Translation into English of:

***Hummeldumm***, a German novel by Tommy Jaud

Chapter 3

For our tour through Namibia, I had pictured us sitting in an all-terrain vehicle with heavy-duty tyres and real grunt under the hood. What now stood before us in the airport carpark was, on the contrary, a seriously clapped-out white Toyota minibus with tyres as thin as a skinny model’s arm.

Under the sceptical eyes of the freshly-formed tour-group, Bahee stacked bags and rucksacks in the boot. Sometime racist, Max Breitling, stood right next to him with quivering cigarette butt, watching the whole thing. “Tell me, boss, how am I going to see the lions if you block the whole rear-windscreen?”

“If an animal runs round the back, you’ll already have seen it from the front.” With a wink, Bahee stacked my pink rucksack on the top of the pile.

“I’ll put that one up against the screen, no? So we’ll be easier to see,” he grinned.

“Thank you, that’s very nice.”

Prune-faced Frau Gruber attacked the luggage and before Bahee’s eyes, pulled her travel-bag out from the very bottom of the pile, like a can from a supermarket pyramid. “I won’t ‘ave a minute’s peace if my little bag is under all t’ rest.”

Yes, I thought to myself, just as your sour face won’t give us a minute’s peace.

Without demur, Bahee unloaded the luggage a second time, and this time he simply put the bags and rucksacks in side by side.

“That way the bags are all in one layer and none of them gets squashed, no?” But now the weather-presenter’s face creased up in a frown. “I don’t know if it’s good for them to lean like that. What if something falls out?”

Bahee shut the boot door with a decisive click. “Nothing’s going to fall out. The door’s shut tight.”

“Don’t forget t’ giraffe!” screeched Frau Gruber, and handed Bahee a wooden animal, the shape and size of a man’s ski, packed in bubble-wrap. Gingerly Bahee took the giraffe off her, with a somewhat baffled look at the over-stuffed boot. “Yes, I know you can buy these things at the airport, but it’s really better to do it on the way back, no?”

“I ‘ave wot I ‘ave,” insisted the woman from Vienna, and Bahee had to scramble onto the roof, where he fastened the giraffe to the luggage-rack.

“Ping!” went the video camera of the oldest member of our group: Seppel-Peter was earnestly filming the securing of the wooden giraffe. “Gi’ us a wave!” he called to Bahee in his best Frankish accent, and Bahee waved.

“Ping!”

I closed my eyes and imagined I was standing somewhere in Cologne, all on my own, in the carpark of a do-it-yourself store. A delightful thought…

Stupidly, I only started to think about the seating arrangements in the bus when everyone except my fiancée and I were already sitting down. In any case, the Viennese prune-face claimed the driver’s seat for herself, on the grounds that she would be travel-sick in any other seat. In the excitement, she had completely ignored the steering wheel, which was right under her nose, since they drive on the left in Namibia. Even that couldn’t faze Bahee. He simply pressed the car-key into her hand and lazily stretched himself out on the passenger-seat. So, Frau Gruber, let’s head for Windhoek, no?”

Frau Gruber stared at Bahee as if she had never in her life seen a black man before, then let out a hysterical laugh. “Laws, ah’d completely forgot – You drive on t’ wrong side o’ t’ road ‘ere!”

“Eh, ye ghost-driver!” joked her husband, and amid loud laughter Bahee and Frau Gruber changed places.

I turned helplessly to Sina, but in the meantime she had taken refuge behind a large map of Namibia. And I was seized with doubt again. Why was I letting everything get to me so much? I hadn’t broken any law, I hadn’t even been arrested. This was just a group-tour, no prison-van. Why didn’t I just get out? We still had chance. We were still at the airport, waiting for Trixie from Zurich-by-way-of-Hannover. In her excitement, she had forgotten to change any money.

“A Swiss woman who forgets to change money! I don’t believe it!” this Pepi Gruber’s second wisecrack, and of course he laughed the loudest over his feeble little joke. He seemed to transform into a cartoon character all of his own when he laughed, with his bobbing leather hat glistening as if freshly pulled from a deep-fat-fryer.

Of their own accord, my lips formed a silent “Dreadful!” For the first time I noticed that Brenda had indeed put on something “poorer.” Instead of her expensive Gucci blouse, she now wore a label-less beige shirt, and she’d taken off her earrings. As she sat there saying nothing, she almost looked nice, and I asked myself how the nicotine-faced, greasy Düsseldorfer came by a young woman like her.

“Boss?” he now snorted from his seat, “What’s the go with smoking in the bus? It’s OK, or not?”

“So, smoking in the bus is not allowed, no.”

“That can’t be true, can it?”

“Yes it is. I have to do as the Tour Operator says, no?”

Breitling collapsed in his seat as if someone had let all the air out of him. Then he turned deliberately to me. “That’s bullshit, isn’t it?”

“Sorry, I don’t smoke.”

“Ping!” I shot a sidelong glance at the old fossil sitting next to me, who had just begun to film the airport carpark with its magnificent concrete slabs and exotic cars and busses. His face reminded me of an affronted tortoise. “Ping!” Incredulously I stared at the state-of-the-art camera.

“Present from my colleague, Greulich,” explained the Frankish tortoise.

I gave a friendly nod and turned to Sina, who was still studying her map. I gave it a careful tap, upon which first her black hair, then a pair of dangerously blazing eyes, appeared above the Namibia-Angola border.

“Yes?”

“I really want to get out now,” I whispered.

The map went up again, and instead of Sina’s lovely face I found myself looking at the Etosha National Park in North Namibia.

Then Pepi the clown broke his silence.

“What do you think if we speak a bit less formally? I’m Professor Gruber, but you can forget the Gruber, ha ha!”

While his wife rolled her eyes roofwards, the rest of the bus looked on in confusion.

“T’were a joke! I’m Pepi.”

Of course. Directly in front of me, I heard Brenda Schiller ask her companion from Dűsseldorf if the old man in front would be as funny for the whole two weeks. Breitling assured her she could count on it.

“That’s a good idea of Pepi’s, to use first names, no?” squawked Bahee into his headset. “So I’m Bahee. Bahee Mutima, but again you can forget the Mutima, no?”

“Does your name mean something?” Sina wanted to know.

“Yes it does: Mutima means ‘heart,’ no? and Bahee, ‘giraffe.’ So I’m called something like ‘heart of the giraffe,’ and that means I’m a patient fellow, no?”

“But in Austria, Bahö means ‘messed up.’ It’s a very old word,” concluded grease-hat, grinning down his nose.

“Really? Oh well, that could be right, because sometimes my heart is a bit messed-up, no? Ha, ha. Now, tell me your first names again, everyone, please. I’ve got a memory like a mosquito-net.”

So we all repeated our first names, and I really didn’t want to take any notice, but a few of them stuck in my head. At that point, the Swiss woman with the face like sour cream scrambled onto the bus looking terribly guilty.

“I’m so sorry that you’ve had to wait because of me. Will you still let me come with you?”

“Only if you tell us your first name, no?” Laughing, Bahee started the engine.

“Trixie. I’m Trixie from Zurich, though really from Hannover. Hello.”

I was glad to finally know that.

“And I’m Bahee from Otjosongombe, no? Now we all have local money, we can get off on our luxury trip, no? Is everybody here?”

“Yes,” we all shouted, and I added quietly to myself, “Clown!”

We rolled out of the carpark, and a good twenty metres on, I tugged gently at Sina’s trousers.

“What is it now, Matze?”

“I can’t take it anymore!”