveliest Christmas Tree” – and the considerable cash prize attached to it.

“Chief Consultant Hoffmann to Professor Müller please,” rang out the announcement over the clinic’s tannoy. Müller was pacing up and down excitedly. “If only Reucker wouldn’t stare at me so triumphantly in the medical conference! I’ve got to control myself, Herr Hoffmann, and I don’t like having to control myself!” He pursed his lips into a sulky, raspberry pout. “But it’s no use. We’ll just have to admit defeat to General this year. I can’t believe that Reucker also got the job of heading the Christmas Tree Inspection Commission.”

“What? Not the Rector?”

“That’s just it – what a swindle!”

“We’re not giving up yet.”

“But Striezel Street Market is the only option that I can still see.”

“They’ve just got a few disabled stumps left – that would make us the laughing stock of the Academy.”

An idea flashed across Müllers face. “And branches, Herr Hoffmann, and lots of little branches.”

When the hour of the tree inspection finally arrived, however, Reucker coolly pulled a screwdriver out the pocket of his snow-white surgical gown, sought inside the tree for a number of seconds – in which Müller pressed his lips together into a small slit – and unscrewed a branch on the proudly-presented and surgically-symmetrical fir tree. The sisters, doctors, hospital cooks and care assistants hung their heads, the only sound the rustling of their uniforms. “The screwtree is not native to this region,” pronounced Reucker, letting the screw fall from on high into the outstretched hand of an assistant, who, engaged as he was to a nurse from Surgery, smiled smugly. And that evening on Planet Lane you could eat the best Stollen in the whole wide world.