

SAMPLE
TRANSLATION

MARUŠA KRESE
ALL MY CHRISTMASES

PUBLISHED BY: MLADINSKA KNJIGA 2006

TRANSLATED BY: TINA MAHKOTA

ORIGINAL TITLE: VSI MOJI BOŽIČI

NUMBER OF PAGES: 110

Maruša Krese: All My Christmases

Selected Chapters

All My Christmases, All My Life

I could have died years ago, actually. So they say. I'm walking along a street in Berlin. The shop windows are glistening as if the shops were open for the very last time, as if the world ended tomorrow, as if people had never shopped around in their lives. Tears are running down my cheeks. All my Christmases, all my life, all my children, all my nights spent baking cakes and sewing hand-made gifts. All the joy of presents, all those tiny sorrows as presents are being opened, all the waiting at a candle-lit Christmas tree, and all the questions asked with a blank gaze: »What are we going to do now?«

I'm sitting alone in my Berlin flat. Should I head off to see my family more than one thousand kilometres away? I don't want to go back. Once upon a time I had a strong wish finally to be alone.

Biscuits, tea and candles

The snow is so deep that my child nearly got lost in it. “Ana, Ana,” I shout. But Ana is determined to go for a walk, God knows why, at thirty or forty degrees below zero.

We are living in Iowa City by the Iowa River in the state of Iowa. We are living in a house on a hill top; the only hill as far as the eye can see, at least three hundred, possibly one thousand miles in the distance. Ours is the largest pear tree too. In Iowa City, at least, that is. The house is owned by an elderly man, a true Democrat through and through. On Election Day he brought us fresh fish. “To celebrate the day and a Democratic government,” he said. Unfortunately, it was Nixon who won, Ana is a vegetarian, and I never eat fish, and the Poet can’t fry them unaided.

Good heavens, where have I ended up? I’m chasing Ana in the snow. Ana is wearing a rabbit fur coat my mother bought for her in Ljubljana, and I’m wearing a Salvation Army coat from Chicago. I can’t wait to be back in Ljubljana to show it to people. Bombs are falling on Vietnam, and I’m making cookies to decorate the Christmas tree and to give away as presents. I’ve got loads of jam left over from the autumn. I had a terrible headache then, and doctors couldn’t identify the actual cause, and they filled my veins with morphine, so I lost my sense of proportion completely, at least as far as jam jars are concerned. Quite possibly I lost my sense of proportion for other things too, but the loss is most blatant with jam. Still, I can now give jam away as presents. I managed to get a plastic Fisher Price radio in a sale for Ana, and it cost me as much as I was paid for cleaning the house, in other words, as much as a reward for my Live Art. The only genre of art that I could never make any sense of was poetry, which is probably why I married a poet, and I was blissfully ignorant of the fact that this makes you a public property and that your every sorrow, every laugh and every secret may end up on paper and become a complete stranger to you. Who on earth is this person, you wonder, when reading about her in black and white?

I’m following Ana’s footsteps in the deep snow. “Isn’t it pretty?” she says, laughing. The snow is pretty, the snow is white. But the sand in the desert, the sea at the edge of the desert. What in hell’s name brought me here among American rednecks? Was it my craving for something higher, different and more holy? If I stay here just a bit longer, I won’t be able to tell a cow from a pig. I’m freezing. “Mummy, when is he coming for Christmas?” Ana runs to the house with her runny nose. We’re drinking tea and waiting for a miracle. The phone rings. It’s the Poet calling from San Francisco: “Happy Christmas, my darlings. I’m arriving tomorrow with my male lover.” Ah, Christmas – why should I give a toss? I replace the receiver, and Ana is screaming: “I want my Daddy! I want my Daddy!” I fetch Janov’s *The Primal Scream* given to me by a friend for my birthday. “I want my Daddy, I want my Mummy.” “Ana, you can make paper boats and airplanes out of this book,” I say to her, pushing the psychobabble into her hands. “I want my Daddy!” she cries, undeterred.

We go to a Midnight mass at a nearby Catholic church with my Jewish friends. As we walk, the snow is cracking under our feet, exactly as it was cracking, according to my father, when he was a child. The priest delivers his sermon for God, the nation and the President beneath the American flag. We look at each other and leave the church. Justice rules the world. Bombs are falling on Vietnam, Ana sleeps blissfully, and the poet is in pursuit of happiness in San Francisco. I'm sitting in my car, a Ford for a hundred bucks, and I'm driving around Iowa City in the snow, beneath a clear sky, passing the houses with illuminated reindeer and elks and sleighs and angels and red stars. I tell a lie, there are no red stars. I'd like to go home, by boat, to a place across the ocean, if I wasn't so embarrassed to admit how difficult I find it here. I stop at a Happy Shopping supermarket. It's still early. Three or four a.m. But I'm not alone. I'm walking along the aisles watching people I never see in daytime. A friend told me they lived in trees with squirrels.

Ana is sitting in her nightie by the window. She's waiting for the Poet and listening to her Fisher Price radio happily. There's a nice smell of cookies, tea and candles in the house. "Happy Christmas, my little darling."

Travelling on Christmas Eve

I'm listening to the radio. In tunnels high up in the Alps. It's become almost a habit of ours to drive from Berlin to Ljubljana on Christmas Eve, changing radio stations, listening to every possible cover version of *Silent Night* in every possible language. The motorway is empty, and at every service area people are staring at us with compassion. The cashier at a petrol station, I think it was near Leipzig, wishes us a Merry Christmas and gives us a small plastic Christmas tree as a present. She probably feels sorry for the kids with such an irresponsible mother. However, we think we're being extremely smart. Yes, smart, for this is the way to avoid unnecessary tears, superfluous grudges, last-minute Christmas presents, bought mainly on account of their pretty wrapping and a need to have as many as possible under a tree, and due to a bad conscience. But travelling on Christmas Eve, we manage to avoid kissing and hugging and inventing unnecessary lies.

I seem to be having this excruciating pain in my heart far too often recently, mostly when I'm driving or lying in bed. I seem to be too preoccupied with dying. I'm driving and wondering if any of the kids would react quickly enough if I lost control of the wheel. I seem to be too deep in my thoughts while I'm driving, reflecting on things I have failed to do in my life. But I never, ever, think of the things I did manage to achieve. Looking at my life like this, I find it hard to believe in it. But it is a real life, I have eyewitnesses. I always end up erasing everything and starting all over again. I seem to be a bit too old for that, and it's high time I came to terms with it. I've been constantly on the move from one country to another, from one town to another, and, if nothing else, from one flat to another. I'm always leaving behind cardboard boxes full of stuff that I might come to fetch one day. One day. This must be quite hard for the kids too, I guess.

We take a short break in the parking area and start running around in snow and counting stars in the sky. This is my first Christmas since my mother and father died. I hope it's not my turn yet. I'm fed up with all these aches and pains and all the foolishness, but I haven't even lived yet. It's a good job I haven't become an alcoholic.

The kids are enjoying a snowball fight, but then my youngest starts to cry because he's freezing cold. "How come Baby Jesus didn't freeze to death as soon as he was born?" he asks, trembling with cold. "You, jerk," his older brother replies. "Because he was Jesus, that's why." We're in the car again, driving to the next service area. We're drinking tea while we're waiting for apple strudel to be reheated. If their mother was a proper mother, she would have prepared a flask of hot tea in advance and made them sandwiches with love.

"You've missed Christmas," we're told at the border into Slovenia and are kindly waved on. Thank God for that, I think to myself while trying to guess what exactly the officer had in mind when he mentioned a missed Christmas? The Archbishop's television address? Or else, does the Slovenian president now address the nation on the telly at Christmas too? I must find out.

Christmas lights in Ljubljana are modest and beautiful. It's past midnight. You can see a lonely figure every now and then walking a dog, as well as young couples in no hurry whatsoever to go home. The traffic lights are stuck at amber. Every time I arrive in this city, I drive by my old primary school and my old high school where I was utterly miserable. I point out both buildings to my kids, and the youngest murmurs: "As if we didn't know already."

We arrive at my sister's who's still awake and ring the doorbell. She brings beef soup to the table. "Exactly like when Mum was still alive," she says. "Granny's soup was tastier though," says my youngest. Tears flood my sister's eyes. Should I slap my youngest? Not on Christmas Eve. "That's what happens when kids are raised without a father!" snaps my daughter. So, we're in for Christmas, no way out.

I'm sitting on the floor by the decorated tree. There are so many stories in all these wretched ornaments. We've bought so many over the years – over the centuries, it seems to me – we've broken so many, we've bought so many again. Small birds, bells, stars, balls, trees, mushrooms. And on the moss, instead of a nativity scene my sister has just put some sea shells.

My Children's Fathers

This year we have no real desire for Christmas. No one feels like going to the market where Christmas trees are sold. This winter we even managed to find our Christmas ornaments, which was no small achievement in itself, so, considering our effort, it wouldn't be totally amiss, well, in fact it would be highly appropriate, if someone gave us a Christmas tree as a present.

It's Christmas Eve, and Ana is sweeping the floor, David is racing around the flat with a vacuum cleaner, while Jakob is doing the dishes, and I'm making biscuits. A real idyll.

The phone rings. Perhaps someone has taken pity on us after all and will give us a tree.

"Hi, how are you?" asks one of my children's fathers. "Have you got a lovely tree yet?" he inquires. "We haven't got a tree," I reply, almost snapping at the receiver. "Have you got presents for them?" he asks. "We haven't got any presents, we haven't got a tree, we're not going skiing, we're not in the Caribbean," I laugh. "I knew you were a careless, no-good mother." I take this statement to be my Christmas present. Not for the first time, mind you.

I'm cutting out suns and moons and stars and comets from my biscuit dough. It's hot in the kitchen, but the smell is lovely. Should I wash my hair, I wonder, and then maybe I could find a tree after all?

The phone rings again.

"Hi, how are you?" the voice of children's father Number Two says at the other end of the line. "Will you be going out? Have you bought anything nice for the kids? Have you got a big tree?" My heart echoes in my ears. "Well, my darling, we haven't got a tree, we haven't got any presents, we're not going out, and I don't know if children will brush their teeth in the morning. There's no school tomorrow, and I would like to sleep, sleep, and sleep. Our skis all got lost when we last moved house. But we do have candles."

"Poor children," he sighs into the receiver and replaces it.

I'm staring at the biscuits, listening to the noise of the vacuum cleaner, and to Jakob humming quietly as he has a go at the dishes.

I make tea and pancakes. I take a look at our old tropical fig tree in the room. I pick up an ornament and wrap it round the leaf of the fig tree. I pick up another ornament and yet another, so that one by one the fig tree gets decorated. It looks like a Christmas tree after all. I'm looking at this miserable old fig tree that has been moving with us from one city to another. Sometimes it plays a trick on us, as if it had wilted or frozen. But then its leaves sprout again. So, my dearest, we do have a Christmas tree after all. We've made it this year again. David turns off the vacuum cleaner, Ana lights the candles, and Jakob says that this year our Christmas tree is the right size. It's bigger than last year's.

We're sitting in candle light, each of us alone, each of us holding a book, each of us nursing a pain. *Natural Beauty* for Ana, *Siddharta* for David, and *Winnie the Pooh* for Jakob. And I'm writing letters to their fathers.

"My darlings, how about sending your kids at least some tooth paste as a gift? As for me, I'll make sure their underwear is ironed."

Among Shells and Snipers

I jump over one gutter, and then another. It's dark, but I'm not allowed to switch on my torch. Or light a cigarette. This is how it goes in this miserable city. As soon as men on the hills surrounding the city catch a glimpse of light, they fire. And target people, just like that. There's no curfew, and people are wandering the streets of the besieged city, because it's Christmas. A Catholic Christmas. The men on the hills are having even more fun than usual shelling and sniping. I wonder what it's going to be like when it's the Orthodox Christmas. Hopefully I'll be out of this miserable hovel by Ramadan.

Not that I know, really, why I keep coming back to this city. To a city where I freeze and starve, where there's constant gunfire and people are dying on every corner. To a city where I'm on such an adrenaline high I don't fear anything.

Today is Christmas, and mortar fire is so intense, and snipers are so hard at work that you almost forget it's wartime, and think it's New Year's Eve in some peaceful part of this country. I run across the street, thinking of my children and my sister. The only people I'm genuinely fond of. Renata also. I'm thinking of my brother too, okay, I'm still fond of him, after all. Satellite phones have stopped working, so I can't give my children a call. But they know I'm alive and alright. Have I the right to involve them in this mess over and over again?

I'm hiding behind some gate. A friend of mine who insists that one never gets used to war, looks me in the eye, and asks: "But why have you come to this city? What is your connection?" I look him in the eye and begin to feel fear. I fear his despair. Actually, I'm very fond of him too. "I hope the guy with the jeep will be here soon. He promised he'd pick us up." "He's always late," I say. But I fear something might have happened to him. As a matter of fact, I'm fond of him too. Actually I'm fond of everyone in this city. They're the only people I can share my numb fear with. Whenever I leave this city, I always fear something might happen to some of them. And when I come back, we act out a normal life and meet for coffee, as if you could get coffee in this city, as if there'd been peace and prosperity for centuries, and as if it were the only place on earth where I could sleep really well. And laugh properly. It's not sorrow that rules this city, but joy.

From my hiding place I can see a garbage dump, but to be honest, the whole city is a garbage dump. Cats and dogs are crawling over the heap of rubbish; in daytime, it's people who are doing it. Cats and dogs don't fight over food, and people share their loot from the garbage dump. Humanitarian organizations distribute tinned food all over the city, but it is unclear whether the tins contain dog or cat food, or a weekly ration for an entire family. At any rate, today is Christmas, Christmas in the city with no Christmas trees, with no trees at all, actually, as every single tree has been burnt as a log to keep the people of this city warm for three days, this being a city that even God ceased to love. God has granted it nothing but a never ending fireworks display.

This city of misery. Is it really true it used to be as cheerful as its inhabitants claim? All its joy erupted like a volcano and turned the city into a sea of tears and blood, lies and theft, lack of forgiveness and silence.

Its people are nice though. Especially the men. They would hold a chair for you and your coat and light you a cigarette during the most intense gunfire and fear. They would reassure you, albeit with fear in their eyes, that you have nothing to be afraid of, and then run for shelter. It is only rarely they take the time to show you where you can hide. They can hardly wait for you to come back to their city and to bring them cigarettes, coffee and vodka. Money isn't a bad thing to bring either, should you find yourself in this mess.

I'm trying to think how to brighten up their miserable lives. I bring them rosemary, sea and shells; in May, I bring fresh cherries and onions; sometimes, I bring them garlic, aspirin, matches, pencils and warm socks. In winter time, I'm tempted to bring them long johns but I know this would hurt their manly pride, and they might slaughter me on the spot. In their hungry eyes I'm constantly turning from Madonna to a whore, and vice versa, so every time I vow to myself I will stop risking my life and I won't have to look at these bright soldiers from Nepal, Taiwan, or Columbia any more, and put up with patronizing Canadian pilots, and be afraid of Serb soldiers, of starvation and the freezing cold, and of the fear of my own children back home in Berlin. The inhabitants of this city adopt you as if you were one of them. The inhabitants of this city think you can't count to three on your own anyway, the inhabitants of this city think you have to live their lives. The inhabitants of this city are cruel to people who have forgotten them, but keep sending polite invitations to people who won't even listen to the details of their hellish ordeal. The inhabitants of this city behave as if you were born yesterday, and it was them who showed you the wisdom of life. The inhabitants of this city know very well that their misery and their obliterated city are killing you, and know that you won't take any of their ugly secrets into the world. The inhabitants of this city know that you'll bring word of their courage to the wide world outside, word of their upright attitude and enlightened spirit, too. The inhabitants of this city know that you won't write anything dark about them. The inhabitants of this city don't know that they haven't trapped you. The inhabitants of this city don't know that you keep wondering how they could be drinking merrily with their assassins until the last. The inhabitants of this city don't know that you keep wondering what on earth was going on in their city in peace time. The inhabitants of this city don't know that every time you take shelter from the shooting in a mosque, you immediately get orders what to bring along from Berlin when you visit next. And the inhabitants of this city don't know that you can see their narrow faces and big dark eyes in a military aircraft the very moment you leave the city, and you know you'll come back.

I'm still waiting for the jeep. I'm cold and I need to pee. I stopped feeling hungry a long time ago. "Why do you keep coming here?" my friend asks again. I close my eyes and think of my mother and my father. Am I really that burdened with their story and with their home country? With their naïve belief that life can get only better? I can see my father crying when he was decorated by comrade Tito, and soldiers firing a salute at his state funeral, I can see my mother singing songs of brave partisan fighting to my children when we drove in the car. I can remember us

always wanting to play partisans and Germans in our courtyard, but we never managed actually to do so, as we always ran out of kids who wanted to be the Germans. I can remember people all over the country crying their eyes out when Tito died. I can remember war heroes, the sick and the old, marching at his funeral. That was their final charge. Is this why I have come to this damn city? Have I come to erase these black and white memories?

I can hear car brakes during gunfire. A white jeep with no windshield stops outside my hiding place. My friend and I run for the car. "The car got broken into again," the driver says. This is like being in a movie, I think to myself. We drive across the city. Gunfire has receded. "This is a present for you, the Catholics," both my friends say. "To wish you a happy holiday, because we're Muslims, you know. It was a joke."

I'm lying in bed freezing. There's plastic foil with the UNHCR logo where a window pane should be. I want to fall asleep, but I'm hungry and grumpy. In my mind's eye, I can see the disgusting American military airbase in Frankfurt full of arms, but right now it seems more beautiful than paradise itself. I'm dreaming of a hotdog I'll have at a railway station in Frankfurt, and of a toilet that I'll be able to flush after use and wash my hands with warm water and soap afterwards. I'm dreaming of my kitchen in Berlin and of my early morning coffee and a cigarette. I'll be able to sit around in my pyjamas without freezing.

Snow is forecast tomorrow. This means gunfire will be even heavier, and there won't be any aircraft landing and taking off, and even the UNO soldiers will starve.

Christmas Day, Christmas Eve, Holy Night. It's all these damned non-believers' fault. Am I one as well? But I've been begging and praying for something all my life.

If Only I Had a Black Cape

It's Christmas, and I'm yearning for spring. In spring, we wear torn denim trousers and blouses made in India, we walk barefoot, and we're revolutionaries. We buried Marx and Lenin a long time ago. It's a bit more difficult to play barefoot revolutionaries in wintertime. Which is why I bought myself a long, hooded coat, in Trieste. It's dark brown and it reaches almost to my ankles. Still, if only I had enough money to buy a black cape as well, then, I believe, I'd be beautiful. And many a man would fall in love with me, I believe. Which is why I have to struggle to keep quiet most of the time, because if I do so, people will think I'm extraordinarily clever. Generally speaking, we all try to look like an extraordinarily intelligent generation, at any rate much more intelligent than the one before us, let alone than the generation of partisans. We all carry around French books, mostly by structuralists and the likes. And I won't admit to anybody, not a single soul, that I'm clueless. I won't admit it even to my younger sister.

So, it's Christmas, and I don't have a black cape. My brown coat looks almost black at night, and is vaguely reminiscent of a Franciscan habit. I'm meeting a friend in town, in front of the main post office. He's the only person far and wide in our cosy little country, who wears his hair long, which is why he's very often reluctant to walk the streets on his own. His fellow townspeople keep telling him to go to a jungle, or to a hairdresser's, or to join the queers or the feminists. When he feels like going for a walk, he gives me a call. "It's easier if we're together." However, the view of many of our capital's inhabitants is that I should, on account of my clothes, join the nuns in wintertime and the gypsies in the summer too.

Neither of us has told their folks at home where we're off to. And I'm beginning to regret it already, as it's so cold and it would be much more enjoyable to stay in and watch the telly. Even with my entire family, I don't care. These last few years Pepca has been bold enough to make a traditional potitzta cake for Christmas. Tea, potitzta cake and the telly. I wish I hadn't made this stupid appointment.

We walk briskly in fresh snow to a narrow street with old villas, built around the turn of the century. We ring the doorbell of a house in which you can hear shouting. A woman with tears in her eyes opens the door; our friend is from an Eastern bloc country, originally. Her husband is a communist, so Christmas in their home is a disaster, year in year out. The husband is shouting from the top of the stairs: "Someone will see you, tongues will wag, and you'll be the talk of the town again. Do you really have to go?" His wife slams the door and says: "I think I'm going to move out." "It'll all be fine tomorrow," we try to comfort her, while in actual fact we're thinking how horrible it is to be married. How can people be so stupid?

There's hardly anyone in the streets of our town which, rather than being illuminated, is almost dimmed. We're approaching a square in the town centre, a square built for the emperor Franz Joseph of Austria. I can't remember whether the emperor himself ever came to visit our town at all. I do remember learning about it in school, but I don't know how the story ended up. At any

rate, there's a big star-shaped park in town now with the Philharmonic building on one side, and a big church opposite it.

The church is crowded with people. One wonders where they have come from, since the town was almost deserted before. We're listening to the organ and the singing. I'm watching people, the old and the young and the kids. I do recognize a lot of them, some from the university, the others from television. I think of the husband of my friend from Eastern Europe. Considering this huge crowd of people attending mass, there must have been major arguments in many a household in Ljubljana tonight.

I'm looking at my friend who's listening to the priest and closes his eyes now, and I'm looking at my female friend crossing herself and kneeling. I'm looking into her deep dark eyes staring at something in the distance. I can feel her inner peace, and I do envy her. I envy her profound faith and all those moments when she can put her burden on God's shoulders.

We walk back to the villa in deep snow. "Would you like to come up for some tea?" she asks, very quietly. We shake our heads and wave goodbye. We're standing in the garden waiting for a light in her room to go on. She'll sleep well tonight, I believe.

My friend walks me home, and there he says it very quietly: "Good night." I climb the stairs quietly to my room, so no one can hear me. I'm standing by the window, looking at the snow. Why doesn't Christmas mean anything to me, why can't I unburden my burden so easily in a church? But I do know that someone is watching over me right now. It's just that I don't know which of the gods it is. Why was I born in this godless country? The sound of the organ is so beautiful.

I'm waiting for the spring and the sun, so that I can wear my colourful blouse again and walk barefoot in the grass, and be told again to join the gypsies. I forget so quickly that I have no god. I might go and watch the telly after all. *Peyton Place* or *Gone with the Wind* might be on.

Ana, Baby, Christmas

I'm laughing. In the past few years a phone call from Sarajevo on Christmas Eve has become almost a ritual in its own right. Muslims from a former brotherly republic want to wish me, a devout Catholic, a Merry Christmas, and then we reminisce about the war years. I guess we're even worse than veteran partisans.

I can hear whispering outside my door. I step out and see my sister, Ana's boyfriend Miha, who's become almost a member of the family now, David and Jakob. "You're going to be a granny, and I'm going to be an uncle," cries Jakob who's beside himself with joy. "Go and see Ana," my sister says. "We were teasing her how much weight she'd put back on. Then she told us she was pregnant. And now she's crying and has locked herself in the bathroom."

We're sitting on the edge of the bath. I give her a hug. Ana. Tivoli Park in Ljubljana. She's bouncing by the side of the pram in which baby David is sleeping. She's telling me something, and she goes on and on. "Do you remember, David, once you were a flower, and I was the sun, and we made up our mind to go and see Mummy?" In the maternity hospital she sits down, and won't even look at baby Jakob. Tears are running down her cheeks, she desperately needs money to go to the hairdresser's or to Paris. A long time ago. I combed my hair in the maternity hospital when she was brought to me for the very first time.

Ana. Baby. Christmas. Mum, I'm so afraid. I give her a bigger hug. Ana. Christmas. Candles. Snow. Silence. Will they have the baby christened?