



The Christmas Angel

**A short story
by Simon Frost**

Preface

Earlier this year, I read a short piece online about a person who had come across a letter tucked into a man's jacket that they had bought at a French *vide grenier* (or a car boot sale as it is known in England). This gave me the idea for this story, however, I wished to give it a festive twist.

Christmas is extremely popular in Germany and many of the traditions we follow today are German in origin. I love German Christmas markets – the amazing *Weihnachtsmarkts*, the fabulous spicy aromas of Christmas, the twinkly lights, the excited crowds of people and the present-laden huts. Many years ago when I was a young man, I had a German penfriend who lived near to Koblenz, and over the years I visited her and her family in this beautiful Rhein city many times. Bringing together these various threads was therefore all the inspiration that I needed.

I hope that you enjoy the story.

Simon Frost
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About Koblenz



Koblenz is located in the Rheinland-Pfalz region of Germany, sitting on the banks of the Rhein and the Moselle rivers, hence its' name deriving from the Latin word meaning confluence. Until 1926, the city's name was spelt as Coblenz. There are strong connections with France; in the 18th century many French emigrées lived there and it was occupied by the French army after World War One. The French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (VGE) was also born in the city in 1926; he died in December 2020.

Author's Note

The names of the Philippine islands Hocara and Chisayas are entirely fictional.

Glossary of German words used in the story

„”	German punctuation for quotation marks, known in English as goose feet or <i>Gänsefüßchen</i>	
Grüß dich!	Informal greeting used when you know people well	
Hallo, mein lieblich	My darling – affectionate term used when people are very close	
Kölner Kölsch	Light coloured German beer brewed in Cologne and very popular	
Weihnachtsmarkt	German Christmas Market	
Wie geht's?	How's it going?	
Wie viel kostet das, bitte?	How much does this cost please?	

Illustrations by Simon Frost

The Christmas Angel

Sofia slowly navigated her way through the throng of people at the first Christmas market of the year, the scent of glühwein, gingerbread and hot chocolate strong, familiar and reassuringly enticing. It was four weeks to Christmas, and it was a welcome opportunity to enjoy the sights and sounds of Koblenz's popular *Weihnachtsmarkt*. Who knows, Sofia may even find some new Yuletide decorations for the house and even a present or two.

Wrapped up warmly on that bitterly cold November evening, her red scarf protecting her against the icy wind, Sofia weaved purposefully amongst the shoppers. Shopping was not one of Sofia's favourite activities, however, she took delight in looking into the bijoux wooden huts, each of them bedecked in gold, green and red decorations and full of Christmas gifts and festive ornaments. This was most certainly Sofia's favourite time of year.

This year, Christmas would certainly be different. Earlier in the year she had split up with her boyfriend Stefan, and now money was pretty tight as Sofia juggled paying the monthly rent by herself alongside the other household bills. Her parents, who lived nearby, did what they could to help by taking her out for meals at weekends, but as a proud young woman Sofia was determined to make her way in the world. She loved the apartment they had shared together until this summer, with its pretty views looking across the River Moselle...and had no desire to move. Therefore, making ends meet was a necessity; hopefully, next year would be better – perhaps her boss may even give her the pay rise that she felt was long deserved.

Sofia's neighbours were great too, and after the initial trauma of the break-up she was relatively content; her work as a receptionist at a local factory was good, her colleagues were supportive and after a busy day, her cat Maus was always there to greet her with a gentle purr and plenty of affection.

At one market stall selling traditional decorations, something caught her eye in particular: a hand cut wooden angel, dressed in a golden tunic.

„Wie viel kostet das, bitte?“, asked Sofia, pointing politely at the figurine, hoping that it would not be too expensive.

„20 euros, bitte schön“, came the reply. Sofia acknowledged with thanks and walked on, aware that she could not really afford to pay that amount on a Christmas decoration, even if it were handmade and would look wonderful on top of her tree.



After a few minutes, Sofia noticed two of her parents' closest friends standing by a food stall, tucking into their hot sausages accompanied by generous mugs of warming glühwein.

„Hallo!!“, waved Sofia, going over to embrace Peter and Brigitte with a hug.

„Wie geht's?“, said Sofia, enquiring how they were keeping, now happily retired after working at the same factory that she was working at.

“Life is good Sofia – and you?” replied Peter.

“Will you stop and have a bite to eat with us, Sofia. It's been so long since we had a good chat,” said Brigitte.

It did not take long for Sofia to respond; after all, Peter and Brigitte had been incredibly close to her family for many years, often spending weekends together around the Rhineland and enjoying a *schnapps* or two on a cold winter's night.

“Yes, of course, who can resist some glühwein on a night like this!”

Over the next twenty minutes or so, the friends chatted happily together, Peter and Brigitte catching up with Sofia's love life (non-existent...), the comings and goings at the factory and Peter's current pastime: restoring a small sailing boat. After saying their goodbyes, Sofia remembered she still had not found what she had been looking for: a Christmas angel to place on top of her tree. Concluding that she was unlikely to find one she could afford at the market – sadly- Sofia decided to pop into the local Aldi supermarket on the *Moselweißer Strasse*, on her way home.



As Sofia entered the supermarket the shop seemed unusually empty, shoppers heading to the Christmas market instead. The Aldi store was close to work and handy for Koblenz's price conscious shoppers.

This week there was a special offer on Christmas decorations, so Sofia headed for the central section where the bargains were always located. Sofia did not mind the warehouse ambience that Aldi created, as she liked nothing better than to rummage through the delivery boxes full of cut-priced goods, whether it was clothing items such as ski jackets, warm winter jumpers or everything you could possibly need for a DIY enthusiast.

That evening though, Sofia knew precisely what she was looking for: an angel for a Christmas tree.

Amongst the Christmas candle decorations, snowmen, baubles and wrapping paper, Sofia did not need to dig too deeply to find something that immediately caught her eye: a Christmas angel. It was not a wooden one and was instead made of ceramic, painted in cream and gold and wrapped in a sealed plastic bag. The angel may not have been Sofia's first choice; however it was beautiful and would look a treat on her tree. She put it into a basket alongside some chocolate and pretzels and headed to the checkout.



Almost as soon as Sofia put the key in the lock of her apartment door and opened it, Maus was by her side; miaowing quite loudly as he was hungry, and it was already well past 7pm.

„Hallo mein lieblich,“ “Have you had a good day?” Sofia said, moving straight into the kitchen to open a pouch of Maus' favourite food.

Maus tucked in greedily, devouring several mouthfuls before Sofia had even left the kitchen to take off her coat.



Opening a bottle of Riesling, Sofia poured herself a small glass and sat on the sofa to catch up with her friends on social media. After a few moments, Maus came in to join her, licking his lips and now quietly content. Her own dinner could wait.

Bored by the latest gossip from friends and uninterested in taking part in a Candy Crush saga, Sofia put down her phone on the coffee table and started to go through her shopping, intent on opening the Christmas Angel to look at it in more detail. It was still only late November – and Sofia never put up her decorations before 1st December – so that could wait until the next weekend.

Sofia removed the three staples which affixed the plastic pouch containing the ornament and took out the angel, together with a folded sheet of paper.

She liked the angel, although Sofia could not help thinking maybe she should have paid the additional few Euros to buy the one that she actually preferred in the Christmas market. Maybe next year....

Placing the angel aside on the table, Sofia unwrapped the piece of paper. What she read surprised her.

It was a handwritten note to start with – and one which was barely legible.

Written in English, which Sofia was fluent in as a result of spending six months in London as a student, she read the following words:-

I hope that whoever finds this note will help me.

My name is Andres. I am 24 years old and I am held captive on a remote island near the Philippines. I do not know exactly where. I think it is called Hocara... I have heard people use this name.

I was brought here against my wishes 2 months ago. I am very sad. There is little food and I am always hungry. Myself and the other people here – men and women – have little to do but work. Some have escaped – very few though.

All day we make these angels, ornaments and toys. We make hundreds each day. The guards check them. You have found this note – so that is good. They do not check all of them!

PLEASE help me. I beg you. Thank you.

Andres del Reyes-Garcia

Sofia laid down the paper, visibly shocked.

Was it real? It certainly looked like it was. It could be a prank, but unlikely she felt.

Then Sofia felt anger. How could this type of thing happen in the 21st century? Young men and women forced to work in poor conditions, against their will. She guessed they only received very little money for the work they did – if at all. A few cents, with little food and drink.

The question was – what could she do about it if anything at all?

Sofia leaned back on the sofa, Maus jumping immediately on her lap, and she started to think.



Sofia hated any form of injustice – and this was a genuine cry for help. Had Andres sent lots more of these letters? If so, perhaps someone else had found it and was busy doing something about it.

Maybe. But the scrappy piece of paper looked real enough, and she could empathise with the desperate situation that this young man must be in. She had read about similar instances in which people were conned into responding to requests for help from total strangers; people in poorer communities, both in rural areas and in towns, who were promised by local gangsters that they could have a new life and money working in factories. Instead, they were kidnapped and transported miles across different countries, usually via lorries and boats; then forced to work in appalling conditions

with few breaks and limited nourishment. Many of these factories were either in remote areas or in cities, whereby they could avoid the prying eyes of the authorities.

There was no doubt about it – Sofia had to do something. She had a name – and a possible location.

The letter appeared to be fairly recent because it had a stamp marked “2018” marked on it. This very year: and probably only a few weeks ago.

Sofia paused to take her mind off things by surfing on Facebook.

Flicking quickly through the latest updates, full of her friends and acquaintances enjoying meals out, winter breaks abroad and lots of pictures of cats, Sofia had an idea.



One of her friends, Anna, was a journalist for the newspaper *Rhein-Zeitung*. The two women had known each other since school and Sofia was amazed at how successful Anna had been in recent years, as she impressed her peers and the Editor with her energy and inquisitiveness. Anna’s persistent nature and curiosity had enabled her to bring several good stories to the attention of the newspaper’s editorial team in recent months.

Perhaps Anna could help? Sofia’s mind was made up; she would contact Anna and see if her newspaper could publicise the plight of the young man.



„Hallo Anna! Grüß dich“

“Hello Sofia! How are you doing? Lovely to hear from you – we must have that drink sometime with the girls,” Anna responded warmly.

“Yes, that would be good. We must get our diaries together. But first I need to ask you a favour.”

Sofia explained how she had found the strange note, and the two young women talked about what they could do – and whether Anna and her newspaper could help.

15 minutes later Sofia had finished the call with Anna and a plan was starting to take shape.



The following day Anna discussed the note with her Editor, who was immediately supportive. He knew that Anna had a good nose for a story – and if they could find Andres and return him safely to his family, it would guarantee great coverage for the newspaper, using social media to publicise it.

By the end of the week, Anna had filed a story and it was duly published online Saturday morning and in print for the weekend edition.

Can you help find this young man?

The title was very clear; with no photo to go on the newspaper used an image of a sweatshop to illustrate the poor conditions that Andres and his compatriots were likely to be enduring. They published the note in full, with a request for anyone with information to contact the paper via the Facebook page or the editorial office directly. Over the next few days, the paper put out various posts on all of its social media platforms, with the hashtag #letsfindAndres.

The response was dramatic – and extremely positive.

Within a few hours the Twitter, Facebook and Instagram posts had been shared by thousands of people, not only in Germany but across the world. The fact that Christmas was just over two weeks away, the plight of someone forced to make decorations against their will, away from their family and working for long hours for only a pittance resonated with many people. Although there were clearly thousands of cases similar to Andres' this had struck a chord with many people in different countries. Andres must be found.



The media campaign was working – however, would it have a positive result?

After a few days, Sofia met Anna at their favourite coffee shop for a chat and to discuss the campaign.

“Have you any news, Anna?” Sofia asked as soon as she had taken off her coat to sit opposite Anna and warm her hands around a cup of hot chocolate Anna had pre-ordered for her. She knew that Sofia loved chocolate and the shop’s recipe was the best in Koblenz, for sure.

“Unfortunately not – at least not yet. But don’t worry. These things take time Sofia. And my Editor has promised we can run an update story next week, leading up to Christmas, which I am sure will generate a bit more interest.”

“That’s good. I keep on thinking about Andres and wondering whether I could be doing something more.”

“Sofia – drink your chocolate and eat your strudel,” said Anna, smiling, before changing the subject.



Later that evening, Sofia sat cuddling Maus on her lap, the Christmas tree was now up in her lounge adorned with pretty decorations and lights burning brightly. There was one exception, however. The top of the tree had no angel. Sofia could not bear to use the angel that she had bought. Somehow it didn’t seem right. Maybe this year she would leave it and instead put some additional tinsel on top.

Sofia was about to get up, carefully placing Maus on his cat bed to make dinner, and her phone rang. It was Anna.

“GREAT NEWS, Sofia!!!! We think that we’ve found Andres.”

Sofia was shocked.

“That’s..... superb, Anna. I’m so pleased. Go on, tell me more please.”

Anna went on to tell her the whole story: how as a result of the massive social media publicity shared across the world’s continents, an intrepid reporter living only 20 miles south of the Philippines island called Hocara spotted the post one day. He had heard rumours that there existed an illegal sweatshop operation on the island, run by a gangmaster. They made money selling the items manufactured by the captives all over Europe, making large profits due to the low wages. From time to time the workers escaped but were too scared to tell their side of the story.

The reporter – Juan Curez – persuaded local fishermen to take him on their boat, accompanied by a policeman, across to the island. It did not take long to locate the operation and as soon as they discovered the illicit operation, the policeman phoned for reinforcements.

Within 4 hours police from the neighbouring island had rounded up the leaders and arrested them, freeing those held against their will. The workers – including Andres – were taken back to the main island for food, drink and a medical check-up.

“Oh Anna – I really cannot thank you enough. That is the best Christmas news ever. What will happen next to Andres – and the other people that were held there?” Sofia was obviously delighted – but wished to know more.

“Don’t worry. Andres has been reunited with his family already. They live on another small island nearby. So it is a real happy ending after all. And that’s it I am afraid for now, Sofia. I am exhausted!

This has been a fabulous story to work on – but now I need my bed. Have a good night, Sofia and we will get together for a celebratory drink maybe tomorrow.”

Sofia sat back and stretched, content and excited.

Unsurprisingly, Andres was still at the forefront of her mind. Anna said they would be releasing photos tomorrow of all the captives now safely freed. Perhaps she would get a glance of Andres for the first time?



Sofia stroked the rim of her wine glass for what felt to Anna like the umpteenth time, her friend deep in thought and not really entering into the spirit of conversation.

“So – what’s on your mind then?” Anna said after another pause, smiling to herself.

“Oh – this and that,” replied Sofia.

“Come on, we’ve always shared secrets. Is it Andres?” Anna decided to dig a bit more. She knew that Sofia would not be offended – and would probably open up quicker to what she was thinking.

“How did you guess?” was Sofia’s brief response.

“It wasn’t difficult. You are like an open book, Sofia!”

Sofia then went on to talk about her feelings for Andres; a man she had never met but wanted to find out more about. She had read a brief interview after his rescue and he seemed really nice. But – it was a bizarre thought. Andres lived thousands of kilometres away, on another continent with a close family; and a new life to build. Yet, she could not stop thinking about whether they could meet up sometime.

Anna, as always, came up with a great idea.

“Well, Andres wrote a letter to you – yes, I know it could have been opened by anyone, but it was you – so why don’t you reply? I can get his address for you – we’ve established really good contacts since the story broke – and I think it would be lovely. You never know where it may lead, Sofia.”

“You’re right. As ever. And it’s a fab idea. I’ll write a letter tonight and email it across to you.”

“A proper letter on paper will be better. Signed by you,” was Anna’s extremely prompt reply.

“Yes, of course. Now, would you like another drink?”





As soon as she got home and after giving Maus some food and a cuddle, Sofia put pen to paper, using her favourite ink pen that hadn't been used for a long time. Fortunately, the words flowed easily. She introduced herself, told Andres the story of how she had found his letter along with the angel, hoped he was well and sent best wishes to his family. And, if he wanted to keep in touch, here was her email and postal address.

Placing the letter into the envelope, Sofia sighed. She had no idea whether the letter would reach Andres, let alone if he would respond. She put the letter on the table by the door to take to Anna tomorrow as she had promised her his address.



Sofia did not have to wait that long to hear back from Andres.

Two weeks later, an email popped into her inbox. She hovered her mouse over the email, recognising Andres name immediately but Sofia could not decide whether to open it, in case Andres was simply replying out of politeness, and no more.

She clicked and opened up the message.

Sofia need not have worried. The email, written in excellent English, was warm and several paragraphs long.

Andres explained the background to his kidnapping, and how he had prayed every day that he would be able to escape from the torment, fearing that he would never see his family again. He had tried to send a letter before, but the guards had found it and destroyed it immediately. The letter he had sent to Sofia was probably the last chance – and he wanted to show his appreciation – in person.

A media company wanted to write a documentary not about Andres in particular, but the plight of captives across the world working for very little money. Andres had agreed to help – and they were going to pay him a fee, as well as donate money towards Amnesty International.

Andres had always wanted to travel to Europe. His family agreed that he should go, before returning home to recommence his budding career as a carpenter.

Things were moving at a fast pace. He had already booked a ticket to visit Europe, travelling first to Rome, then Paris and stopping off in Berlin, before returning home.

Perhaps...Sofia thought. Could I ask Andres to change his plans a little? Berlin was a long way away – maybe she could persuade him to alter his travel arrangements and add in an additional stop. Sofia responded – and plucked up courage to ask if they could meet up in Cologne. She loved the historic cathedral and thought that it would be a good place to see the sights and down a *Kölner Kölsch* or two.



Time flew quickly, and five weeks later the day had arrived. Sofia had booked a hotel near to the grand *Dom* cathedral. She was nervous, but happy.

Sofia suggested they meet outside the Tourist Office as it was easy to find for a stranger visiting the city for the first time and she told Anna her whereabouts. They always kept in touch, especially on first dates. Was it a date? That may be pushing it a bit, thought Sofia, but the butterflies were in her stomach all the same. It certainly felt like a date.

Sofia need not have had any concerns.

Andres was everything she hoped for. Polite, charming – and extremely handsome. Sofia had fun teaching him a few words of German, which he got to grips with amazingly quickly, as they interspersed their conversations with her native tongue and English.

The day flew by... but for Sofia, every second was ingrained into her memory. When they came to part, Andres taking a flight back to Berlin before returning home, Sofia had a tear in her eye as they hugged and said their goodbyes. She suspected Andres had too.

However, they agreed to meet up again in three months' time. This time it was Sofia's turn – she would visit him and meet all his family on their island in the Philippine Archipelago.

"I can't wait, Andres. Please write soon," she said as the train pulled out of the Cologne railway station.



Later that year, Sofia ventured across the world to visit the tiny Philippine island of Chisayas. The experience was unlike anything Sofia had had before in her life; the food and the buildings were so different – and the welcome was incredibly warm.

Andres took Sofia around the island – it was only 50km² – and it was incredibly surreal.

One night, Andres told Sofia he was going to cook her a special meal, close to his favourite beach. When they arrived, the fire had already been lit, the embers burning brightly against the night sky.



Over the barbecue, Sofia ate the most delicious fish wrapped in palm leaves, flavoured with delicate spices and fruit.

As the fire started to die down, the couple moved closer to embrace, sitting on the sand and looking out to the moonlit ocean.

“Sofia, I have something to ask you. I have been thinking about it since that first moment we met in Cologne. We have only known each other a few months, but it seems much longer.”

“That sounds bad,” Sofia said, teasing.

Andres laughed. “I mean in a great way. I have loved every minute that we have spent together. And to be honest, I don’t want it to end. Even if it means that I have to leave the island – and my family.”

Sofia looked pensive. She had no desire to take Andres away from his family. But... as Anna had often said to her, sometimes you need to ignore what your head was telling you – and follow your heart.

There was a short pause.

“Sofia, will you marry me?”

Sofia leaned over to kiss Andres. “Yes, that would make me very happy indeed.”



Four months later, the couple were married. Sofia’s parents and Anna had travelled to Chisayas, with Anna as her Maid of Honour. A week later following a short honeymoon on the island, Sofia and Andres boarded a plane to return to Germany as man and wife. Andres’ family were sad of course but did not want to stand in his way and his dream of owning a business making bespoke furniture. There were so many different types of wood to work with, compared to Chisayas; it was a dream come true.



Christmas Eve.

Andres and Sofia returned back to the apartment, Maus as always waiting patiently for their return. The couple had visited the Christmas market – a first for Andres.

As they relaxed on the sofa together, Andres handed Sofia a carefully wrapped shiny gold present, with a pretty red ribbon.

“What’s this, Andres? I thought we agreed after all the expense we’ve had in recent months; we would not buy any gifts for each other.”



“I know, but this is a very special one,” Andres replied, smiling.

Sofia took off the wrapping slowly, keen not to tear the paper.

She then held up the present – a beautifully carved, wooden Christmas Angel. Handmade by Andres.

“I know just the place for this, my love.”

Sofia walked over to the Christmas tree, stretching to carefully position the angel on top.

The tree was now complete.

