

# Edgar Fuhrmann: Strange Encounter

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Simon, an asylum seeker from Ethiopia, disappears one day without a trace. Months later, he unexpectedly reappears.

Story from the book *Central Station* by Edgar Fuhrmann, with texts about people on the edge of society, stranded as human flotsam at the central station, this labyrinthine center of modern societies.

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When the train pulled into the station, I stood at the window with the other passengers, looking for friends and relatives. I knew that no one would pick me up, but somehow I still hoped to spot a familiar face in the anthill outside. However, there was no one I knew. While some burst into joyful excitement, I remained motionless at the window until the train stopped.

Trotting towards the exit, I wondered whether it would be better to take the bus or a taxi. My bag wasn't particularly heavy, I had plenty of time, the bus was cheaper – no reasonable arguments could be found for a taxi. I still had a few minutes before the bus left. So I hung around the station for a while, looking at the posters with the special travel offers and skimming the headlines in the newspapers.



I was about to head towards the bus stop when suddenly I felt as if I had seen a familiar face. Hesitantly, I turned around and ran my eyes once more along the route I had just strolled. My gaze fell on the curly head of a dark-skinned man who was intently studying a timetable on display.

Wasn't that ...? But no, I was probably behaving like anyone else who has had a fleeting encounter with a foreign people: Don't all the members of this people then seem somehow familiar?

In my case, a group of asylum seekers from Ethiopia had once lived in my neighbourhood.

From time to time I had met them in the community rooms of the local church. At some point they had all been moved to another area, so suddenly that I had lost all contact with them. The curly head in front of the timetable reminded me of Simon, who had left town before the other Ethiopians. It had never become quite clear what his sudden departure was connected with and where his new place of residence was. Whenever I asked his flatmates about it, they lost themselves in excuses and quickly shifted to another topic.

What immediately struck the eye about Simon was a certain restlessness that could be felt in everything he did. For example, it could happen that he was passionately discussing something with you, only to suddenly break off the discussion in mid-sentence because he remembered some appointment.

Half an hour later, he might be found walking in the park with a book in his hand, so absorbed in it that he didn't notice anything around him. In this way, he had very quickly learned the English

language, which he spoke with almost no accent. The fact that he kept weaving Russian words into his sentences – he had studied in Russia for a while – was rather a quirk he had retained from his early days in our country.

Slowly I moved towards the curly head in front of the timetable. As I now looked at the figure more closely, my suspicions gradually turned into certainty. That impatient rocking from one leg to the other, the annoyed hand movements when apparently a train connection was not as he had hoped: no doubt about it, that was Simon!

I stepped up beside him. My gaze fell on the nervous twitching of his eyelids that I had noticed on him right at the beginning of our acquaintance.

Cautiously, I addressed him from the side. "Simon?"

Without the slightest sign of surprise, Simon turned his head to me and looked me in the face. He blinked his eyes several times, then seemed to come down from his star.

The corners of his mouth twitched – was that a smile? "Ah, it's you," he greeted me. "How are things going?"

"Thank you, everything's fine," I returned. "Are you going on a little trip?"

"Yes, I'm just checking out the train connections."

"Do you want me to help you?"

"No, no need, I've already found my train."

"Do you still have time for a cup of coffee?"

"Yes, konjeschna – sure."

As we walked towards the station restaurant, we only talked about trivialities: weather, train connections, where we were coming from, where we were going to – we hadn't seen each



other for more than a year, so all these phrases were probably unavoidable to get back into conversation with each other.

In the large restaurant, only a few tables were occupied. At the very front, just at a safe distance from the swinging door, sat a chubby woman with a feather-adorned hat on her head. Next to her was a suitcase on wheels and a bag. Obviously she had come here to bridge a longer stopover.

She looked at us a little piqued when we entered briskly, causing a proper draught. Further back, next to the counter, sat, as it seemed to me, a group of Africans. At least their colourful robes suggested that they were not at home in this dreary environment. Other guests took no further notice of us or just glanced over reflexively and then turned straight back to their meals.

We sat down at one of the front tables, leaving a table free between us and the piqued lady. When the waitress came, I ordered a cup of

coffee for me and a glass of mineral water for Simon.

It took a while until our eyes got used to the bright light and we no longer felt like intruders in a foreign territory. A little bashfully, we looked around the pub, leafed through the menu or played with the beer mats piled up in front of us. When our drinks came, Simon placed a beer mat each for the mineral water and the coffee in front of us. The waitress put the mineral water on top and the coffee next to the beer mat.

"What's your new accommodation like?" I finally asked him.

"Oh, it's okay, you know. There are a lot of students in that place. It's easy to get in touch with them."

"Do you live alone?"

"No, we are three in a room. It's cramped, but ...

Why don't you drink your coffee?"

He raised his glass as if to toast me. While I was still sipping my coffee, Simon had already put his glass down again and was looking at the bubbles



that rose from the mineral water and burst on the surface.

"By the way, have you finally been granted asylum officially?" I wanted to know.

Simon didn't answer right away. "They dissolve quickly into thin air," he murmured, deep in thought.

"What do you mean?"

"The bubbles. They turn to air immediately. You can feel it when you hold your hand over the glass."

"Oh – yes."

Simon held his hand over the glass, as if to prove to himself that his thought was correct. "They are working on my case," he said after a while.

"Sometimes I get a letter, sometimes I have an appointment, but either way the result is: they are working on my case."

He looked at the bubbles again. "To be honest: I feel quite depressivni," he suddenly declared, blinking his eyes at me. "What does that mean in English: depressivni?"

"Probably 'depressed',' I translated at random. Simon smiled fleetingly: "I still have trouble with words like that." He turned his eyes from me and let them wander aimlessly around the pub.

"If you need any assistance – you know that ..."

Simon leaned slightly towards me. "Those are Ghanaians back there," he whispered.

"Maybe – but what does it matter?"

"You always have to be careful with them. They even steal from their own compatriots."

"I'm sure that doesn't apply to all of them – I've met some very nice Ghanaians," I contradicted him.

Simon's eyelids twitched. He took a sip of his mineral water. "Is your coffee okay?" he then asked.

"Well – it's just the usual station coffee."

Simon smiled. "Do you remember the coffee you had at our apartment back then?"

"Of course! My heart still begins to race when I think back to it."

"You can only get real coffee in Africa," he remarked with satisfaction. He looked around the pub again, as if searching for something.

"No, wrong," he suddenly corrected himself. "The Turks drink coffee that strong, too. And the South Americans even stronger, I think."

He picked up a beer mat and folded it into a roof. "You drink a lot of coffee when you're always sitting there waiting," he added.

"You mean because of the asylum application?"

The waitress walked past our table to bring the lady at the front door her food. She had ordered roast chicken with French fries. Simon watched



closely how the lady picked up her knife and fork to eat the chicken.

"She looks like one of those frogs we have in Africa," he remarked with a grin.

"Excuse me?"

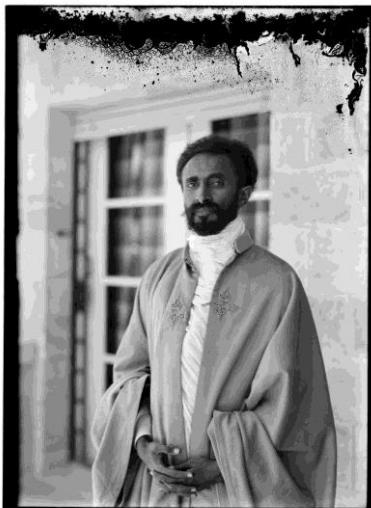
"You know, in Africa there are many different kinds of frogs. Some are so big and eat so much that they can hardly hop. They even devour mice! To catch their victims, they dig deep holes in the ground."

He blinked at me expectantly.

"I didn't know that," I confessed, while I remembered all the bizarre things Simon had told me about back then.

He nodded with satisfaction: "They eat the animal and then sit in a corner for days digesting. When people don't have anything to eat in our country, they catch the frogs and grill them over the fire."

Simon made a disgusted face. He had grown up in the city and in many ways showed the condescending attitude of the urbanite towards the rural population.



"You've never eaten any, I suppose?" I interpreted his expression.

"Once they tried to make me eat one. We were on the run and had nothing to eat ... That was already after Haile Selassie. – You know

he's descended from King David, don't you?"

"Yes, you told me before."

Simon let his gaze wander around the restaurant again, eyeing the presumed Ghanaians suspiciously. Then he fixed his eyes again on the lady with the chicken, counting the bites into her mouth with fascination.

"Do you actually know that in the meantime your former flatmates have all been transferred to other cities as well?" I asked him.

He shook his head.

"I haven't heard from them since," I added.

"Have they ever contacted you?"

"No." He turned back to his mineral water. He didn't seem particularly interested in what had become of the others.

"We were all quite surprised then when you suddenly left," I remarked.

Simon squinted again in the direction of the Africans. "Do you know they sometimes work for the secret service?" he whispered conspiratorially.

"Who?"

"Well, the Ghanaians."

"Nonsense! They're also just asylum seekers!"

Simon's eyelids began to twitch again. "The KGB used to do it that way, too. They send people abroad as political refugees, and then they use them as agents there. – I told you I studied in Moscow, didn't I?"

"Yes, you mentioned it once."

"I was a good student, you know. And the communists who were in power in Ethiopia at the time sent the best students to Moscow. The



Russians had better teachers, but it was also because of indoktrinacija – how do you say it in English?"

"Indoctrination, I think."

"Yes, because of indoctrination – and of course to learn Russian."

"Do you still speak the language?"

Simon had turned his gaze back to the chubby lady, who was now gnawing off the last bone.

"In Africa they slaughter every animal themselves," he said then as if to himself, "even in the big city."

He smiled. Obviously he had just thought of something funny. "In Russia they always took me for a Yank – because of the colour of my skin. They allowed me into the finest restaurants. 'Only for foreigners', you know? Of course, I only bought cigarettes or had a drink there, but it was always very funny."

One of the men in the colourful robes walked past us to leave the pub. Simon winced and turned to the other Africans who were still sitting at their table.

Absent-mindedly, he continued. "After a year I had my first holidays and flew home with the others."

He stared ahead, his eyelids twitching. "I am standing in the arrivals hall of the airport. No one is coming to pick me up. I take a taxi and let it drive me home. There is even more military in the streets than usual, at least that's how it seems to me. The taxi stops in front of our house. I pay. I get out and walk up to our flat. I unlock the door. No one is there. I make myself a coffee. I sit down at the table and wait. In the



evening my sister comes home. She tells me that our parents are dead."

Simon had told me about that before. His sister – she worked as a nurse in a hospital – had come home from work one day to find her parents murdered. They had been hung from the ceiling. Signs saying "I am a traitor" were tied around their necks. Obviously someone in the neighbourhood had denounced them.

The letters Simon's sister had sent to her brother in Moscow to inform him of the tragedy had probably been intercepted. After his return, they had both fled to Germany.

"Does your sister want to work as a nurse in Germany, too?" I asked him, trying to steer the conversation to a more innocuous topic.

Simon looked at me anxiously, almost a little indignantly: "She'll never do that!"

His gruff tone unsettled me. "Because of her memories?" I asked cautiously. "Or is it that she can't come to terms with our mechanised medicine?"

Simon looked at me in amazement. "Don't you know they do experiments on patients in hospitals?"

"Experiments? What makes you think that?"

"I realised that when I was in hospital myself.

They tried all kinds of pills on me and gave me injections to test some kind of medication."

"Are you sure you're not mistaken?"

Simon drank the rest of the mineral water. Then – as if remembering something – he turned back to the Africans.



Since he didn't give me an answer, I tried another question. "Why were you in the hospital in the first place?"

Simon looked at me in surprise. "Didn't the others tell you?"

I shook my head.

"That was before I moved away from here," he explained. "I had gotten myself something, and when the others weren't home, I took it."

"What did you take?"

Simon leaned over to me again. "They even wanted to do surgery on me at the hospital. But I escaped in time."

He was blinking his eyes even harder now than before. I was beginning to get seriously worried about him.

"But now why were you in the hospital?" I inquired again.

Simon glanced at the men in the colourful robes once more. "What time is it, by the way?" he asked suddenly.

Before I could answer him, he had already read off the time from the clock on the wall. In a flash



he rose from his chair. "Sorry, my train is about to leave. I have to go."

"Okay, but – give me your new address at least!"

"I'll send you the money for the mineral water by mail."

"But I invited you! Just give me your address."

He hurriedly scribbled something on a beer mat.

"Bye," he said, shaking my hand in his careless manner. "And thank you for the drink!"

"Don't mention it! Take care, will you?" I called after him as he was already hurrying away through the swinging door.

I ordered another cup of coffee to help me sort out my thoughts. The glass Simon had been playing with was still in front of me, and the colourful men he had been eyeing so suspiciously were still sitting in the background. For a moment it seemed to me that they were actually watching me. But when I looked more closely in their direction, they only grimaced happily and waved at me. A little bashfully, I reached for the coffee the waitress had brought me in the meantime and took a sip.

For a while, Simon's sentences just flashed through my head in disarray. Then I had the idea to have a look at the address he had written down for me. I picked up the beer mat that was still lying next to Simon's glass – and was startled. In the rush, Simon had written down his old address for me.

I hurriedly paid and ran out to chase after him. Only when I was outside did I realise that I didn't even know which train he wanted to take. I wandered aimlessly around the station for a few minutes, but couldn't find Simon anywhere. So I

ended up walking empty-handed to the bus stop.

When I got on the bus, I had the impression that all eyes were fixed on me. I quickly huddled in a corner and looked out the window, but in the bright light of the bus, only my own face was indistinctly visible in the pane.

