

1. THE MUZUNGU

Perhaps I wouldn't have been there to pull Puck from the path of the car if I hadn't overslept. Normally I notice when my cousin Joy, who sleeps next to me, gets up. But that morning I only woke up when the cock crowed. That creature makes a terrible row under the bedroom window. I sat up in bed, saw that Joy had disappeared and felt for the opening in the mosquito net. Judging by the light it was already after six. Why hadn't Rosa woken me?

I quickly made a knot in the mosquito net and opened the door in my nightstand. A clean shirt. I knew at least one was in there. I dug into the cupboard and pulled everything out onto the ground. Then I saw the envelope. *Maridadi Mukamuhoza* it said in elegant handwriting. I knew I had put the letter in there myself, but I still couldn't bear seeing it again.

'Maridadi!'

Rosa.

'Coming!' I called from the door. I grabbed a shirt from the pile and stuffed the rest back inside. I washed myself in the shower with a few bowls of cold water. I then got dressed and walked into the living room. The table was laid, but only Rosa and her youngest daughter were still sitting at it.

'You're late,' said Rosa. She put a mug of runny porridge in front of me.

I mumbled something that sounded like 'sorry'. The stuff was lukewarm, I noticed as I started eating it. I stared at her face over the edge of the mug. Those chubby cheeks, that grubby scarf on her head. Rosa was so familiar to me and yet she wasn't my mother. Did she ever think about that?

'Get a move on...' she began.

'Alright. I'm going.' I put down the mug on the table and stood up. Before Rosa could say anything more, I crossed the yard and closed the gate behind me.

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I stumbled over the stones littering the dirt path. A pain shot through my foot. Stupid rocks. As I walked on with a throbbing toe, I thought about the letter on my nightstand. Why was I rushing like this? Why was I doing my best? Nothing will change what it said in the letter. I still knew exactly how I felt when I received it a few months ago. We were standing at Rosa's bedroom door, my girlfriend Claudine and me. It would only be a matter of seconds before I knew whether I had got into university as well. I wanted to go to Butare. It was one of the best universities in the country. Once I graduated, I would be certain of a good job. Then I would never again have to beg for money for a few phone minutes.

With the traffic racing by on the asphalt road, I relived that decisive moment. How Rosa came into the bedroom holding the envelope. How my hands were shaking as I opened it. How my eyes swept over the lines. 'Application not accepted.' I read it out loud, but I couldn't grasp what it said. I read the text again. '*Application not accepted*'. Rejected. No

sociology. No future. Or at least, not the one I'd imagine. Instead, I'd be spending all my days at the market.

I pressed on. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I heard people greeting me, but I didn't reply. It was so unfair. I had worked myself silly. I was second in my class. Yet they still refused to give me a grant. Could my father have helped out? Or was it simply that he didn't want to? His voice had sounded so flat over the phone. As if he couldn't care what happened to his daughter.

Sooner than I would have wanted, I stood in front of the iron gates of the Gisenyi market. The smell of vegetables and sweat hit me in the face. I thought of mama Hirwa. How she was standing inside next to her market stall, waiting for me to arrive. Suddenly it seemed as if the gates wanted to swallow everybody: the street children, the mamas in their colourful clothes, but especially me: they wanted to devour me. I walked to the market wall and leant against it. The bricks dug into my back. Should I? After all, I had sometimes slipped away for a hour on other occasions.

It was at that moment that I saw the *muzungu*¹. The white woman walked through the gates with big strides. Blond ponytail, loose jeans, a backpack from which bananas protruded. Most white people didn't go to the market. They stayed near the luxury hotels. As the woman crossed the road, my eyes followed her. She moved so easily, as if she could do anything she fancied. Was she married? Did she have children? She looked so young. She actually looked more like a girl than a woman.

Suddenly a hooter sounded. The girl let out a cry. A moment later, her bananas lay on the road. She had started to pick them up, when I saw, from the corner of my eye, a second car approaching.

'Watch out!' I rushed forward and dragged her to the side of the road.

'*What the...*' she sputtered.

'*Be careful,*' I said in my best English. I pointed at the street. Just at that moment, the front wheel of the second car drove over a banana. The girl turned paler than she already was. She mumbled her thanks, but I brushed it to one side. My eyes scanned the spot of the near accident. The bananas were like half-moons on the asphalt. After I had assured her that it was safe I led the girl onto the road. Together we picked up the edible ones from the ground. With our arms full, we walked to the other side of the road. The girl stuffed the bananas into her backpack, but the last one she gave to me.

'*This one is for you,*' she said.

Before I could reply she had already turned away. She crossed the road with quick strides. She dodged between the motorbike taxis and rounded the corner. I stared at the spot where she had disappeared. A pity. I would have liked to have learned more about her. Where she came from. What she was doing here. Whether she was travelling through Rwanda on her own. Kind of her though to give me the banana. I stripped back the peel and took a bite.

When I'd finished it, I looked at the market gates. I immediately felt anxious again. No, I wouldn't go to mama Hirwa. Not now, in any case. I walked through the waiting motorbike taxis and turned the corner and... what on earth: there was that white girl again! She had her face pressed against the window of Adolphe's hair salon. Apparently she saw something of interest because she opened the door and went inside.

¹ There is an explanatory list of words at the back of the book.

I stayed where I was, a little unsure. I had never seen a muzungu at the hairdressers before and I wanted to look inside, but then I thought of Rosa. Playing hooky from the market for an hour was one thing, but to break her rules of politeness... Never show what you are thinking (put on a mask of a face); obey everyone older than you (who are therefore above you); and don't poke your nose in someone else's business (don't ask impolite questions). Better not peer through the window. Anyway, I wouldn't want the girl to think I was following her.

'Hi, sweetheart!' someone called from behind me.

I turned round and saw three street boys. The tallest was staring at me in a provocative way. Congolese, of course; they're not afraid of speaking to a stranger. I turned my back on them again. And just as I decided to walk on, the white girl came out. When she saw me, her eyes lit up.

'You again!'

'Yes, I had to come this way.' I couldn't think of anything better to say.

She gestured at the hair salon. 'I want to get my hair cut, but no-one speaks English.'

'Do you want me to translate for you?' I asked eagerly.

'If you could...'

I nodded. 'Sure. No problem.'

The girl's smile spread to her eyes. Grey green as eucalyptus leaves they were, with tiny grey stripes.

'What's your name?' she asked.

'Maridadi Mukamuhoza.'

'Ma... Mu...?'

'Just call me Maridadi.'

'Ma-ri-da-di. Great. Mine's Puck.'

I tasted the name on my tongue. Short and sweet. 'Just Puck?'

'I'm actually called Paulien, but only my mother uses that.'

Paulien. I knew that name. There was a girl in my class called that. For the last three years, she had slept next to me in the dormitory.

'Coming?' asked Puck.

Without a second thought, I pushed open the door.

* * *

The last time I went to Adolphe's I was with a couple of girls from my class. We always had to have our hair done before we went off to boarding school. Two of my friends had had some fake hair added. During the holiday, I had also begged for braids – those thin ones that hang from your head like a curtain - but Rosa said there was no money for something like that. Not that it made much difference at Adolphe's: we all ended up with shaved heads. Whether you were rich or poor, you all had to look the same at boarding-school.

That morning, Puck was there with one other customer. He sat in a chair in front of a mirror while a barber boy shaved his head. The clippers hummed. When the barber noticed us, he turned them off.

'What can I do for you?' he asked in his velvety soft voice.

'Can you help this girl?' I asked.

The boy looked at Puck's ponytail. 'Eh... sure.' He waved at the chairs behind him. 'I'll be right with you.'

From our chairs, we watched how he shaved off his customer's curly hair. I wondered for a moment what he would do with Puck's straight hair. But he was the hairdresser, so he was sure to know. Automatically, my eyes sought out the upright mirror in the corner. It was so big I could see all of myself in it. Since the last time my head was shaved, my hair had grown back into a thick, dark layer. Otherwise, I hadn't changed much. Thin arms and legs, flat breasts. A bamboo shoot. That's what the boys on the block called me. Like so many times recently, I thought of my mother. What would she have looked like? Did I look like her? Without a photo, she remained a distant shadow in the mirror.

Suddenly I noticed that the humming sound had stopped. The customer paid and disappeared through the door.

'Next, please,' said the barber boy. He pointed to an empty chair.

Puck went and sat down. 'Why does he talk so softly?'

I shrugged my shoulders. Sometimes our people whisper about the most normal things as if they are letting you into a secret.

'How do you want it?' asked the boy.

'Tell him what you want done,' I translated.

With an impatient gesture, Puck pulled off the elastic band around her ponytail. Beautiful long locks fell down to her shoulders. She pointed at the fringe in front of her eyes. 'I want it a lot shorter. Everywhere. I really can't continue my travels through Africa looking like this.'

If I had had such long hair, I would never have gone to the hairdresser's. But I had said I'd translate, so I passed on the message. Immediately, the humming sound echoed through the salon. In the mirror, I saw Puck's eyes grow wide.

'Hasn't he got any scissors?' she asked.

After I had translated this, the boy shook his head. 'This is how we always do it.'

'Oh.' It seemed as if Puck wanted to say something else, but she kept her mouth shut.

The barber set to work. He took a handful of hair and shaved it off close to her scalp.

'Not that short!' cried Puck.

The boy turned off his clippers. 'What did she say?'

'Too short,' I translated. I broke into a sweat.

'I thought white people liked their hair like that.'

Now I was sure: this boy had never had a muzungu in his chair before. I watched anxiously as the floor became littered with Puck's blond hair. Sometime later, the boy turned off his clippers and began to sweep up.

'Well?' I asked.

Puck laughed at her reflection. 'At least I can now see things.'

It was only then that I had the courage to look at her new hairdo. She looked like a young chicken. Short plucks of hair pointed in all directions and her fringe was all skew-whiffy.

'Aren't you upset about your long hair?' I asked.

'No. It'll soon grow back.'

She didn't seem at all bothered.

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We had hardly got through the door before the street boys started calling out and whistling.

'Look what they've done to her hair!'

'Oooh. She looks fan-tast-ic.'

'The muzungu's got guts!'

Puck shrugged her shoulders. 'They're probably making fun of me. But who cares?'

Who cares! She was so different from my friends at boarding school. Much chiller, it seemed.

'And now I want to rinse it all out,' said Puck. She ruffled her fingers through her short hair. 'Fancy going with me to Lake Kivu?'

For a moment I thought of the market, but the idea was too tempting to refuse. Puck smiled as we walked along the street together. I noticed that she was nearly half a head shorter than me. She had to collect her swimwear, so we made a detour via her hotel. Well, 'hotel' was a bit of an exaggeration for the dormitory run by the Presbyterian sisters. Puck disappeared into a barracks and reappeared a few minutes later. As we walked on, I looked at her worn backpack. What was she doing in Rwanda? And how long was she staying?

'Are you from England or America?' I thought of Rosa. No, this wasn't an impolite question.

Puck smiled. 'I come from the Netherlands. Do you know it?'

'A little.' I didn't want to make a bad impression, but I knew next to nothing about the Netherlands.

'Have you ever heard of Amsterdam?' she asked. 'Or The Hague?'

'The Hague! You mean where they have that international court of Justice?'

'Yes. But they're not trying your war criminals there, are they?'

Your war criminals. She meant, of course, the leaders of The Happenings, but we never talk about those people. We hardly ever say anything about what happened during the war. I mumbled something about ours being tried in Tanzania and then quickly asked her whether she would like to swim at the Serena Hotel. You never knew who could be listening.

Puck thought the Serena would be fine, so I took the road along the water. A shrill, whistling sound came from under the cypresses. 'Fruit bats,' I said, pointing at the black creatures hanging upside down in the trees. Puck fumbled round in her backpack for her camera and took a few photos.

At the Serena, I hesitated a little. Most tourists swam here, but I had never been inside a luxury hotel. Fortunately, the porter was kind. Patiently he explained that they would have to scan our luggage. Puck placed her backpack on the conveyor belt. We went through a corridor and a garden with swimming pool and arrived at the beach. Deckchairs stood in pairs under blue striped parasols. There were some other white guests, but they were sitting a good way off.

Puck immediately threw her backpack on a chair and undressed. She was wearing a dark green bathing suit, which she must have put on when she went to the dormitory. It contrasted sharply with her milky white legs. Muscled legs, I noticed.

She asked whether I was coming, but I said I'd stay and look after her things. I have never learned to swim and anyway, I don't like people gaping at me. I sat down on the deckchair and gazed around me. A boy was staring silently at us through the beach fencing. Puck hadn't seen him, or perhaps she again thought 'who cares', because she waded into

the lake and splashed herself with water. Suddenly she dived. A little later, I saw her blond head sticking out above the water.

'It's great,' she called from the distance.

With strong strokes, she swam towards Congo. She seemed like a fish, the speed with which she was moving. As I watched the ripples, my thoughts began to wander. So Puck was from the Netherlands. Did they have hills there? And universities? There must be a lot of water there for her to have learned to swim like that.

I think I was day-dreaming, because suddenly Puck was beside me on the beach, dripping wet. She picked up a towel and rubbed her head so hard that her hair once again stood up on end. Then she lay down on the deckchair and gave a sigh. 'It's beautiful here.'

I followed her gaze. In front of us was the water of Lake Kivu. To the left, the beach with palm trees gave way to green hills and to the right, in the distance, stood the Congolese villas. She was right: it is beautiful. I had never noticed it before. Every time I had looked towards Goma, I had to think of my mother. I wish I could remember her better. What she looked like, how she moved, what she liked. Rosa had told me so little about her.

Puck pulled a tube from her backpack and began to smear some cream on her neck. 'Do you go to school here?'

'No. I've just finished boarding school. I got my diploma in January.' That was only two months ago. It seemed an eternity.

'Did you learn your English there?'

'Yes. And from television.' I'm crazy about English soaps.

'You speak it well.'

'Thanks.' I felt myself getting warm.

'What are you doing now?'

Rosa would say that the girl is poking her nose into my business, but I rather liked the questions. 'I work here in Gisenyi at the market, but I want to go and study in Butare.'

Puck squeezed the tube and now spread cream on her face. 'That's nice. I study in Amsterdam.'

A student! Perhaps that explained the cheap sleeping place and the worn backpack. 'May I ask what you are studying?'

'Cultural anthropology and development sociology.'

'Did you say "sociology"?''

'Yes. A special form of it. You study societies, near or far away. You try to understand how they work. I like travelling and discovering new places.'

That's exactly why I chose sociology too. 'Did you come here for your study?' I asked carefully.

'You bet,' said Puck. 'I'm doing research into the *Batwa* in Uganda, Rwanda and East Congo. I came here from Uganda two days ago.' Her eyes sparkled. 'The *Batwa* danced for me there. Really spectacular.'

Here you weren't allowed to call the small potters that any more, but I didn't want to correct Puck right away.

'Do you know the *Batwa* here?' she asked when I remained silent.

I nodded. 'They sell their pottery at our market.'

'So they do! On the market just now, I couldn't find a single *Twa*.'

I shrugged my shoulders. 'They drift around a lot.'

Puck frowned but didn't pursue the matter. I stared out across Lake Kivu. I wanted to travel too, the farther the better.

'Where do you want to go?' asked Puck.

Apparently I had said that last bit out loud. 'Well, eh... to your country, for example. I can talk to other people there.'

Puck smiled. 'We speak our own language in the Netherlands.'

'Oh.' That was disappointing.

'Yes, but most people speak English as well. Particularly young people. Part of my study is even given in English.'

That was something.

'Can you let me know when you see the Batwa?' Puck asked.

'Of course. Have you got a phone?'

She opened her bag. 'I've just bought a Rwandese sim card.' When she had given me her number, her eyes sparkled again. 'I'm so pleased I met you.'

I grinned shyly.

'Really! I like you. Anyway, you're the first Rwandese I've got to know better.'

She was curious about us. You could tell that from everything. 'Would you like to come home with me later?' I asked. It slipped out before I knew it.

Puck began to beam. 'I'd love to! In Uganda, I stayed in hostels. I've never been to a family's home here in Africa.'