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The Nativity Scene

Translated from Croatian by Johnatan Bousfield

To Heinrich Böll

In November 1984, the Disability Commission of the District Secretariat for Health ruled that Mister Ivo Mijun was entitled to early retirement. At the time Mijun was 55 years old, with a chronic kidney problem and two gallstone operations to his credit. In the mornings he heard a buzzing in his ears, southerly winds made him dizzy, and whenever the bora changed into a sirocco, he would experience panic attacks and cramp in his left hand.

He had spent October and much of November collecting a folder of medical reports as thick as a deck of cards. "With a bit of luck", the doctor had told him, "you should qualify for a disability pension with this lot".

The next morning Ivo went to work as usual in the shipyard library. Sitting at his desk registering catalogue numbers, he just couldn't get the doctor's words out of his head. Instead of spending whole mornings staring at fading posters for local wine and putting text books on hydrodynamics in alphabetical order, he would have entire days to himself. He would be able to go to the fish market every morning, stop off for coffee at Automat, and spend the early evening out in his small boat searching for squid. And it was at this thought that Mister Mijun, sitting under the wan neon lights of the library, flexed his moustache into a smile.

In mid November he went for his kidney examination, picked up the results, and submitted his request for early retirement to the commission. At the end of the month they met to examine his case. Mister Ivo sat at the table and watched as three serious-looking men discussing the state of his heart, nerves and entrails. They concluded by signing off his request. On November 30th, the morning after Yugoslavia's Republic Day, Ivo Mijun became a pensioner.

It wasn't even ten o'clock when he got home. He threw the medical files in a drawer and sat down at the kitchen table. It was too late to go to the fish market, and too early to make a start on lunch. It was raining outside, and the leaves in the park were being mashed underfoot into a porridge-like sludge. There just wasn't anything he could think of doing.

Vesna got home from school at one. Zora returned from work at two, bringing chard, parsley, and a couple of salpa fish. Vesna sat down to do her biology homework, Zora got the fish soup on the go, and Ivo Mijun simply stood beside the kitchen table, seized by sudden doubt. It occurred to him that maybe early retirement hadn't been such a good idea after all.

The first day passed, followed by the second, then the third, and Mister Mijun was increasingly overtaken by this new sense of gloom. He drifted aimlessly around the house, desperately waiting for 7 o'clock to come around so he could switch the TV on. And then one evening, while they were watching *Dynasty*, Zora suggested that he should take up something useful. "It'll soon be Christmas", she said, "why don't you have a look in the storecupboard to see what state the crib and the decorations are in". The next morning Ivo pulled four boxes of damp cardboard out of the cupboard and had a good look at the contents. Lying in the boxes wrapped in crumpled newspaper were plaster lambs, shepherds and wise men, wire angels, wreathes of tinsel, and some Christmas lights. Jesus, Joseph and Mary were in reasonably good condition, but the stable itself had been crushed out of shape.

“I’ve decided to make a new stable for the nativity scene” Mister Ivo announced just after lunch. Vesna raised her eyebrows in bemusement at this suggestion, but Zora immediately declared it to be an excellent idea. That same afternoon Ivo went to the modelling shop to buy screws, strips of teak, and modelling paints. When the stable was ready, he also made a grass lawn from green baize and some little trees from tufts of sponge. He then threaded a length of wire through the stable canopy in order to light up Joseph’s lantern. On Christmas Eve, as the aroma of Zora’s cod-and-potato stew wafted from the kitchen, Ivo laid the nativity scene out beneath the Christmas tree. He put a waterproof sheet on the parquet floor, covered it with three square metres of moss, and set the shepherds, sheep, wise men, geese and goose girls on top of it. In the middle, right beneath the tree’s branches, he placed the stable. “Dad, this is fabulous!” Vesna exclaimed. Zora looked fairly satisfied too. As they slurped their stewed cod, Zora gazed pensively at the lit-up stable. “Ivo has calmed down a bit at last”, she reflected, “it looks like retirement will be good for him after all.”

That year they didn’t take down the tree or the nativity scene as usual on January 6th, leaving them out until the end of the month. In September Ivo announced to Zora and Vesna that this year he was planning something special. He cleared his work table, bought a set of woodworking tools, brushes, paint thinner, woodworking glue and tacks. His former study was transformed into a workshop. Every day after breakfast he would shut himself away and work until lunchtime. He would then have a snooze before drilling and sanding away again right up until news time. Zora would spend the whole afternoon cooking, watching soap operas, doing the crossword or reading, while all that could be heard from Ivo’s room were monotonous sounds of drilling and scraping.

That Christmas they had the best nativity scene that Zora had ever seen. It was, admittedly, smaller than the one in the Church of Our Lady of Health, and it didn’t have running water like the one in St Dominic’s. But Ivo’s had more in the way of colour and detail. The other nativity scenes consisted of not much more than a manger, but Ivo’s also had a grotto, a stable and a threshing yard of yellow chalk. While the others had bits of mirror that were supposed to represent ponds, Ivo’s had a proper well complete with rope and bucket to bring up the water. While others had a drawing of Nazareth in the background, Ivo had made an entire little town of wooden cottages, houses and huts. The town had streets, crossroads, a cistern; Ivo had even planted one of his Christmas lights to make a street lamp. That Christmas their friends and neighbours came round just to see Ivo’s nativity scene. They were particularly impressed by the moss, the street light and the well. Nephew Davorin brought his three children, and the parish priest Don Damian came round at Zora’s persuasion. On Boxing Day they were even visited by their neighbor Neno, a party member who was certainly not in the habit of placing a Christmas crib at the foot of his tree. He sat in front of Ivo’s masterpiece, dipped a biscuit in a glass of prošek dessert wine, and gazed at the tiny glades, thickets and lit-up streets. ‘My God Ivo, this is really something else’ he said entranced, and sipped away at his prošek.

In January, Ivo asked Zora if they could leave both tree and nativity scene out a little longer. Zora wasn’t keen on the idea because the tree had already begun shedding its needles, and the room had taken on the damp smell of an antique shop. However she kept quiet about it and let Ivo have his way, and Baby Jesus stayed put in his manger throughout the first week of February, then the second, and then the third. As the beginning of March drew near, Zora finally decided to take the nativity scene down. She took advantage of a breezy Saturday, throwing the windows open to allow in the crisp fresh air, and packing Ivo’s opus in boxes. When she had finished, she swept the floor, gave the house a good airing, and stacked Ivo’s creation in the corner. When she got back from the market, Ivo didn’t say a word, although his face was a picture of barely suppressed irritation.

In 1986 Mister Ivo's nativity scene grew even bigger. At the end of August he brought a bag of plaster home from the builders' suppliers. Just before the Christmas holidays he cleared the living room of table and chairs, and pushed the chest of drawers against the shorter wall in order to free up a whole side of the room for the nativity scene. He used the plaster to fashion a mountain massif, some small hills and a river gorge. He placed village houses on the plaster slopes, and adorned the mountain tops with thickets made from twigs and green-painted sponge. An extended, enlarged stable was placed on the hillside. Behind the hills of Palestine, electric stars and a brassy yellow moon twinkled away on the wall.

With the nativity scene already laid out in early December, it didn't take long for the first visitors to show up. Neighbours and friends would ring the doorbell bearing walnut cake, cookies and bakewell slices, before sitting down to gaze entranced at Ivo's latest wonder. Most of all came the children. And not just the offspring of their own extended family, but also the children of neighbours and distant acquaintances. Mister Ivo would light up the nativity scene for each one of them, dimming the lights in the rest of the house. The girls would stand immobile in front of the illuminated wonder as if stunned, while the boys would launch themselves head first onto the artificial turf ready to cradle camels, wise men and treasure-filled knapsacks in their hands. "I'm going to set up a nativity scene myself next year", declared neighbour Neno when he brought his daughter Klara over to see Ivo's latest work. Zora said nothing in reply, offering Neno some almond-flavoured balls and a glass of herb brandy. And thus they sat looking at the nativity scene, twinkling away in the twilight of late afternoon.

They couldn't eat their Christmas dinner in the living room that winter. They set the table in the small kitchen instead and dined, as every year, on squid risotto followed by cod paté and cod-and-potato stew. They sat round the small kitchen table with their elbows rubbing against each other as they ate. "Next year dad ought to make a smaller nativity scene" said Vesna as she lunged across the table in search of the pepper. Zora kept quiet, and shot Vesna a hostile stare.

It wasn't until mid March that they packed the nativity scene away. Once they'd taken everything down and put it in boxes, the living room was left bare save for a scattering of pine needles, scraps of tinsel and tufts of moss. Before them lay four boxes filled little houses, figures and plaster boulders of the disassembled mountain range. "What on earth shall we do with it all" asked Zora, to which Ivo answered "well we certainly won't be throwing any of it away." They carried it off into Ivo's former study, putting the plaster hills at the back and the boxes by the door. The door itself would hardly close. "It's a shame to leave it lying around like this. It'll all fall to bits" said Ivo, shutting the door behind him. By 1987 Vesna was in her last year at school. In September she started cramming for the entrance exam for medical school, and Mister Ivo disappeared into his workshop. While Vesna studied the structure of the DNA spiral and the different varieties of ribonucleic acid, Mister Ivo assembled a two-horse coach, then set to work on a tiny railway station, a church tower and a town clock. The nativity scene went up in November and it was bigger than ever. It had a twin-track railway line, a small electric train, a tunnel through the hillside and a fountain with real water. Once again the local kids tramped through the house; once again the neighbourhood women rang the doorbell bearing walnut cakes and biscuits; and once again Neno came round with his daughter. "I made a nativity scene myself this year" Neno proudly announced on December 20th, and he invited them over to see it. Standing beneath an artificial tree was a small wooden house, surrounded by three sheep. Fashioned from a piece of damp bread, Neno's Baby Jesus looked somewhat shapeless and awkward.

Despite Vesna's protests, the Mijuns had their Christmas dinner in the kitchen again that year. And when they packed the nativity scene away in spring, they found that it no longer fitted in the study. Six

large boxes, a plaster hillside and a model railway lay before them. "Vesna will be going to university in the autumn" Ivo said, "and until then we'll just have to get by".

Vesna did indeed go away to university. By December she had taken her anatomy test and her civil defence exam, and arrived home for the holidays just before Christmas. She found her room already occupied. The place where her bed had once been was now a mountainside complete with cascading waterfalls, while the whole living room was taken up by a plateau covered with tiny orange trees made from yellow and green cotton wool. The little town of Nazareth had become a major urban centre: it had public lighting, a railway station, a theatre and a museum, and Mister Ivo's universe of anachronisms had ancient Romans riding in tram cars and waiting for trains. "So where am I going to sleep?" Vesna asked irritably, while mother gave her arm a light squeeze. "Don't make a fuss, dear" she said, taking her to one side, "you know how much this means to him".

On Christmas Eve they all went to midnight mass. While Don Damjan lit a candle decorated with the Croatian tricolor and prayed for a homeland in danger, Vesna squeezed her eyes shut and mumbled her own prayer. She prayed that she would pass Anatomy 1 and that everything would be OK with her mum and dad. She took a look at them. Zora was kneeling on a hassock with eyes closed, lost in prayer. Dad was looking this way and that as if the whole service was an utter bore.

The next morning Vesna went round to Neno the communist's house to wish him a happy Christmas. Neno offered her a slice of walnut cake while little Klara climbed up onto his knee. As they chatted, Klara poked Neno in the ear with a pencil and pulled at his nasal hairs. Eventually Neno showed Vesna his nativity scene. It was a small one, bought in a shop. "I gave up this year", he said, "I'm no good at making things like your dad."

In 1991 the war started, and in 1995 it came to an end. Vesna graduated in 1997, and by 1998 she was specializing in hematology. She came home each Christmas, finding her mother getting older and the nativity scene getting larger. The hallway had long since become a river gorge, her room the slope of a large hill, and the living room a grand city complete with flyovers and tram lines. Ivo's nativity scene now included a ski resort, a desert and a cargo port, and Baby Jesus lay in a manger surrounded by seashells, pebbles and little candles in various colours. The space where the kitchen table used to be was now occupied by the Virgin Mary. Wearing a cloak of blue plaster, she cast her prayer-filled eyes up towards the kitchen ventilator.

In 1999 Vesna met Frane for the first time. Within two weeks they were meeting up for coffee, within four weeks they were officially an item, and by the autumn they were living together in a small rented flat in Zagreb. Vesna would phone home on Wednesdays and Sundays, talking to Zora each time, but only occasionally to her father. That autumn she told her parents that she wouldn't be coming home for Christmas. She and Frane had booked a winter break in Prague. For Vesna, the fact that Frane would not be witnessing one of her father's creations came as something of a relief.

In February Zora passed away. She died instantly, of a stroke that came without warning in the hallway. When Mister Ivo came home from the butcher's he found her lying motionless in the canyon, her face plunged into green polystyrene. They buried her at Lovrinac Cemetary three days later. Sharp stormy air was blowing in from Mount Mosor. Vesna's black coat flapped in the wind, and father stood before the hearse, motionless, stiff and waxy.

During the spring she travelled from Zagreb once a month to see how he was. She would arrive on Saturday with the night train, make him some beef soup and take him for a walk. He was clean-shaven and well turned out, but thinner than ever, and his complexion still had an unhealthy, waxy tone. "Do you get out much dad?" she asked, to which he answered with an uncertain nod of the head. On

Sunday, she asked him if he felt like going to mass. "I haven't been since your mother died", he answered, "what good would that do?".

Next Christmas she came to Split with Frane. They drove up to her father's flat, unloaded dried cod and cakes from the car, and rung the doorbell. He ushered them in. What greeted them exceeded Vesna's worst nightmares.

There wasn't a single corner of the flat that wasn't taken up by the nativity scene. From the bedroom flowed waterfalls that powered watermills, a railway junction spread along the hallway, shepherds and shepherdesses looked down from plaster clifftops on a sea of blue crepe. Frane stood in the middle of the room totally stunned, mutely observing this flickering, twinkling and bubbling world in miniature. They gave the old man a peck on the cheek and turned towards the door. They slept at Frane's parents', in Kaštela.

"You need to give that nativity scene a rest" she told her dad the following week when she called him from Zagreb. "Why not go to town once in a while, spend some time in the countryside, or go fishing. You need a change". "Leave me be" he answered hollowly, and spent the rest of the conversation mostly in silence. It seemed to Vesna that he couldn't wait to put the phone down.

In 2001 Frane completed his speciality training and applied successfully for a job in the immunology department in Split. In April Vesna called her father and told him they were moving back. "We were thinking of staying with you for a while, at least until I find a job." Ivo Mijun didn't answer. He simply breathed into the mouthpiece for a long time and made uncertain mumbling noises.

In June Vesna arrived in Split to prepare for the move. Her father barely allowed her through the door. Once inside, she saw that the nativity scene from last winter was yet to be dismantled. A canyon and a railway line still ran through the hallway. Throughout the house stood dozens of twinkling stables with their dozens of Marys and Josephs, their dozens of Baby Jesuses in plaster, wood, clay and plastic. The mountain range now reached window height.

Ivo took her into the kitchen and made some coffee. They drank in silence. "I don't know how we'll manage, my girl" he finally said with nervousness. "What would you do here anyway, you can see that there's not enough room". "There would be room if you got rid of this monstrosity" Vesna answered. And then Ivo Mijun angrily struck the table with his hand. The coffee pot jumped from the blow.

In late summer Vesna and Frane got married in a hotel in Kaštela. Vesna invited her father to the wedding, and Mister Ivo sat out the ceremony in a corner of the room, glancing at his watch. The same summer he made three more Christmas cribs, two small ones and a larger one with a Jesus that lit up. In July 2003 Vesna gave birth to a 7lb baby girl. As soon as she came out of the maternity ward, she rang her father to tell him the news. She didn't invite him to come and see the baby. And she didn't suggest that they should pay him a visit either.

In autumn, Mister Mijun prepared his last, greatest work. He brought back six bags of plaster from the builders' suppliers and built a full-scale grotto along the back wall of the bedroom. It had a jagged entrance and a convincingly cave-like interior, with sharp, heavy stalagmites hanging from the bedroom ceiling. He stood a life-size Mary and Joseph in front of the grotto. Gazing at the Virgin Mary, he was reminded of Zora. "If only she could see this", he thought, momentarily laying his spatula aside.

He finished the nativity scene at the beginning of December. He hoped that people would call round to see it. But since Zora's death, less and less people were in the habit of coming round. No longer were there any visits from neighbours, acquaintances, or colleagues from the shipyard. His nephew Davorin nowadays delivered his Christmas greetings by telephone. Neno was his only visitor. He brought Klara, a big girl now, together with a Christmas wreath and a bowl of fritters covered in icing sugar, and sat

down to drink a quick glass. They sat for a long time in front of the neon crib, sipping their carob brandy and saying mostly nothing. Once he'd gone, Ivo saw that Neno hadn't actually drunk a single drop. His glass of brandy sat untouched, smeared around the rim with a thin layer of unwashed grease. In 2006 Mister Mijun's granddaughter started kindergarten. In 2008 she sang carols and played the part of the moon in the kindergarten's Christmas concert. Vesna invited Ivo to the performance. He put on one of his better suits and gave himself a good shave. The kindergarten was in a new part of town and he hardly found it. He sat down in the back row and had a look around. The kindergarten had been decorated for Christmas, and there was a nativity scene behind the childrens' choir. The children began to sing. As the little sopranos clashed in unharmonious confusion, Mister Ivo Mijun gazed at the expanded polystyrene moon, the papier-macher grotto, the plastic shepherds and the mass-produced wise men.

When it had all finished, he said goodbye to his granddaughter and went home. It was a bit cold in the house so he decided to switch the heating on. And then, just once more before going to bed, he decided to check that everything was in its proper place. He smoothed down the moss, straightened the polystyrene tree trunks, and righted the shepherds. He undertook a thorough inspection of the goose girls, Holy Virgins, Roman soldiers and Baby Jesuses. He switched on the railway, the watermill, the windmill and all three waterfalls. He switched on the lights in the stable, the lights in Nazareth's houses, and the Christmas lights on the tree. He also set the musical bells going. The Nativity Scene now rattled, rang and hummed, and twinkled in dozens of uncoordinated colours. When he had done all this, he sat down for a while to admire his work.

And then he noticed that it really was rather cold. He halted the waters of the stream, quietened the bells, switched off the lights, and contentedly tucked himself up in bed.