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Hugo the Donkey

A CHRISTMAS TALE FROM THE BOOK "ETWAS ANDERE WEIHNACHTSGESCHICHTEN"
(CHRISTMAS STORIES WITH A DIFFERENCE) BY MINU,
PUBLISHED BY OPINIO.

OF COURSE THE TREE ALWAYS WAS THE PRETTIEST part of Christmas, but for us the crib was just as important. And most important of all was Hugo, the crib donkey.

Hugo is part of a very strange family story, and Christmas without Hugo would be like Christmas Eve without piles of presents: a disaster.

Hugo was mother's creation. Aunt Martha had given us her Nativity scene, making a great deal of fuss about her generosity and issuing dire warnings to "Take care: it's an heirloom from the Baroque period." To which my Great-Aunt Finni retorted: "Since when did they have rubber in Baroque times?"

That was a recipe for a Yuletide row, but it's only the preface to my story. Our rubber Holy Family from Nazareth was missing one essential item: the donkey. Because we'd heard so much at Sunday school about the gentle donkey in the stable, we were deeply disappointed. "Where's the donkey?" we cried when the crib we'd inherited from Aunt Martha made its first appearance in front of the Christmas tree. "Christmas isn't Christmas without a crib donkey!" I blurted. Rosie only added insult to injury: "This Joseph looks odd too. He's in a bad mood."

Whereupon Aunt Martha called us an "ungrateful lot" and threatened to strike the entire family from her will. But Mother saved the day with a fervent, "Si-i-lent night!" When everyone had joined in, she whispered to us, "I'm sure Father Christmas will bring you a donkey next year."

And so it was: Early on the morning of 24 December, the doorbell rang. Rosie ran to the front door, but no-one was there: just a package in white paper tied with a big, red bow.

"Well, well. What could this be?" Mother asked in feigned surprise, clasping her hands together. "Let the children open it," Father replied. And that's when we unwrapped the tissue paper to reveal Hugo the donkey.

Many years later, Mother told us how she'd hunted all round town for a Nativity donkey. Alas, in vain. There had been owls and Baby Jesuses, the Virgin Mary in all sorts of poses and Joseph with or without his staff, but no donkey. In desperation she had finally bought a lump of clay. She looked at us and grinned: "You know how hopelessly uncreative I am. Even in kindergarten I was no good

at crocheting and painting coat hangers. But this time I just had to do it – for your sake. So it was a case of knead and pray!"

The outcome was predictable. Hugo was a cross between a pregnant elephant and a squashed VW Golf. But that's precisely what we liked about him. We stood him alongside the Holy Family, and suddenly Rosie cried, "You won't believe me, but I swear that foul-tempered rubber Joseph smiled for a second when he saw Hugo!"

After that, Hugo would arrive every year in a white package tied with a red bow. Even after we had grown up, we'd always phone Mother on Christmas Eve morning and ask, "Has Hugo arrived?"

"In white tissue paper with a red bow," Mother would reply. And only when the donkey was standing beside Joseph was it truly Christmas.

Then came the day when Mother departed and we didn't feel like celebrating Christmas anymore. My father sold the house and sent me the box with all the Christmas baubles. It wasn't until many years later that he said, "I think we should decorate a tree again like in Mother's day. You've got everything, even the crib."

So I decked out the whole house in tinsel and glitter. In the sitting room we decorated a Christmas tree and set up the crib.

That was when I noticed that Hugo was missing!

I quizzed the entire family, but no-one knew where he was. Hugo had been Mother's business; her creation. The rest of us only ever saw him in the white package with the red bow or under the tree.

The moment came when the guests waited in the front room to be allowed to enter the Christmas room. Sadly lighting the candles on the tree all by myself, I suddenly spied something: There was Hugo in all his ugliness peeking out from under the branches.

"Linda!" I cried excitedly towards the kitchen. She hurried over grumpily because she had been busy with the roast, and shouted at me, "What about that silly donkey? Of course I put it there. The doorbell rang early this morning, I ran to the door, but there was no-one around, only this white package with a red bow. So I unpacked it, found this donkey inside, and put it by the tree."

With that, she hurried ran back to her cooking.

I looked at the crib. Hugo stood next to ill-tempered Joseph, and I got the distinct impression that Joseph briefly smiled.



Hanspeter Hammel (alias Minu) is a columnist and author, and lives in Basel and Rome.