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*Radost*

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## 1

‘Have you heard this one?’ asked Max. ‘How do we know that Jesus was a student?’

‘No, I haven’t heard it.’

‘So? Do you know how?’

Max leaned back into the chair with a jerk and folded his arms on his broad chest. His right foot tapped agitatedly on the sand. His black mane was drying in the midday heat.

I was irritated and unsettled by his intrusive, physically intense, and rather threatening presence. But for some reason I also found him fascinating.

Abruptly, he lifted his Kilimanjaro beer with his right hand and took a big gulp.

He leant back towards the table to put his beer down. The noise of the screeching chair, woven from crooked branches and upholstered in leather, was so close, that I realised, from how far away the voices of the local beachboys and the crashing of the waves seemed to come. Obviously, it was too hot for even noises to travel far.

At least this Max was a bit of a diversion. This Swiss man in a Masai outfit, who told me everything except why he was wearing that attire — the red robe, the short sword on the hip and the thin rungu. Or maybe he did tell me about it. His loud erratic chatter confused me.

Alfred Andersch had called his famous novel *Zanzibar: Flight to Afar*. I would call mine *Zanzibar: Flight to Hell*. I hated almost everything about this island.

I was here only because I had won the flight in a raffle, one I didn’t even know I had taken part in. I had no choice, but to get on with it; otherwise, I would have really disappointed Mahmut.

I left the fairy tale capital Stone Town in haste on the third day. I had felt like a clay tile in a kiln there; I couldn't take five steps without being pestered to buy something I didn't want — a snorkelling trip or a drum or a fish. One evening a local ripped me off good and proper by arranging with the waiter to charge me double for everything and then share the spoils. After seeing me in town that afternoon, terribly scared dragging my feet through the winding alleyways of this oriental labyrinth, he had realised that I was hopelessly lost. He clung to me like a tick until I agreed to hire him as a guide for 50 000 Tanzanian shillings. Naively, I felt proud of myself for having bargained down the initial price of 100 000.

He did actually know a lot about the town and its history, and in the twinkling of an eye whisked me round places I had fruitlessly tried to find earlier. So, I decided to invite him for a drink in the evening. I would have given him a big tip for his services, but then I caught the waiter slipping money into his hand and counted what I had overpaid for my beer, the price of which was listed on the drinks menu. I didn't say anything. The next day I went to Nungwi, in the North of the main island, because Nungwi was the beach village most tourists talked about.

The guidebook was advertising a ride in a Dala Dala, a local minibus, as an unforgettable experience and a once in a lifetime chance to breathe the authentic African air of touristy Zanzibar. So, instead I took a taxi and ended up in one of those hotels with bungalows, where men armed with clubs would hang around and ensure that nobody who didn't belong came in, making sure that Africa didn't darken the tourists' door.

There are no lions or zebras on Zanzibar. But one doesn't need to go to Ruaha Park, the Serengeti, or the Ngorongoro Crater on Tanzania's mainland to experience a wildlife hunt. I noticed shortly after my arrival in Nungwi that I could have the same experience just sitting outside my bungalow on my fairly comfortable wooden Zanzibar chair drinking lukewarm beer and.

This was the best spot to observe how the beachboys ambushed the tourists, particularly the women. They were poised sitting or standing, until the tourists came close enough and had nowhere to run. Then they pounced.

Sometimes the tourists spotted the beachboys and hastened their pace. They couldn't outrun them though. Every now and then they succeeded, with a reckless change of direction into a beach bar, behind the protective club of a security guard.

The tourists were mostly retirees, mainly old dears hoping to cure their withering white limbs with a black youth's balm. And the young backpackers were a primitive bunch of bovine posers, who were always screwing each other in the communal bathrooms whenever I wanted to shower.

I wanted to shower often because it was always far too hot. I sweated, the beer was too warm to drink, the sea too warm to swim in. The pestilential beachboys were always lurking. In the evenings I had to wear long trousers because bloodthirsty mosquitoes buzzed round my ankles. Worst of all, I was done with this paradise island on the second day, after I had checked a morning snorkelling trip and an afternoon spice-tour in an herbal garden off my list.

Until Max appeared with his how do you know that Jesus was a student.

'I don't know. How?'

'Jesus was 33 years old, had long hair, lived with his parents, and every time he did something, it was a miracle.'

That was the first joke Max told me. A few hours later I found him lying motionless on the beach. Two carmine blotches were spreading across the light red of his Masai blanket — one here and one there, where the knife had gone in.

The whole story started with Mahmut. I met him for the first time in March, eleven months before the Zanzibar trip. I remember that day very well. Amongst other things, I recall it as one of the few highlights in my editorial career for one of the two local newspapers.

A tomcat, belonging to an old woman in the area, had run off and reappeared 9km away in the garden of a married couple. Because of this and because the old woman was the deputy editor's aunt, the tomcat had earned himself an appearance on the back pages. I couldn't come up with a more urgent assignment quickly enough, so the job landed in my lap. Both company cars were in use and my Vespa had conked out again. So, I took the train.

The woman lived in a quiet, leafy neighbourhood and was craning her neck outside her door, surveying her small garden and spying over the wooden fence at the people coming down the road. The aroma of cake was wafting down the street from her house.

Seconds after my arrival, a car pulled up outside. 'Oh, the prodigal son is back,' she sobbed as the people who had found him got out of their car with the pet carrier. Inside it I saw the silhouette and heard the hissing and yowling of a black beast, who could just as well have been a panther.

The couple didn't want to stay for coffee and cake. They had to go to a dinner party and after answering a couple of questions and posing for a photo with ill-concealed impatience, hurriedly said their goodbyes. 'But you will come in, won't you?' the woman turned towards me. Her voice and her eyes were filled with such pleading, and the cake smelled so wonderful that I said, 'I'd love to!'

I was terrified to set foot in this house with the beast roaming free. She had locked him inside as soon as he was out of the carrier. I was not frightened of cats. But this specimen could have given the shivers to a lion tamer. And I knew cat bites could sometimes get horribly infected. As I sat down at the table with her, I kept an eye on the beast with my peripheral vision and would have liked to sit cross-legged just to keep my feet in view.

We drank coffee and ate chocolate cake. She told me all about her sons and grandchildren who rarely came to visit, because they were all busy. And then suddenly the black monster curled round my legs, purring and displaying the manners of the gentlest lap dog. After my initial shock, I mustered the courage to stroke this well-travelled cat.

Writing a story about a woman and a cat was not something I'd envisioned when I graduated from university. Compared with what I usually had to deal with — the local media events, community meetings, transportation debates, podium speeches, Schlager concerts and interviews with artists in their studios, as they tried their hardest to disguise the mediocrity painted on their canvas or carved in stone, because they felt they were being unappreciated — it was quite a pleasant change. This outing also meant that I could cut short my working day. Nobody would ask how long I had stayed chatting with the woman.

If I hadn't come back home earlier that day, who knows whether things between Mahmut and I would have turned out in this way? In hindsight, it seems that the runaway tomcat was also an omen foreshadowing Max's antics long before I met him in Zanzibar. But of course, at that time I didn't realise that the cat was going to be like the chaos butterfly, sending a tornado my way with the beat of its wings. Back then I didn't see Mahmut as an angel of fate, who a few months down the line would catapult me from my small universe into a direct collision course with Max's orbit.

Suddenly, on the way back home, it turned pitch black. A dark cloud swallowed the sun in its gaping maw. The only thing I could see was the orange lightning, a gale warning signal, flashing only a few kilometres either side of the lake's shores. Then a lightning bolt forked across the whole sky and reversed the coming of dusk, and in the blink of an eye it was daylight again. At the same time a crack of thunder crashed against the train so violently that the windows vibrated and I covered my face in horror.

As I got off in my neighbourhood, the heavens opened, rain bounced off the cobblestones, and was blown sideways by the wind. By the time I had sprinted home from the train station, I had collected a lake in each shoe.

Because the wind was lashing rain into my eyes and it was almost dark, I didn't see the slender black boy until I was right in front of him. He was sitting on the entrance steps, trying to shelter from the storm, shivering, pressed against the corner. He was wearing a T-shirt and shorts, both soaked. He shrank even further into his corner and said *'Hello'* quietly.

*'Hello,'* I said and asked him if he spoke English.

*'Yes, I speak English.'*

*'Where do you need to go?'*

*'Verena Meier'*. He tapped his finger on the sign with *'V. Meier'*, next to the buzzer for the first-floor apartment. I didn't know Frau Meier's first name. We only ever greeted each other with a nod when we met in the entrance hall or in the laundry room.

I thought it unlikely that the shy boy had made up the name Verena from the V. so that he could enter the building for nefarious purposes. I opened the door and let him in. He walked hesitantly through the entrance, past my apartment door on the ground floor. Every second step he cast a look over his shoulder.

As I put the key in the lock, he stopped and turned round. *'I live here,'* I said and pointed at my door. He looked as if he was going to make a step towards me. *'Is Frau Meier home?'* I gestured towards the floor above. He nodded, said *'yes,'* and went up the stairs.

By now I was freezing and wanted a shower. I had barely got under the stream of hot water when I thought about the boy. Surely, he had rung the doorbell. Maybe Frau Meier wasn't home.

After a short internal debate, I came out of the shower, dried myself, slipped on jogging bottoms and a jumper and went to the first floor.

He was sitting on the door mat on which *'WELCOME'* was written in colourful letters and his teeth were chattering.

*'Nobody home?'* I saw through the glass pane on the door that the lights inside the apartment were off.

*'I'm Fabian. What's your name?'*

*'I am Mahmut.'*

*'You can come and wait at my place.'*

He followed me four steps behind. I placed my smallest jogging bottoms, my smallest T-shirt and my tightest jumper on top of the toilet seat in the bathroom. Then I showed him how to use the shower and gave him a towel and a plastic bag for his wet clothes.

Whilst he showered, I wrote on a small note: *'Mahmut is with me on the ground floor'* and stuck it on Frau Meier's door.

I gave him the pair of socks after he came out of the steaming bathroom, because, as I had feared, he had managed to flood the floor.

The shy boy with his uncertain glances and hesitant movements, dressed in my oversized clothes, looked like a puny picture of misery.

I made him hot chocolate and gave him a slice of honeyed bread. He sat on the sofa, I on the armchair. Since neither of us knew what to say to each other, and also because his English was rather limited, I prepared a second and then a third and then a fourth piece of honey bread. I learnt that he was 9 years old and came from Uganda. He said he was here with his father, staying with his new mother Verena.

*'How long have you been here?'*

He waved with his right hand twice over his left shoulder, as if he were throwing pebbles over it, stuck three fingers in the air and said, *'Three days.'*

An hour later Frau Meier came to pick him up. She apologised, thanked me profusely and suggested we drop formalities and I call her by her first name. She asked if Mahmut and I had got along alright.

*'Yes,'* I said and looked at Mahmut. *'He speaks English very well.'*

*'Yes, I speak English very well,'* he repeated. *'Very very well!'*

Then, for the first time, his bright eyes flashed with mischief. The following day his rolled *Rs* were still rippling and swirling round my apartment like dust devils.