

THE LOPSIDED KASIMIR

Every winter whole gangs of forestry workers travel to the forest plantation area on the west-facing slope - as they did this year. The time to cut down the Christmas trees has arrived again. Taking part again are Herman and his friend Bill. "Look, the lopsided Kasimir is still there!" Bill laughed and pointed to a small fir standing in a particularly steep part of the slope. The meagre little tree tried to reach upwards from its place between the boulders and scree. The brittle trunk grew from under the side of a boulder as the roots sought to gain a hold amongst the scree on the barren ground. You can bet this seedling was not planted there by anyone on purpose. Perhaps the puny little plant was simply thrown aside as worthless - and survived despite its apparent fate.

The two young men parked their truck and began to work. The mature trees that had grown big and imposing were the first to be toppled, then the medium-sized and then, finally, the small trees. All were tied down on the back of their truck. "And...?" Bill looked questioningly at Herman, "what are we going to do about Kasimir?" "Hmm, let's take it with us as well", he decided. "I suppose nobody will want it with its bent trunk and thin branches, but it will land in the shredder soon enough", Bill sighed. Then, all at once, Bill's face broke into a huge grin. He fetched a spade from the truck and began to dig Kasimir out of the ground. Bill was only able to dig out a small root ball from under the boulder, several thin roots were torn off and loose earth fell away. But when he looked, Bill was satisfied with what he had done.

Once their day's work was over, and their load securely tied down, the men made their way home.

The next day, preparations had already begun for the big sale in the town. Temporary fencing was put up and the fir trees leaned against

it according to size, so buyers could purchase the nicest looking ones.

A week passed and the remaining trees were getting fewer and fewer so that on Christmas Eve the haggling began - as it did every year. Herman and Bill enjoyed praising the remaining trees to the cheerful customers enjoying the Christmas spirit. Unfortunately, nobody wanted to take Kasimir off their hands. Some smiled pityingly; others grimly shook their heads and wondered how anybody could have the gall to offer such a puny little tree for sale.

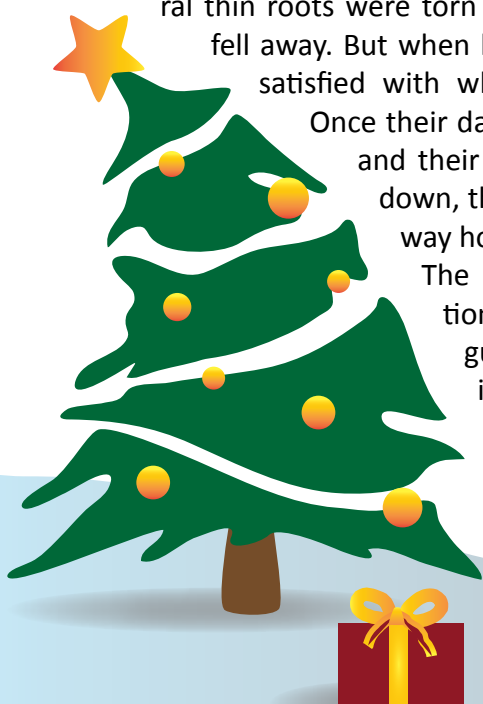
Herman and Bill were satisfied with the business. They had been able to sell most of the Christmas trees. They cheerfully stowed away the remaining trees on the back of the truck, so they could be shredded after the festive holiday. So Kasimir landed along with the other leftover trees. And because there weren't so many trees left, Herman and Bill didn't bother to secure the load with ropes. They got into the cab and made their way home.

"At home in Ireland", Bill began to say, "we meet up with friends and acquaintances in the pubs on Christmas Eve. We drink together and talk about the past year."

"Here Christmas Eve belongs to the family, Father Christmas visits the children and hands out his presents" Herman replied.

"Oh, Santa Claus comes to visit us as well!" Bill confirmed enthusiastically. "But he comes down the chimney during the night. And Christmas day is a day for the family. All of the children and grandchildren visit the old man and the old woman..." Bill suddenly went quiet and turned to look out of the window. "Most of the children go home... But not always all of them", he explained quietly.

Herman looked at his friend out of the corner of his eye. Then he made a decision: "Hey Bill, are you doing anything in particular this evening?" he asked.





“Why don’t you come to my sister’s place? We always hold a Christmas Eve party with her four nippers and the grandmother-in-law. They would love to put on a real German Christmas for you, and I ...,” he gave his friend a playful shove in the side, “... I would have some support entertaining the four children!”

Bill beamed. “A real German Christmas? Fantastic! Of course we will entertain the children - I’m good at that!” He grinned quietly to himself at the thought of his nine younger sisters and brothers.

Just at that moment Bill hastily grabbed the door handle as Herman swerved violently and slammed on the brakes at the same time. Cursing he wound down the side window and spat out a salvo of swear words at a swaying roller skater.

“Boy, oh boy”, he moaned after a while, “I only just missed whoever that was. Did you see that idiot? And on the bridge at that!”

Bill looked at him concerned, then he grinned. “Nobody was hurt, right? Don’t swear Herman, let’s just look forward to the Christmas party.”

Meanwhile under the bridge: The elderly Ena, Carl sporting a long beard, Tom, the former sailor, Carl-Ludwig and quiet Maria were passing round a bottle of red wine. They had taken refuge under the bridge to save them from the winter winds. Here at the embankment between the bare bushes, empty cola cans and unhesitatingly discarded refuse of a throw-away society, this is where they found some shelter and peace away from the Christmas madness and turmoil in the entrances to underground stations. That is where they would go later when everybody else celebrated, dry and warm in their homes. The entrances to the underground stations gave them a roof over their heads. These five were a merry bunch, apart from Maria, who always followed the discussions with amazement without adding anything herself.

“Merry Christmas”, Tom flourished the bottle and passed it on to the elderly Ena. She took a swig before placing the bottle on the ground. Then she took

a paper handkerchief out of a plastic bag, unfolded it, twisted the middle of it together and pulled on the corners to create a rosette.

“When it is empty”, she confided secretively with a wink to all present, “then we’ll decorate the bottle with this!” She inserted the rosette into the neck of the bottle.

“Wouldn’t it be nice if we had a proper Christmas tree?” they heard quiet Maria say. All of them looked up. Carl-Ludwig moved closer to Maria and placed an arm around her shoulders. “If you wish, we can call into the Church afterwards. They have a lovely big tree.” Maria smiled quietly.

At that precise moment they heard tyres screeching and something rumbling on the bridge followed by the cracking of branches on the embankment above them, a buzzing noise followed and then... “Thud!” a dark bundle landed right next to them. Startled, they looked at one another. Tom was the first to stand up and take a closer look at what had fallen from the heavens. Beaming, he turned around to his friends: “It’s a Christmas tree!” He carefully stood the meagre little tree upright. It had lost a few tips of its branches as it fell. Needles trickled gently to the ground. Two of the three-piece crown had broken off. Clods of earth fell from the withered roots. Nevertheless, none of the five friends could find any fault with this gift from heaven. Everything was perfectly still for quite a while.

It appeared to be a miracle! In silence they assumed that someone somewhere had heard their wish for something festive.

Carl-Ludwig was the first to break the silence. “Do you remember what little Martha said?” he asked mysteriously. “She always said that the only thing she feared was to be lonely at Christmas!” “That’s right”, Ena agreed, “that’s what she said when she moved into the summer house with Otto!” “And Otto...” he continued to spin the story, “... died three months



ago.” “Do you think she would be pleased”, suggested Maria, “if her old friends were to visit her and plant a Christmas tree for her in the garden?”

They all agreed unanimously that it would make little Martha happy. They made a couple more rosettes from paper handkerchiefs, cut the silver paper that Tom pulled out of his bag into thin strips and hung them over the branches. Ena made colourful paper bows out of the glossy advertising section from the day before yesterday’s newspaper; then she tied them to the branches.

Finally, they set off. The allotment was not all that far away. They were able to find Martha’s and Otto’s garden quite easily. The windows were dark. Nevertheless, they knocked on the locked door. They had to try several times until the familiar face of their former comrade appeared in the gap between the door and the frame.

Carl-Ludwig flourished a lighter back and forth in front of Kasimir, to allow Martha to examine the Christmas present they had brought with them. At first she was speechless, then her sad eyes began to light up as she recognized the tree and her old friends.

Finally, she ran laughing around the corner of the summer house to fetch a battered old shovel, which she proceeded to hand over to Tom: “Well, start digging! This is exactly where I want it to stand! This will be its place of honour. I will quickly go fetch a bucket of water to help it settle in!” She ran enthusiastically from one place to the next. “That’s right, this is absolutely the right spot for it!”

Once Kasimir had been buried, carefully trodden down and watered to ensure it felt contented in its new home, they looked at it with pride: Ena, Carl, Tom, Carl-Ludwig, quiet Maria and little Martha.

And then little Martha invited her friends to

join her in the summer house. They lit a candle, listened to Christmas music from the croaky sounding portable radio and ate gingerbread – the good sort covered with chocolate.

Freely adapted from a story by: Octavia Bender

