

Abu Rayan

Be in this world
like a Stranger

Autobiographical novel

Text and cover design

Abu Rayan

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*You were born with wings.
Why do you prefer
to crawl through life?*

Jalaludin Rumi

The book describes true events
as far as I can still remember them
and is dedicated to all those who
have helped me along the way.

Prologue

*Be in this world like a stranger
or someone passing through.*

Sahih al-Bukhari

Ever heard of Biniha? Probably not! Biniha is a small village on the Gulf of Tomini on the island of Sulawesi in Indonesia. As unknown and insignificant as this little place is, a surprising number of strangers now stop by and stay for a few nights. That's because we've opened a small hotel here, and it's often used as a stopover by foreigners passing through. I think that's very fitting! Because I'm a stranger myself and still feel like I'm just passing through.



Have most guests ever pondered on why they travel? What makes someone invest time and money to travel halfway around the world from Paris or Berlin to Biniha?

There are a few rational reasons one could list: When traveling, you leave everyday life behind and get to know new things and people. You treat yourself, see

beautiful sights, experience adventures, test your limits, broaden your horizons, spend meaningful moments with family or friends, and, last but not least, can show off with cool selfies.

But it's not just that. Travel is something that's hardwired into our genes. A nomadic life as hunter gatherers and herders has shaped humanity - not sitting in an office for hours on end. It's in our nature to be on the move, and that's why it's so fulfilling.

One could argue that it goes even deeper. Our true self is, in reality, beyond time and space and any limitations. Clinging to material things is therefore like a prison for our soul. When the soul can rid itself of all attachments and responsibilities and freely surrender to its being, then it feels happiness. And the best way to escape attachments and obligations is through travel.

But in today's travel, something fundamental is missing in this regard: letting go! With money and a smartphone in your pocket, you don't truly entrust yourself to being, but still to having. We hop from one island to another and from one hotel to the next. Even those who don't plan their trip down to the last detail and leave room for spontaneous decisions still miss something fundamental: entrusting oneself to fate. We miss the experience of knowing that we will find our daily bread along the way, just as a bird finds its grain. Traveling through a foreign country as a tourist, or earning one's daily bread there, are two very different things! The experiences will be fundamentally different, as will one's mental and psychological state. As long as one still derives one's livelihood from Europe, one is, so to

speak, tethered and bound to it. And no matter how long the leash may be, eventually it will pull one back.

That's why it's not surprising that many guests ask, "What brought you to Indonesia?" What they really want to know, of course, isn't what's so great about Biniha that I gave up my life in Germany for, but rather - generally (and often unconsciously) - the question: How did you manage to let go? How did you take the leap?

Most guests have no idea how spiritual and profound their question was, or that it could take hours or even days to answer it properly. But since, of course, not everyone wants to hear my entire life story or be enlightened about the religious and philosophical considerations that underlie my decisions, it's better to be able to refer them to a book so that people who want more details can read about it for themselves. Yes, exactly—the book you're holding in your hands right now!

What many people can easily understand or even relate to is that I wasn't happy in Germany and always felt like a stranger and out of place. It almost goes without saying that this is why I loved to travel. After graduating from high school, I traveled to Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia for the first time in 1986. It was a different world, and of course, I was a stranger there too. But when traveling, being a stranger feels normal, whereas upon my return, "normal German life" felt even more foreign than before.

Until I graduated from high school, I'd never really given much thought to what came next. Because it was kind

of a given: As the child of academics, you go to university! But when the time came and I had to make a decision about what I wanted to invest years of my life in - a decision that might even shape the rest of my life - the question suddenly stood clear before me: What do I really want to do with my life? What do I hope for?

And I had no answer! I knew only one thing: I didn't want the "normal German life"! Something was wrong with society, and therefore with my own life as well. Terribly wrong! But what exactly was it?

Environmental destruction was one of the most obvious symptoms. Why was humanity destroying the place from which it came - Mother Earth - and thereby ultimately itself? It didn't seem to me to be a technical problem that could simply be solved by not using coal and nuclear power and instead using "green technologies." It went much deeper!

I became somewhat depressed at that time and suffered from eczema, a condition that has many causes but is often primarily psychosomatic in nature. A doctor prescribed corticosteroids and the eczema disappeared for a while, only to reappear after a short time. I began to understand that we humans are not simply biological machines that can be taken to a mechanic to be repaired, but that we have a soul.

A friend of mine gave me a book by a naturopath that said a disease is not an enemy we must fight, but rather a friend who shows us the way. We were like stars on a path and had spiritual lessons to learn. If we strayed from the path and refused to learn our lessons voluntarily, we would experience friction in the form of

illness and other misfortunes that would help us learn the lessons anyway and bring us back onto our path. Existence, then, had a meaning and a purpose, and was not merely chance or a cosmic game of roulette.

The book was very inspiring, and after that I devoured countless books on esotericism and religion. I began to believe in God again after having given up my faith at the age of seven.

During the time of my “spiritual awakening”, I started various educations, only to usually drop out after two or three months, because I lacked any motivation and felt as if I were laced into a corset. After each dropout, I would travel again for several months to get some fresh air. Of course, my parents were anything but pleased and eventually made that crystal clear: “This is the last education we’re financing you! If you drop out one more time, that’s it! Then you’ll have to find your own way!”

Alternative practitioner was the last thing I tried. But again, I felt like I was stuck in a straitjacket. After three months, I dropped out again and from then on got by with odd jobs, like sticking labels on products in a department store warehouse. Then I went into construction and started laying crane rails in high-bay warehouses. A well-paid dirty job! You were on the road, which I liked. But otherwise, it was pretty much the exact opposite of all my lofty ideals, because this time the trips weren’t to a tropical dream beach but to Germany’s industrial areas.

My God, what had been done to this earth? And there I was, right in the middle of this devastation, my pneumatic drill in hand!

These were the darkest hours of my life. But the light was near...

Purifying Fire

*"Stop complaining," said the farmer,
"who told you to be a calf?
Why don't you have wings to fly with
like the swallow, so proud and free?"*

Donovan, On a Wagon

It was four o'clock in the morning in December 1990 when I arrived at the company. The blue delivery van was already parked in the lot in front of the brick building. My three Belgian colleagues were just in the process of loading a few more parts from the workshop into the van. Peter, my foreman, gave me a yawning "Good morning" and said, "You're coming with me in the Opel! We have to go to Frankfurt today."

I got into the car with Peter, while my other two colleagues settled into the delivery van. The man in the passenger seat wrapped himself in his jacket, leaned his head against the seat, and seemed to have already fallen asleep before the van had even pulled away. We glided silently down the highway.

"You are lucky," Peter said suddenly, "working here as a student. At least you get a couple of weeks off every now and then! I really don't feel like it at all this morning!"

"Nah, me neither!" I grumbled, gazing out into the night, where a few streetlights could be seen here and there. "I can't understand how you can keep doing this job for so long either!"

“There isn’t much work in Belgium,” Peter replied, sounding somewhat resigned. A faint whiff of alcohol drifted over to me.

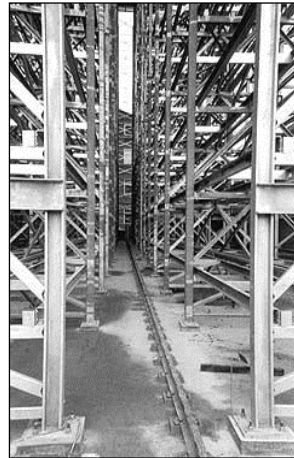
A leaden gray sky greeted us in Frankfurt. Other installation teams were already on the construction site, and the sound of hammering and drilling could be heard everywhere. The parts for the 40-meter-high shelves were lifted by the telescopic arm of a massive construction crane and lowered to the men who were assembling the steel beams high above the ground. Other workers were installing sprinkler systems, and still others were tinkering with the massive special cranes that would later, under computer control, fill the shelves with products like dog food, televisions, or shaving cream. There were eight aisles between the shelves, and in each one stood one of these monstrous cranes, for which we were laying the tracks. The aisles were over a hundred meters long. Rainwater pooled on the concrete floor, which we were now measuring and marking with points where the drilling would later take place.

“Are you taking the drill?” Peter asked.

“I’ll do it!” I replied and trudged over to the delivery van to haul the pneumatic drill over. Then I connected the thick hoses to the compressor, turned it on, put on my ear protection, and started hammering away.

Every 70 cm, two holes had to be drilled at each spot that Peter had previously marked with the Hilti so the drill bit would have a grip. Dust and concrete flew everywhere. A deafening roar echoed through the warehouse. As long as the drill bit hit only concrete, it

dug into the floor like butter. But as soon as it hit the rebar in the reinforced concrete, it started bouncing and occasionally got stuck, so that I had to use all my strength to get it loose again. After twenty minutes, my fingers were already cramping, and I began to sweat despite the December cold. Eventually, one of my colleagues took over, and I proceeded to bolt together the steel plates onto which the rails would later be mounted.



I stared into nothingness. Behind that nothingness lay the white ceiling of my hotel room, where I lay on my bed, lost in thought. Outside, a cold wind howled, making the already unwelcoming atmosphere of the sparsely furnished room seem even more melancholic. Gloomy thoughts raced through my head, and I wondered how I'd actually ended up doing this slave labor. I had dropped out of my naturopath training because it didn't live up to my ideals, and now I'd been scraping by for a year with whatever jobs I could find!

I continued to stare into space, thinking about my 29-square-meter ground-floor apartment, my cell, where I lived; where I painted, read, and listened to music, or hosted my friends, who also didn't really know what they actually expected from this strange life. Certainly not cozy family bliss with a home of my own and sports on TV!

Wasn't it fear that forced me into this life? That fear of facing nothingness if I didn't keep chasing after that filthy lucre?

I rolled onto my side and reached for the Bible that the Gideons had left out here for guests. In keeping with my mood, I leafed through the Book of Revelation and read about the bowls of God's wrath that the angels poured out upon the earth. I read about the sea and the rivers that were poisoned; about the sun, which was given power to scorch people with intense heat; and about the sores that afflicted the people. I couldn't help but think of oil tanker accidents, the ozone hole, and cancer - and of how the apocalypse was already in full swing while I was still diligently laying my tracks. I heard one of my colleagues laughing next door, and I glanced briefly out the window. But there was only pitch-black night, so I kept reading.

They have shed blood, and You have given them blood to drink; they deserve to be destroyed - those who have destroyed the earth... but for the cowards and the unbelievers and all liars, their portion is in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, and this is the second death.

I closed my eyes.

I saw a path. Pillars of fire stood at its edges, the ground was covered with glowing coals, and there was no sky. And I had to walk this path. All alone, to its very end, where an angel would receive me with cooling water and all torment would end forever. Should I refuse to walk this path, or shrink back in fear and agony, the flames would crash down upon me eternally, and even my own scream would turn into a flame against me, devouring me and yet spitting me out again and again.

Suddenly, a fear dawned on me that was far greater than the fear of standing on the street as a beggar or a starving person! It was the fear of being guilty and being held accountable for it!

Humanity was in the process of destroying the planet! Humanity was heading toward the abyss! And I was running along with the lemmings toward self-destruction! Well, I probably couldn't save the Earth, but perhaps I could do one thing: stop going along with it! Stop ruining everything! Repent, and stop kneeling before the Golden Calf! Sooner or later, there wouldn't be anything left to buy with all that money anyway! And I could keep fooling myself and lying to myself about why I had gone along with the general madness, but God would judge me one day! And every lame excuse would then no longer hold water!

I opened the Bible once more and read, as if for confirmation:

...and they did not repent, so that they might cease from the work of their hands and give glory to God! ...if anyone wants to come with me, let him deny himself,

take up his cross, and follow me! For whoever wants to save his life will lose it.

At that moment, it became clear to me that I no longer belonged here. But that I had to face my fear and let go of the straws and supposed securities, and entrust myself to a guidance that would continue to lead me even after my death.

Snow

There is nothing better for this illness (melancholy) than a change of air, than wandering up and down, like the Zalmohens Tatars, who live in hordes and make use of the opportunities offered by time, place, and the seasons.

*Robert Burton,
The Anatomy of Melancholy*

I slept on my decision for one more night, then the next morning said goodbye to my astonished foreman, took my remaining money and my small backpack, and set off for the train station. The keys to my apartment I sent to a friend and asked him to clear out the apartment for me.

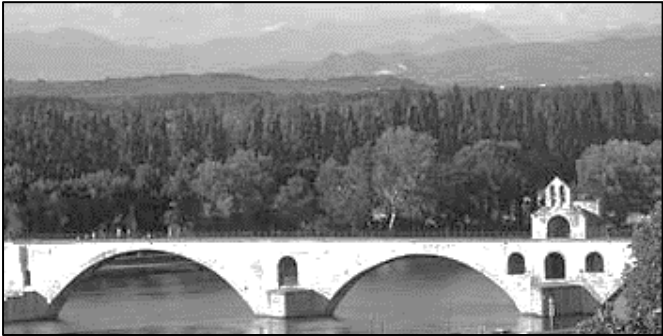
My money was enough for a ticket to Lyon, but my destination was Spain. In my mind's eye, I already saw myself as a beggar on the streets of Barcelona and as a self-flagellating, penitent monk in a desert-like region.

It was night when I reached Lyon, and it was cold. I headed south and soon crossed the Rhône, on which the lights of houses and refineries glistened. As my legs grew heavier and heavier, the question arose of where I could spend the night sheltered from the cold. When I finally spotted a hospital sign, I remembered my time as a nursing student and knew the answer. Unnoticed, I made my way into the shower room of a staff locker room, spent an uncomfortable but warm night there, and was only awakened by the noise of the early shift.

The sky looked leaden, and a sharp wind was blowing. But it felt good to walk; it was liberating. And since it was too cold for long breaks, I managed to cover over fifty kilometers that day. At night, I found shelter in a factory hall and some plastic sheeting, which I used to cover myself makeshiftly. But it soon got too cold. Shivering, I got up and set out in search of a new place to sleep. I stumbled into the factory's heated break room and curled up close to the heater. Until, after a few short hours of sleep, the lights came on, the night shift trickled in, and unwrapped their sandwiches. The men shot me silent, chewing glances and looked astonished as I gathered my things, gave them a wave, and made a swift getaway.

I hadn't gotten much sleep, and it had gotten even colder. And then, at the first light of dawn, it started snowing – here in the south of France! Just as quickly as my shoes got soaked, my mood had plummeted below zero. For hours I trudged through the slush with wet feet until, around noon, a hospital finally came into view, and I made it to what I thought was a sheltered corner of a changing room. But it wasn't long before I heard a frightened woman's voice: "Il y a quelqu'un!" Yet I was too tired and in a foul mood to get up, so I pretended to be asleep. After a few minutes, a man's voice approached. A stocky, bearded man, surrounded by curious nurses, urged me to get up. I tried to explain that I had been seeking shelter from the cold, and I was lucky. A kind-hearted, pretty nurse took me to her ward, made me a hot cup of tea, and gave me something to eat. The embarrassment of standing before such a pretty woman as someone in need soon faded, and I enjoyed being looked after. But unfortunately, that

warm feeling didn't last long. My shoes were still wet, I couldn't stay, and it was still snowing incessantly. I'd had enough of wandering by now and tried my luck on the nearby highway, where after just five minutes I caught a ride to Avignon. Thankfully, there was no more snow here, but by then I'd developed a constant chill, and I wasn't quite sure whether it was more psychological or physical in nature. The uncertainty and the cold I was heading into made the world seem more desolate than ever. Life was nothing but a burden, and so I dragged myself along, heavily laden, even though my backpack was small.



Just past the Pont d'Avignon, a small delivery van pulled over without me even having to hitchhike. Inside the rusty old clunker sat a gypsy and a massive dog, and on the dashboard, a small plastic statue of the Virgin Mary stood with her arms outstretched in a welcoming gesture. The gypsy just waved, and I got in without saying a word. We drove along lonely country roads. At sunset, a mountain range was visible to the southwest, which I mistakenly assumed were the Pyrenees.

“Do you want to come meet my family?” the gypsy asked, popping a Gauloise into his mouth and offering me one as well.

“Yeah, maybe,” I croaked through the cigarette smoke, “where does your family live?”

There was no clear answer, however that evening came an invitation to dinner and the offer of a blanket. In a parking lot, the gypsy got ready for the night. But I didn't feel quite right about it: the cramped space of the car, the big dog, and the feeling that the man might be gay! So I told him I'd rather keep going, hoping not to offend the gypsy's pride - after all, he had invited me to meet his family. The gypsy seemed indeed a little offended and just nodded. I waited for another awkward minute, hoping the man would come back to the offer of the blanket. But he rummaged around in his car without saying a word, and only the cold encouraged me to ask again.

I spent the night in a stairwell, sitting on the front edge of a step, waking up again and again from the cold despite the blanket. It probably would have been better to stay after all. It hadn't been a lonely parking lot, and hadn't Maria welcomed me?

It turned out that I had strayed off course after all, and the mountains weren't the Pyrenees. But hitchhiking went quite well all the way to Montpellier, and there I found another hospital, this time even with a bathtub full of hot water. I lay in the tub for nearly an hour, relishing the sensation as I kept running hot water into it, until finally an impatient knock on the door reminded

me that there were other people who wanted to bathe as well.

Later, I sat down in a patient lounge and watched TV. Although I was the only one sitting there without a bathrobe or bandages, everyone's attention was focused on the screen anyway. A boy with a horribly disfigured face sat down next to me and offered me some candy. As we got to talking, I confessed that I wasn't a patient at all and was just warming up here, whereupon the boy led me to his room and said the other bed was free, so I could sleep there. But once again, my fear held me back from seizing fate's helping hand, and I preferred to sleep in a quiet corner of the stairwell. Still, the boy had given me some strength. I wasn't the only one suffering on this planet! How quickly one forgets that!

White Doves

Atum emerges from the chaotic waters of Nun, and the light appears. Ra-Atum, whose symbol is the scarab, initiates a new cycle of creation. This aspect of the sun god is called Chepri, the Becoming.

Cosmogony of Heliopolis

After waiting a long time on the highway, I was finally picked up by an English guitarist who was on his way to Toulouse with his wife and child to meet up with his band there.

“Where are you off to?” he asked, offering me cookies and cigarettes.

“To Spain!” I blurted out.

“You got money?”

“No.”

“Do you speak any Spanish?”

“No.”

Good music blared from the speakers as we rocked comfortably southward, and I was in a good mood for the first time in a long while. Spain was already in sight! When I finally got off, the woman pressed the half-full cookie package into my hand with a good-natured smile. “Good luck!” the two of them called out, and a few minutes later I realized that the woman had secretly slipped 200 francs into the cookie package! Rarely had my heart felt so warm, and I sensed that I

was back on the upswing, for fear was gradually giving way to trust in fate.

The area and the weather became more pleasant, although the nights were still very cold and my legs were badly strained from the unfamiliar exertion. The journey to Barcelona was slow. When I finally reached there, I sat down on a waterfront promenade and gazed at the infinity of the sea. From here, one could make out the district where the Olympic Games were soon to take place. Monstrous concrete skeletons jutted out there like an aesthetic nightmare right up to the shore.

It was too cold to sleep, despite all my washed and unwashed shirts and socks, and the exhaustion was wearing me down. A few meters away, a homeless man was busy trying to start a small fire with a newspaper so he could then lie down on the warmed-up stone. The man was wearing a T-shirt and had only thin moccasins. Shivering, I wondered how the man could stand it, and I crept over to him to toss a coin into his crumpled hat. As I looked at his furrowed, sooty face and his stubbly, patchy beard, the man woke up, and I was astonished. Most people would probably have jumped up in fright if a stranger were fiddling around next to them in such a place. But the vagrant just looked at me with the most peaceful eyes one could imagine, gave me a brief smile, and the next moment had already fallen back asleep, like someone who since long had nothing left to lose and no longer knows fear or mistrust.

Hitchhiking and walking, I continued my journey south and eventually reached a small village, where I made myself comfortable on the porch of a house that was obviously only inhabited during the summer months.

I was already looking a bit run-down, with a rash on my neck and dirty clothes. As I was lost in my gloomy thoughts, a Moroccan guy my age suddenly came walking along the beach, saw me, and asked in French where I was from and where I was going.

“Come with me to my friends,” he said after a while, “it’s too cold here.”

A few streets away stood a building under construction that hadn’t seen any work for quite some time. A small room had been made rainproof with cardboard and plastic sheeting; three Moroccans were sitting inside and greeted me warmly. They were day laborers who sometimes found work on the nearby orange plantations and had been granted temporary visas. I immediately felt at home. Crowded together, the five of us slept on two mattresses laid side by side, and I was ashamed of my rash and my clothes. I was moved that so much warmth was shown to a grubby vagabond like me!

Two days later, Valencia lay before me, and then the moment came: I ran out of money! With my last pesetas, I bought a small loaf of white bread. A meager ration! But one hope remained: I had written to my parents that I was on my way to Valencia and now fervently hoped that they would send me the promised Christmas present there.

Shortly before I fled Frankfurt, I’d had a few arguments with them. Besides my doomsday prophecies (“The world is falling apart and you’re partly to blame!”), I’d mainly accused them of financing my brother’s entire education but failing to support me in my efforts to find

alternative paths. I found all this talk of education and a secure livelihood in the face of global catastrophes ridiculous. They should rather give me the same opportunities as my brother and let me dispose of the money freely, instead of forcing me (!) to pursue an education or lay tracks. My pent-up anger at the general situation (which was probably, in reality, more a rage at my own inability to find another path) erupted so violently during our discussions that my parents gradually began to fear for my mental health and finally decided to at least treat me to a vacation: “So that the sea breeze can blow your gloomy thoughts out of your head.”

Well, now I was at the sea! And if I ever needed money, it was now! Surely my parents could have figured that much out!

But the post office was closed for a holiday, so I had to endure another day of hunger. Deep down, I knew that the money probably wouldn't do me any good and would only unnecessarily postpone something decisive and inevitable. But my trust in money was still greater than my trust in God!

As I was strolling through the colorful shopping arcade that morning, a beggar wrapped in a long, worn leather coat suddenly spoke to me in English: “Don't you have any spare change for an old man?”

“Sorry, I don't have any myself! But I'm on my way to the post office. If I find something there, I'll treat you to breakfast.”

The beggar nodded silently and raised his hand in a salute.

A telegram was waiting for me at the post office: "Letters take 9 days Stop Apartment still there Stop Come back first Stop Your parents."

When going back the same way, I met the beggar again, sat down next to him, and didn't need to say much. The old man asked if I was hungry, and when I said yes, he motioned for me to come along. We went to the nearest café, and my eyes widened when the beggar served me croissants and a latte!

I then spent half the day watching my host do his "job." He really knew who to ask and what to say! A real artist! People smiled, and were generous. Most of the money went toward vino tinto, though, and the old man started getting louder and louder, which wasn't exactly good for business. He kept at it just for the fun of it, like someone who enjoys his work.

A buddy of his later took me to a friendly-looking flute player, a Portuguese guy named Alberto, who spoke passable English. He asked me to collect money while he kept playing the flute.

And so, for the first time in my life, I was begging strangers for money! Later, I even tried my hand at the flute, but produced almost nothing but annoying noise. At least it was enough to get people's attention. In the pre-Christmas hustle and bustle, hardly anyone was really listening anyway.

Later, we strolled through the picturesque old town of Valencia with its many churches, romantic squares, and narrow alleys, sat down in a cheap little bar, and

ordered beer and tapas¹. Then Alberto hauled a foam mattress from the curb, eventually stopped in front of a massive old apartment building, looked around to the right and left, and then opened the heavy door. We entered a gloomy stairwell, and I immediately recognized from the smell that this house had obviously not been lived in for quite some time. We entered a ground-floor apartment and joined two Spaniards who were sitting there by candlelight in a small room, smoking a joint. Alberto placed the mattress for me in a cozy corner. “Make yourself comfortable,” he urged me, and I didn’t need to be told twice.

The building had over twenty apartments spread across four floors and, like so many buildings in Valencia, stood empty: too dilapidated to be lived in, too expensive to renovate, but listed as a historic landmark, so it was slowly falling into ruin. Alberto had picked the lock a few days earlier and had already spoken with the owner, who seemed quite nice and happened to be passing by; he apparently had no objection to housing illegal subtenants as long as no mischief occurred. Which, however, turned out to be the case later on, because the house attracted more and more a motley crew of people like a magnet.

The next day, I chose a room on the third floor, with marble floors and huge windows, and built myself a bed and a desk using junk from the street. Soon I got a Canadian as a neighbor, who had run out of money in Valencia and whom Alberto had dragged here, just like me. Alberto showed us the “Comedor Casa Grande”, a

¹ Small samples of all sorts of things, served with beer or wine.

charitable dining hall where over 400 people were fed daily, all of whom were required by the resolute nuns to say their prayers before the food was served. A unique gathering of drunks, vagrants, homeless people, slackers, foreigners, drug addicts, and other social misfits - many nice, but unfortunately mostly broken, dull, or dazed faces. My regulars' table for the foreseeable future!

I practiced being a beggar monk! It had taken me quite a bit of effort to sit down in the pedestrian passageway with a shoebox for the first time and endure the shame. But I had been sitting there for barely ten seconds when a 1,000-peseta bill flew² into the box, and all I could make out was the back of a man who was hastily disappearing into the crowd. The spontaneous thought occurred to me that I had been rewarded by fate for humiliating myself and lowering myself in front of others!

Over time, however, the unpleasant feeling of being stared at, despised, ignored, pitied, or even hated faded away. At first, I could only look down at the ground in shame, but then my eyes slowly opened! Just standing there calmly and observing all the hustle and bustle! Being a rock that the river of people washes past!

There were the old ladies who took five minutes to dig out a Duro³; the dapper yuppie who, in his haste, still found the time to donate a coin; young girls who slipped me something, either bashfully or with a smile; housewives on their way to the store; serious

² Back then, about 7 euros

³ 5 pesetas

gentlemen who cast worried or stern glances my way... and the feeling of pity turned around!

I mourned for the people who seemed so alien to themselves; who rushed past one another, so close and yet so far apart, and seemed trapped in a kind of Sleeping Beauty slumber, as lifeless as wind-up toys! In the past, I had often felt a sense of hatred for the masses of people who, in their busyness, were trampling the planet underfoot. But now that I myself was no longer running along with them, and had thus put an end to my hatred of myself, I could once again recognize the individual faces and the illness that had afflicted them. And I had the strange but certain feeling that by doing nothing, I was doing something good! For there were people who stopped, saw something other than themselves and their own interests, and temporarily brought their clockwork to a standstill!

At a flea market where Alberto also sold junk on Saturdays, I found poster paint, brushes, and old boots in my size, which I managed to haggle down to 300 pesetas from the good-natured old man. I bought some large sheets of paper, then sat down on the street and started painting. I placed a small pot next to me and put some loose change inside to make the point clear: donations welcome! That brought in less money than begging, but I was now sitting in a beautiful spot right next to the cathedral, the Plaza de la Virgen, where hundreds of white doves lived. Sometimes a police patrol would come by, usually giving me a look that told

me to get lost. Or an acquaintance would show up with a joint, a beer, or some Calimucho⁴ .



Once a woman came by and tried to strike up a conversation with me. But of course, my Spanish wasn't good enough for a real conversation yet. At least I understood that she painted herself and that she liked my pictures. And suddenly there were 5,000 pesetas in my piggy bank! Now I could buy special paints at an art supply store - the kind you had to mix yourself with glue and water – and that produced brilliant effects.

Before long, my room had turned into a small studio. Euphoric, I wrote to my parents that I could now make a living painting and really went on and on about it. “The fox provides for himself, but God provides for the lion⁵,” and other bold sayings I let fly, so happy was I to have my feet back on solid ground!

The house had already filled up quite a bit within a week. Three Black men from Ghana had arrived as stowaways and were posing as South Africans to get

⁴ Spanish: really warms you up. Wine mixed with soda or Coke

⁵ W. Blake

asylum. You could constantly hear Bob Marley and Burning Spear blaring from their small, windowless room, and since I was their immediate neighbor, I spent some time with them. Somewhere deep down, I had quite a bit of respect for their life experience, because they had been hardened by their lives in Africa and were a step ahead of the decadent Europeans. Their clothes and they themselves were always meticulously clean, because their motto was: “You can’t have luck when you’re dirty!”

Then there was a room filled with Moroccans and Algerians; two German girls who always put on funny makeup and then struck some pose on the street, encouraging people to stop and donate money; and more and more Spaniards, Portuguese, French, Italians, Dutch... After a month, I lost track. In the evenings, a bonfire was usually lit in the courtyard, where we cooked, smoked weed, drank, and sang, and thanks to the different nationalities, a wild mix of languages was spoken.

One day it happened. Someone was found on the first floor with his throat slit. The whole room was smeared with blood and reeked of that peculiar smell. It remained unclear whether it had been suicide or murder. Strangely enough, there were no major police operations nor interrogations, and the house remained untouched. The mood was a bit somber for a short while, but no one seemed to have known the man at all.

As I stood on the street once again with my hand outstretched, three people who looked like students walked by, sized me up, and asked how much I made

from begging. I dodged the question and said it was hard to say, that it varied.

“Do you speak any foreign languages?”

“German, English, and French.”

“Would you like to work in a gallery and sell paintings? You’d make 150,000 pesetas a month!”

I wasn’t quite sure why I turned down this fantastic offer. Maybe because I felt a bit like I was at a slave market, where the buyers were eyeing me up as merchandise. Or because I instinctively sensed: “This is a temptation meant to lead you astray!” In any case, I shot back at them: “I paint myself, and if I sell paintings, they’ll be my own!”

The three of them looked at me in bewilderment, then shrugged and went on their way. The very next moment, I already regretted it. Maybe that would have been a good opportunity for all sorts of things, especially since I painted myself! A gift from fate! But I soon calmed down again and believed I had made the right decision. At the moment, my philosophy was: Less is more.

Inspections were now taking place in the house after all. A few people were taken into custody and the police kicked down my door (even though it wasn’t even locked!) and stormed into my room. But when they saw my nice studio and my German ID, they disappeared again without a word.

Things gradually became more chaotic, and there were thefts. I never missed anything, but what did I really

own besides paints and brushes? My door was always open.

The fire pit had since been moved by the Blacks to the third floor, where they set up a metal barrel in the middle of a room, from which it blazed comfortably. But the spot had a few drawbacks: the room quickly became too small for all the people, and you were half-suffocating in the smoke, which blew unhindered through the windows to the outside, giving passersby and neighbors the impression that the house was on fire. So we finally moved up to the roof, where there was more space and where there was also quite a bit of flammable junk lying around.

One cozy evening, as I was staring absently into the embers, I heard that there were supposedly habitable caves near Granada where freaks lived, and the old image of the monk in the cave resurfaced. Since the atmosphere here was slowly losing its appeal for me, I packed my small backpack the very next day and resolved to walk all the way to Granada without using any money.

I wanted to learn to let go and now saw my journey symbolically as the biblical exodus from Egypt. If I didn't want to remain a slave to money, I had to cross the desert - the place where there was nothing and where, with all my strength and intelligence, I could accomplish nothing, but was entirely dependent on God's grace and guidance! The place where the golden calf could not help me!

Charles Bronson

“Only the children know what they are looking for,” said the little prince. “They waste their time over a rag doll and it becomes very important to them; and if anybody takes it away from them, they cry.” “They are lucky,” the switchman said.

A. de Saint-Exupéry, The Little Prince

The outskirts of Valencia stretched on endlessly with their unsightly architecture. At noon, I found an intact sandwich wrapped in aluminum foil on the street. A little later, I asked for water at a restaurant and was given ice-cold lemonade instead. In the evening, I stuffed myself with oranges at an orchard until my whole skin started to itch. At a bakery, I asked sheepishly for day-old bread and, to my surprise, received a bag full of fresh assorted pastries.

I tried to reach the next major town by noon, hoping to find a comedor there in time for lunch. But it was getting later and later, and I was getting more and more nervous. Finally arriving in the little town, people sent me from here to there; no one really knew where I was going, and I was getting more frantic. Eventually, I ended up in the entrance hall of a monastery, where there was a small revolving door in the wall serving as a pass-through. When I rang the bell, an elderly woman’s thin voice answered, asking what I wanted.

“I’m hungry and I have no money!”

Five minutes passed and my hope rose. Something that had lasted this long had to turn out well in the end! The revolving door opened and there were 25 pesetas in the serving hatch. Not even enough for a bread roll! I called out to ask if they might have something to eat instead of money, but all I heard was a murmur, and then there was silence.

Later, at a bakery, a kind soul gave me a loaf of bread, and I found a vacant little house by a river with a garden and fruit trees. There I lit a campfire. I was pretty angry at myself for getting so worked up over the food and chasing after my greed. Eating had already become the center of my thoughts and philosophy! All the lofty ideas I'd been clinging to in Germany had been reduced here to the simple question: "How do I get something between my teeth?"

Finally, an easily walkable sandy beach began. I enjoyed hiking kilometer after kilometer along the sea and feeling the sea breeze in my hair. Here, before the immensity of the sea, so many things lost their meaning, and I felt lighter and lighter the further I went. As if I could walk like this forever!

Eventually I reached Denia and finally Benidorm, whose skyline reminded me of a miniature Las Vegas. I walked through the streets, saw plump tourists' faces and one eatery after another. But when I asked in the restaurants, it was in vain - they wanted to see money. So I collected leftover food from the tables and earned some dirty looks. People would rather throw the stuff in the trash than give it to me, the poor sod!

There were no more sandy beaches now, and I had to walk along the road. The traffic was terribly annoying, and the land was dry and barren. A small brick cottage stood between the expressway and the highway. An older but very sturdy-looking man with a stubble beard stood in front of it and waved me over. A good-natured face smiled at me: “A donde vas, hombre?” He pulled me into the house, where a fire was burning in the fireplace, in front of which another man was busy cooking.

“You’ve come just in time for dinner,” said the bearded man in quite fluent English, because he had apparently already noticed that my Spanish was still poor, and because he was likely proud to be able to demonstrate his linguistic talent. He got so carried away that he spent half the afternoon telling his life story.

“I used to be Charles Bronson’s double,” he said. “I’m originally from the Canary Islands; my ancestors used to live there barefoot in caves.”

Later he asked me, “Don’t you feel like diving for sponges with me, or maybe searching for lost jewelry in the water on the beach in Benidorm? I know a good buyer there!”

But the thought of the water temperature in mid-February put me off, and besides, I didn’t want to use any money. I stayed one more day, but the other Spaniard seemed jealous, didn’t understand English either, probably felt left out, and then started grumbling that there wasn’t enough food for everyone. The Canarian was clearly uncomfortable with this and would have liked to keep me there, but he also wanted

to keep the peace. But since I wanted to move on anyway, I said goodbye to the old man.

I walked through huge salt flats, endless fields, and sprawling landscapes. My shyness about approaching people in shops, bars, or restaurants had gradually faded, and I always dutifully recited my little line: "Tengo hambre, no tengo dinero..."

Most of the time, a single glance was enough, and I already knew whether I'd get something or not. Of course, I was wrong now and then, but my ability to judge people grew with experience. My worst experience happened once when, on a hot day, I asked for water in a tavern and the landlady just shook her head with a cold smile. When I was back on the street, tears welled up in my eyes - I was so taken aback. How could anyone deny water to a thirsty person when they had plenty of it themselves?

I began emptying my backpack, which was quite small anyway. In Valencia, I had seen a man dressed like an Indian guru. He wore only a white cloth and a white blanket over his shoulder, had a white beard and long white hair, and no shoes on his feet. He reminded me of Jesus' teaching: "Do not acquire gold or silver or copper in your belts, no bag for the journey, nor even two tunics, nor shoes, nor a staff, for the worker is worthy of his food." I, too, wanted to learn to live like a bird, to gain the confidence that one finds everything necessary along the way, if God wills it!

It was also relatively easy for me to part with my pocket knife and a pair of socks; I only hesitated with the blanket, because the nights were still cool, and the

experience of being unable to sleep from the cold was still fresh in my memory. And if I wanted to part with everything and rely on nothing material anymore, what about my ID?

Just before Almeria, I was about to sneak out of a tomato field where I'd been stealing a few tomatoes when a police car pulled up. The officer smiled at me when he saw he'd caught me: "Documentacione!" He glanced briefly at my ID, then handed it back to me, raised his index finger slightly, and the car drove on.

After a few kilometers, I passed a ruin on which someone had spray-painted in red: "Because they didn't have documentation... they died in Christ... Civil Guard, God knows what you're doing⁶!"

That was it! The ID card was the mark mentioned in the Apocalypse! The one that all people, except for the few chosen ones, would accept, and without which one could neither buy nor sell! All who did not accept this mark would be killed. But those who did accept it would end up in eternal fire! The image and the name of the beast, and the number of its name: 666! The number of a man, the number of my own reflection!

⁶ Spanish: Because they didn't have ID...Died in Christ...Guardia Civil, God knows what you're doing!

Cave Dwellers

The genius differs from the dreamer and the fool only in that his visions are analogous to the truth, while the visions of the dreamer and the fool are lost reflections and distorted images.

Eliphaz Levi, Transcendental Magic

After six weeks of walking, Granada lay before me. Skyscrapers and church spires rose up from a brownish haze. In the background, the Alhambra, the Moorish palace, rose majestically, towered over by the mountain backdrop of the Sierra Nevada.

I had actually imagined Granada to be smaller and cozier. Disappointed, I already decided to keep walking on to Morocco, since I was now in good shape and the constant moving on had become addictive to me. But I wanted to quickly stop by the post office, since I had written to my parents that they could send me letters there.

The city greeted me with exhaust-filled heat and a throng of people. I asked my way to the post office and found a friendly letter from my parents, along with some money. My apartment had been cleared out in the meantime, and there was still quite a bit left over from the security deposit. The letter showed me that, despite all their lack of understanding, my decision to leave Germany and my settled life was gradually being accepted.

What a feeling! After six weeks of hardship, suddenly holding 300 DM in my hands again! What power that money radiated! All the glittering and delicious things I saw in the shop windows there had become within my reach! I had become powerful again and no longer had to wait humbly for whatever fate threw my way!

I took a short walk through downtown. Eventually I sat down in a bar, tucked in heartily, and then gazed dreamily out the window over a beer. Suddenly, in the passing crowd, I recognized Davide, an Italian I'd met in Valencia. I rushed out of the bar so quickly that the bartender thought I was trying to skip out on the bill, and I ran and called out. We had a big reunion; there was a lot to catch up on, including how the house in Valencia had been cleared out in a massive raid shortly after I left.

We took a stroll through the city, greeted a few “freaks” at Plaza Bibrambla, bought some beer, and moved on to Plaza Nueva, where another horde of “hippies” was hanging out. After six weeks of solitary wandering, I was now in a boisterous mood. The sun was shining from a cloudless sky, and my initial dislike of the city turned into something else, because the city center, with its picturesque nooks and squares, its many churches and fountains, its bars and cafés, dominated by the mighty fortress and the palace, did indeed have a very inviting atmosphere. You could see the city walls and a few cave entrances rising on a hill above the city: Sacromonte⁷.

⁷ The first caves were excavated around 800 years ago, providing living quarters for the workers who built the Alcazaba and later the Alhambra, the Moorish masterpiece that was never conquered by

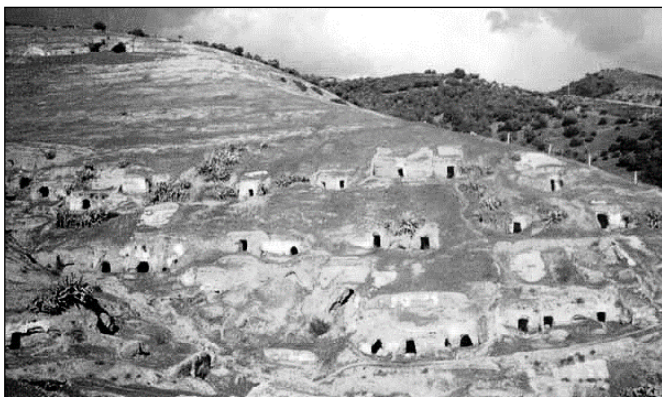
I felt right at home among my new acquaintances, as if I had found my family again. And as I enjoyed the day, I suddenly found myself getting more and more intoxicated and later, staggering, joined a group heading into a pub. Colorful paintings hung on the walls, though the details had already become somewhat blurry to me. A chillum⁸ was passed around, and I greedily took a deep drag, but realized at that very moment that this had been the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. I stood up to make it to the bathroom, but my vision was already starting to spin. There was no door in sight. I tried to make it to the exit,

force and was considered impregnable. The castle is crisscrossed with underground passages and vaults. The palace itself looks like a fairy-tale castle from *One Thousand and One Nights* and rises protectively above the old Albayzin district, which consists of a labyrinth of narrow alleys and white houses with red-tiled roofs. Starting in the 15th century, the caves were inhabited and further expanded by Gypsies. Houses were built in front of most of the lower caves, and they now house some of Spain's most famous flamenco venues. It is said that up to 40,000 people once lived on the Sacromonte, which was likely a thorn in the side of the city fathers. Thus, heavy rains, during which several caves collapsed like sandcastles, were used as a pretext to declare the cave city uninhabitable and to relocate the Gypsies to the Poligono, a sterile high-rise housing project outside Granada, where the culture of the Gitanos was doomed to extinction. Soon the caves were discovered and occupied by freaks, some of whom kept them nicely maintained and restored, while others simply filled them with trash and feces. It was a bit like a pigeon coop. Sometimes over a hundred people lived here, staying on average two or three months. They came from all over Europe, but also from overseas, and earned their money mainly by playing music, begging, juggling, street painting, street theater, or by making jewelry or leather goods.

⁸ elongated pipe made of fired clay

but my legs gave way and I fell into a black hole, weightless and bodiless, in a state of absolute peace.

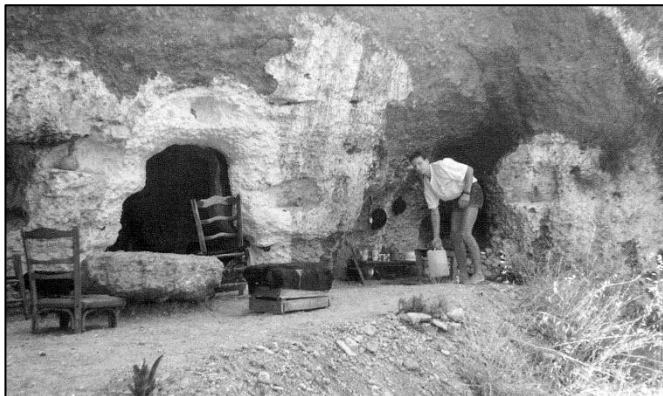
Unfortunately, only for a short time. Hands were tugging at me. I told them to leave me alone, but the heavenly state was already over. I staggered out onto the street, wandered around disoriented until I found a suitable spot and threw up. My head was pounding.



Davide later took me to the caves, a half-hour walk from the center of Granada. Steep hills, still green and covered in flowers at this time of year, were dotted with cave entrances. I spent a day in Davide's cave, which had two rooms with whitewashed walls and was quite cozy, furnished with furniture, blankets, and pictures. Davide recommended Alberto's old cave as a shelter because it was clean and had a cement floor. It was just a bit small. At night, I felt like I was lying in a tomb. So I moved to a small valley where there was only a single habitable cave. The cave was small and there was a lot of rubble in front of it, but it had a pretty kidney-shaped room and intact walls—that is, the sandstone was still coated with a mixture of cement and lime.



It took me two weeks to build a terrace out of the rubble, paint the cave, repair the floor, and haul suitable furniture and dishes from the junk pile. But the effort was worth it; I believed I had found the most romantic spot in all of Granada. You would never have guessed you were only half an hour away from the center of a major city, because the only sign of civilization was the church bells. At dawn, the birds began their concert; a small pine forest stretched from the cave up the canyon, the surrounding hills were overgrown with shrubs, cacti, and agaves, and you could still make out the outlines of the oldest caves.



I got my water from the Church of San Miguel, which stood atop the hill and from which one could gaze far out across the plain and overlook almost all of Granada. A few priests lived in the monastery next door and tended a small garden, from which I occasionally stole firewood with their tacit permission.

Most days I went into the city in the morning and stood by the roadside for an hour. I used the method of holding a cardboard box, standing there staring ahead or watching the people. Every day I had a few nice experiences. For example, a school class walked by. One of the students started whispering and pointed at me, and suddenly the whole group came running over and filled my box with loose change. Or a woman asked me if I was trying to follow Jesus. When I said yes, she blew me a kiss and tossed in a few larger bills. People started chatting with me, wanting to know where I was from and what the problem was. There were also a lot of pretty women walking by here in Granada, so I always had something to look at, even though that didn't quite fit with my philosophy of detachment from the world

and penance. I saw many devout Catholics making the sign of the cross in front of every church, and I never got bored watching the many faces passing by.

Afterward, I usually went to one of the two Comedores, where the whole “scene” gathered. San Juan de Dios was a large monastery complex, located near the center, but it was hectic there and the food wasn’t as refined as at Regina Mundi, where the meal consisted of three courses and the white bread was served with tongs. Later, at the market, one could still hunt for discarded fruit or vegetables. I had grown accustomed to mocking glances when I searched through the trash for food. I often found the best items and wondered how people could throw such things away. For me, it was yet another good exercise in humility, and I consoled myself by telling myself that the last would be first. Every now and then, the vendors would give one a bag full of vegetables if they saw one were searching. It was amazing how quickly one’s vision sharpened and one developed the eyes of an animal in search of food! Surely this was an innate instinct that had simply been somewhat neglected!

Gradually, I got to know the other cave dwellers. There was Gil, the Frenchman, who drew pictures in the style of Druillet, and his friend Bertrand, who made leather sandals and was together with a red-haired American lady who did yoga every morning. There was Erik, the Dutchman, and his girlfriend Maria, a Spanish flutist. I always had great conversations with him, because he, too, had that certain apocalyptic awareness. There was George, the Portuguese guy, who hardly seemed to sleep, sitting for hours in front of his fireplace staring

into the flames until his T-shirt was dripping with sweat. He played flawless blues on the harmonica and was just as good at procuring things as Alberto. You never knew where he found all the junk he dragged in.

There were Nellie and Laura, former psychology students from Santa Cruz, California, who could both sing beautifully. I fell in love with Nellie's blue eyes at first sight. Then there was Wolfgang, who did tattoos, and Johannes the drunkard, on the run from creditors in Germany, who made jewelry and played the guitar. And David, an Englishman with an aristocratic flair, the Casanova... Every day I got to know new faces and destinies, saw different caves that were as varied as the people and seemed to have lives of their own. There was always something going on somewhere - a meeting, a meal, or a party - and I soon felt better than I had ever felt in my life, freed from an oppressive burden and the rat race. Even if it probably wasn't a long-term solution to mooch off other people and live off the scraps of the throwaway society, for the moment it was okay to play the beggar monk. It was my very own private education!

I met Holger, a stocky German with reddish-blond, tousled hair and a thick mustache, who had gotten stuck here six months earlier on a motorcycle vacation and now lived in a small Moorish cottage in the Albayzin. I often helped him with the renovations and had long conversations with him, because once Holger got going, he was almost impossible to stop. He believed in the coming new age and claimed to be able to observe how the vibrations were gradually changing, and how people who weren't ready to adapt to it were

running into more and more problems: “The new age will be characterized by spontaneity. People will be able to recognize God’s will with and act on it spontaneously. We are currently in a sort of preparatory phase in which we have to practice this.”

“How much spontaneity is even possible in this overly planned world?” I asked. “And how can I distinguish divine inspiration from my own ideas and images?”

“Yes, that is very difficult! But God knows this and is patient. Only those who stubbornly cling to the old structures will not get to see the new age.”

He told me about the philosophy of the Gypsies, who depicted the process of self-discovery as a labyrinth. If, after many wanderings and various stages, a person finally reached its center, they attained self-knowledge and knowledge of God. The ancient paths of the Gypsies in Europe retraced the course of this journey on another level, and the center of this labyrinth would be the cathedral in Chartres, where one could discover many of their symbols.

One day, not far from my cave, the guru I’d briefly seen in Valencia - the one in the white Hindu clothes - showed up. I invited him in for tea and admired his long white beard. The guru spoke German and referred to himself in the first-person plural, which briefly confused me at first. We philosophized about this and that and the other, and I asked if he didn’t have any clothes to change into.

“No,” replied the guru, “we wash them at night. Sometimes it’s already too much for us to carry a blanket around with us.”

I was impressed by this practice of remaining untainted by the world and making do with nothing. I asked the Guru the relatively superfluous question of whether he possessed an ID.

“It’s not enough to no longer have an ID; you also have to have stood in the rain for a few years first, so that your identity washes away!”

The guru also mentioned that “we” hadn’t used money for seven years and then went on his way. Later, I heard a few strange stories about him. Bertrand couldn’t get him out of his cave at all. The guru had advised him and his girlfriend that instead of doing yoga in the morning, they should have proper sexual intercourse - that would be healthier. And he asked if “we” could watch them do it; “we” could surely give them a few good tips. Other people also felt harassed and weren’t particularly fond of him. I ran into him here and there later on, and saw him obviously talking people’s ears off again, but I actually got along with him just fine - just like with Holger, who also annoyed a lot of people and who would voice his opinion even when no one wanted to hear it. I didn’t care; I could just tune him out. And there were always a few nuggets of wisdom that you could fit into your own puzzle.

In the city, I met a former Foreign Legionnaire who wanted to go on to South America because he thought that in the event of a global catastrophe, one might still be able to take shelter in the rainforest.

“They’ll just cut it down and burn it to the ground!” I replied. “I’d rather go to the Hoggar Mountains, which lie in the middle of the Sahara and are as big as all of

Germany. It's far removed from any political or economic interests, and I once heard that there's supposed to be a huge underground freshwater reservoir beneath the Sahara. If the predicted catastrophes like earthquakes or nuclear war were to occur, this water might gush forth, for as it was prophesied in the Bible, the barren land would become green again."



From one day to the next, it seemed, all the grass on the hills withered away, and we were no longer awakened by the birdsong. During the day, temperatures climbed to over 40 degrees, and at siesta time, you really only saw sweaty tourists in the streets. Nellie had headed off to a folk festival in Galicia, and I myself was expecting a visit from an old friend from Germany. He showed up on the very night of my birthday, but by then the party was already over, and only a few Belgian wine-soaked bodies filled the cave.

Soon after, my father showed up as well, determined to see for himself how his son was faring. What a contrast:

my long, grueling journey to the cave, and Dad was here in half a day! On top of that, he rented a room at the Parador, which was perched atop the Alhambra and cost over 200 DM a night! Two worlds collided! But it worked out quite well. I stood by what I was doing, and my father showed me a certain amount of respect, even if his son's inner world wasn't entirely transparent to him. But that was enough for me, and to demonstrate that I had nothing to hide, I smoked marijuana right in front of him - something I used to try to keep secret. Dad didn't find the smell unpleasant and actually preferred it to cigarette smoke, but he didn't want to join in; he stuck to his beer instead.

Just as quickly as my father had arrived, he was gone again, and the whole visit seemed more like a dream to me - too fast and fleeting to be real. But now prosperity had arrived. I was able to get oil and canvas and buy a Moroccan drum, and spent another month secluded in my cave. Most of the other cave dwellers had since traveled to the sea or to cooler climes, and my only visitor was a starving fox that, lured by food scraps, came closer and closer and lost its shyness until it finally ate out of my hand. When I finally ran out of money, the time had come to move on. Off to the Hoggar! This time without luggage, without money, without identity, with nothing but a small Bible. I had burned my identity card in a solemn ceremony, and I wrote to my parents that I still believed something evil was at work and that the net had already been woven very tightly. If I managed to slip through the mesh, I would vanish from the scene. By "web," I meant the total recording, identification, and definition of all life. I sought the nothingness, the image-less, undefined being: God!

The Shore

*But we - a blackened seed. Liars who
were granted speech. Traders, doers,
perpetrators, dissectors of the world,
betrayers of the forest. Murdering God
and ourselves with names, names.*

Franz Werfel

I tried to avoid major roads, for fear of the Guardia Civil, and passed through endless olive groves and small villages, where I begged for food as was my custom. Finally, I reached the sea.

In Málaga, I met a couple of freaks in the city park and was offered a joint. But the place was swarming with police, so I quickly moved on, reached Algeciras a week later, and soon found myself facing Morocco. From here, one had a fantastic view across the strait and could see the mountains of Africa lying ahead in the soft evening light, full of promise. A mysterious world awaited me there!

The only question was how to get there. To use the ferries, which now looked as tiny as model boats on the water, you probably needed a passport. At the very latest, though, at the border from Ceuta to Morocco. The thought occurred to me that it might be possible to refurbish a small, discarded boat and use it to cross over. It was about 25 km - that should be manageable in ten hours during the night! Well, that would certainly

be exciting! But this was all part of it, part of the exodus from Egypt! Moses had to cross the water, too!

So I headed on to Tarifa and lingered around there, looking for a paddleboat. The harbor was guarded, and there was nothing but a half-rotten wreck on the beach. I watched the windsurfers whizzing across the water and thought to myself that that would be just the thing. They could make it across in two hours if they were athletic enough.

As I was walking down the streets of Tarifa once again, I passed a weirdo sitting on some stairs who had been staring at me from a distance. He was maybe two years older than me, had a long red beard, and wore a colorful turban on his head. He waved me over to sit with him and asked where I was headed.

“I’m looking for something to eat.”

The stranger offered me bread and cheese: “My name is Jan, and I’m from Sweden.”

“My name is Nadie⁹, and I have no nationality,” I mumbled.

“How is that possible?”

“I don’t have a passport, so I don’t have a nationality, but I used to live in Germany.”

Jan took me to a beach 15 km from Tarifa with a small hut village and a few naked hippies. He stopped at a fire pit, told me to make myself comfortable, and started cooking a lentil dish. Meanwhile, I told him about my

⁹ Spanish: nobody

plan to take a boat to Morocco and make my way to the Hoggar Mountains.

“A funny idea,” Jan said. “I’ve been there before. There’s a place there where Christian hermits live. I saw a man there who sits on the same rock all day and stares out into the desert. Good brothers who live there! But you’ll need a camel to get there from Tamanrasset.”

My heart began to beat faster. Maybe I’d had the right inspiration!

It turned out that Jan had already been to Ethiopia, Mali, Sudan, and who knows where else: “I want to go back there too. But it might take another two or three months before I’ve saved up the money I need. You should get a passport, then we could go to Tamanrasset together. From there, you can send your passport back to Germany and explain that you don’t want it anymore. That’s how you have to do it - don’t just burn the passport!”

I tried to explain to him that the whole point was to get there without a passport or money. Jan showed me banknotes from Niger and said, “If you want a camel, people want to see money.”

A Guardia Civil helicopter raced along the shore, its roar interrupting our conversation. It was obviously searching for illegal immigrants or smugglers who were landing here in speedboats.

The next day, I found a seemingly intact light-blue boat that was half-buried in sand. I started digging it out, but soon realized it was much too big and could hold at least ten people.

“You find lots of boats like that here!” Jan remarked later. “They arrive here completely overcrowded with Moroccans. Some get swept out to sea and disappear into the Atlantic, never to be seen again.”

Jan began to criticize me for having no luggage and no money, and thus being constantly dependent on other people.

“I believe in relying only on God,” I replied, “I want to follow Jesus: Look at the birds - they don’t sow, they don’t reap!”

“Everything changed with Jesus!” Jan claimed. “I used to give everything away and give it as gifts, back when I still lived in Greece. But if you don’t have anything yourself, you can’t give anything to others either. Keep your things together!”

Jan gave me more and more advice, which I was happy to listen to, since Jan was quite a bit ahead of me in experience. Among other things, he accused me of being too selfish and thinking only of my own plans. But that was the problem with most Europeans anyway: they didn’t know how to live together. Everyone just muddles along more or less on their own. There’s always something to do, not just for yourself! Until it eventually became too much for me, as Jan started nitpicking more and more on little things and seemed to be relishing his role as a schoolmaster. And since I saw no way forward here, I set off again and followed the shore toward Cádiz.

After two days, I spotted a small boat in the harbor of a larger fishing village that was half-filled with sand and trash. “I guess nobody needs this anymore,” I thought

to myself, and began to empty it out. I found leftover paint and old brushes and painted the boat to seal the small cracks. No one paid any attention to the stranger who was repairing a boat as if it were the most natural thing in the world, because who would have thought that someone would be painting a boat that didn't even belong to him in broad daylight, only to set off on a long journey in it?

So I left the harbor unnoticed and paddled along the coast toward Tarifa. The boat was leaking a little, and with the planks I'd used as makeshift paddles, I made only slow progress. But still, it was a great feeling to be the new owner of a boat!

Suddenly, however, a Guardia Civil jeep appeared on the shore. Two uniformed officers and a civilian were hopping around on the beach, waving their arms. Of course, escape was out of the question, since I wouldn't have gotten far with the planks, so I had no choice but to paddle to the beach, where the men were already waiting for me.

"Is that your boat?" they asked, not unkindly.

"No, I found it in the harbor filled with trash and sand."

They took me to the car, asked for my personal details, and received the strange reply that my name was Nadie and I had come from nowhere. They found my German Bible, and one of the men said, "Aha, an Englishman!" to which I dared to remark that the man probably couldn't read English. The police officers didn't seem to have any desire to waste time with this half-crazy saint and just took me to the highway, where they let me go and advised me to hitchhike.

“Lucky again,” I thought, and walked to the nearest bar, where I begged for matches, which I later used to start a fire to dry my clothes, soaked from the adventure, and warm myself for the night. Then I walked on toward San Fernando, home of Spain’s most famous flamenco singer, “El Cameron,” and hitchhiked the last stretch to Cádiz.

The center of Cadiz had the quaint atmosphere of an old port city, and begging worked great here too, so I could afford luxuries like hashish and chocolate croissants.



I learned that you didn’t actually need to show ID on the ferry to Ceuta, and I figured I could swim across the border from Ceuta at night. So I scraped together the necessary money, took the bus to Algeciras, and actually made it on board without a hitch. During the crossing, I watched the waves, and as they grew higher and higher, churning up foam, and a fierce wind suddenly blew in my face, I was glad my plan to paddle across the strait hadn’t worked out. That would surely have ended badly!

Ceuta was an ugly little corner, full of all sorts of hustlers, so I made sure to get ashore quickly and trudged up to Monte Hacho, where an old fortress stood from which you could see far into Africa. You could see the Ceuta-Tetouan coastal road and make out the customs buildings, the sight of which gave me a queasy feeling in my stomach. As night fell, I set off, armed with a plastic bag in which I planned to put my clothes while swimming. When I was no longer far from the customs office, I found a spot on the beach that wasn't lit by the bright orange streetlights and got ready to swim. The dark water was terribly cold, but there was no turning back now. Just as I started swimming, people noticed me and began shouting and waving.

Cops and Robbers

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. Say: He is the One God. Allah, the One and Only; He begets not, nor is He begotten, and there is none like Him.

Quran, Surah Al-Ikhlās

I swam toward the open sea and into the darkness to get out of the light as quickly as possible and to avoid revealing my direction to the onlookers on the beach. But I saw no one heading toward the customs huts, and as the crowd slowly dispersed and I seemed to be out of sight, I set course for Morocco.

I had gradually gotten used to the temperature, but the plastic bag with my clothes had filled with water and was dragging at me. Cramps set in over time, and it felt like I'd been in the water for an eternity when I finally reached the rocky shore of Morocco. I wrung out my clothes, put them back on in the hope that they would soon dry on my body, and walked along the road to Fhideq, the next village. The cold and the swimming had left me ravenous, and I succumbed to the temptation to buy something to eat with the dirhams I'd exchanged in Ceuta, even though a voice inside me warned me not to put myself in danger for the sake of food.

In the village, I found small street stalls where I happily bought a pack of cookies. On the way back, however, someone on the opposite side of the street spoke to me and waved me over. I wasn't really in the mood for that,

but instead of simply ignoring him and walking on, I asked in French what he wanted from me. And as I looked at the man, I noticed that he was standing in front of the police station. A plainclothes cop!

He immediately asked for my passport, and when I just shrugged, he gestured for me to enter the station, just as if he were asking a lady to dance. When asked for my personal details, I told the police officers that I had no nationality, which they found quite amusing. At first, nothing happened. They seemed to have time on their hands and were waiting for the next shift; they probably didn't feel like filing a report and risking overtime. I asked for permission to use the restroom, and a police officer nodded in the direction of the bathroom. On my way there, I passed a half-open window, and when I looked out, I saw the courtyard and a few sheds that I could easily have climbed over. My heart started pounding, but I hesitated and kept walking for the time being.

The station had emptied out. There was only one officer left at the door, watching the activity on the street. I was overcome by a slight tremor, partly from my still-wet clothes, but partly also from my exciting thoughts of escape. Finally, I pulled myself together, went into the stairwell, and headed toward the window. But just at that moment, the guard came in and asked me where I was going.

“To the bathroom!”

“Again?” The policeman looked at me suspiciously, saw the open window, went over and closed it, and told me not to get any silly ideas. I had missed my chance!

I hadn't acted on impulse, and had let fear hold me in its grip for too long!

When the night shift arrived, I was thrown into the hole - a basement dungeon where I found a blanket and a bag of bread that my predecessor had probably left behind. It was the first time I'd seen a cell from the inside. At least this one was authentic! German cells were more like hotel rooms, but this one was dirty, with a few straws on the blackened stones and a rusty steel door. I was alone.

The next morning, a brief interrogation took place, and I told them I had swum to Morocco and appeared out of nowhere. Amused but also somewhat perplexed faces looked at me: "What are we supposed to do with someone like this?" They put me back in the hole. After a few hours, two police officers appeared with batons and stern expressions. One of them slammed his baton down on his hand and demanded that I come clean, otherwise I'd be in for trouble.

I had expected it! Eventually, I would have to testify! Like my brothers, who were killed by the Guardia Civil because they didn't have passports! Like the guru from Granada, who had a lit cigarette stubbed out on his penis and spent two years in jail! Fear clouded my thinking. I lowered my head and said quietly that I had told the truth. The two police officers looked at each other, started to smile, and, to my immense relief, left the cell again.

That evening, I was taken back to the station. An old truck with an olive-green tarp was parked in front of the building, and I had to climb into the back. We drove

over bumpy roads and later on dirt paths toward the border. We stopped at a military camp, and I was taken to an officer to whom one of the police officers was explaining something. The officer nodded, beckoned a few men over, gave them some orders, and gestured for me to follow the soldiers. The soldiers led me along narrow paths to a hill from which you could see Ceuta and the border's searchlights. I now understood what they had in mind: they simply wanted to push me across the border illegally to save themselves unnecessary work and trouble with this strange fellow!

One of the soldiers pointed to a path: "Go straight down this path, and don't even think about turning back!" I started running, and after half a kilometer I spotted Guardia Civil jeeps ahead of me. If I kept going, I'd run straight into their arms - out of the frying pan and into the fire! I stopped in the shadow of a bush and, after some thought, came to the conclusion that I'd rather try my luck in Morocco one more time.

I crept sideways into the terrain under the cover of the bushes and then slowly turned in a wide arc toward the south. Where I found no cover, I crawled along the ground. When I finally made it over the first range of hills, I risked walking along a wider path that led me up to the crest of a second range. There I sat down behind a bush to catch my breath from the exertion and excitement. But just as I had crouched down, the beam of a flashlight shone over the hill and onto the bush behind which I was sitting. I didn't dare move, and after a while the light faded away. Nevertheless, I remained motionless, sitting there for over an hour, then carefully crawled around the bush and peered into the shadows.

There was nothing to be heard or seen. My heart pounding, I followed a narrow path that wound gently down into the valley when I suddenly heard voices from above. Immediately afterward, I was caught in a beam of light. Without hesitation, I sprinted off as fast as my feet would carry me, while behind me, heavy boots clattered down the slope. But I was already out of the beam of light, and my fear seemed to awaken my instincts, for despite the darkness, I flew down the narrow path. When I spotted some bushes to the side, I squeezed myself into the undergrowth and remained motionless, crouched on the ground.

Footsteps and voices approached. But they passed me by and didn't seem to be in much of a hurry anymore. I crawled further and further down the ravine until I reached the valley floor and found a reasonably comfortable spot where I lay down to sleep and didn't wake up again until the sun was already high in the sky.

The night's terror had vanished. I was in a bushy area with many flowers. Birds were chirping and insects were buzzing. I climbed the next hill and followed a path that led me past a house and an astonished Moroccan man. I greeted him warmly, as if it were the most natural thing in the world for a European to be walking by here. But the man was too stunned to return the greeting and just stared at me with his mouth agape. After about a hundred meters, I heard his footsteps behind me, and he asked me in French if I had had breakfast yet. The man had a kind face, so I gladly accepted the invitation.

From the terrace of the house, you could see all of Ceuta bathed in the morning sun. A donkey was tied to

a tree, and chickens were running around, clucking excitedly. We made ourselves comfortable on a bench, and the man let his wife know, who soon appeared with bread, butter, and the famous Moroccan mint tea, while the man cautiously tried to strike up a conversation.

“Where are you coming from right now?” he naturally wanted to know soon enough. An inner voice told me I didn’t need to fear being turned in, and I told the story of how I had sneaked into Morocco.

“You were really lucky!” the man said. “The border is pretty well sealed off here.” And in a trusting tone, he told me, “I’m a smuggler; I know the way and know who to bribe!” But he didn’t reveal what he was smuggling. Later, he explained the route I could take to get out of the border area without passing any checkpoints, and shook my hand as we parted: “Bonne chance!”

I continued on narrow paths and dirt roads. When noon came, I decided it would be better to sleep a little longer under the cover of a bush and continue walking at night. Soon, however, I was awakened by voices, and to my horror, I realized that farmers armed with clubs had surrounded me. When they saw, however, that they were dealing with a European, they waved me off; I had nothing to fear and could continue on my way. An old man even ran after me and pressed a bag of bread into my hand.

A little later, I saw Fhideq lying below me and heard the muezzin calling to prayer. In the valley, I could see fields and pastures with cows tethered here and there. A man saw me, started shouting, and ran after me, swinging a

club, until he, too, realized that I was a European and not a robber.

“Quite a paranoid area,” I thought to myself, and took a wide detour until, after another night, I reached the Mediterranean beach again, where I hoped to make faster progress than in this hilly region.

After a short while, I passed three men who were gazing dreamily out at the sea and were about my age. One of them waved at me, and I accepted the invitation and sat down next to them. They had friendly faces, were obviously pretty stoned, and were quite amazed when they heard my story. They invited me to their camp, a village of huts located right next to the Ceuta-Tetouan highway, first served me a tagine¹⁰ and tea, and then pulled out their hash pipes. It was good stuff they were smoking there, and pleasant to smoke in the long clay pipes.

“Nous sommes grands fumeurs d’haschisch, Monsieur!” they said, and I learned that they were workers building the road widening. They shared a hut with ten people. One of them was solely in charge of shopping and cooking and received a share of the others’ wages. We quickly became friends, and when they saw that I felt right at home in their little shack, they told me I was welcome to stay longer. They gave me a piece of hash and watched contentedly as I rolled joints for us all: “Oui, oui, Monsieur; nous partageons!”

What wonderful people! They gave me a gift so that I could share too!

¹⁰ Stew with various vegetables, meat, or fish.

I learned my first bits and pieces of Arabic. Among other things, the Shahada¹¹ and Sura al-Ikhlās, one of the last and shortest suras of the Qur'an but still one of the most important ones. Although none of them prayed, they were eager to teach me about Islam, especially when they saw how interested I was. In the evening, we went to a café. My companions had brought knives; one of them had a baton. I asked one of them what was so dangerous around here. The man showed me a long scar on his arm, which was obviously from a knife: "The border area is a bit unsafe, but they hardly ever attack foreigners. Hassan II has imposed severe penalties for that."

In the café, the men sat sipping their tea, smoking their kiff, and staring at the TV. There wasn't much conversation; the box hypnotized everyone, like a snake hypnotizing its prey. I drank a coffee and looked around, feeling somewhat frustrated. So the plague had already spread here too! The coffee also upset my stomach. Over the next few days, I had to battle leaden fatigue and came down with diarrhea. I often lay down on the beach to sleep, since the highway was too loud for me. I could hardly comprehend how the others managed to fall asleep right next to the roaring diesel engines, and I wondered what kind of inner peace these people must still possess.

Then came the time to say goodbye. To mark the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, work was suspended and most of the workers went home to their families. My friends insisted on giving me some of their

¹¹ Testimony of faith

hard-earned money as a farewell gift, and I accepted it, deeply moved, after first trying in vain to refuse it.

“Sometimes it’s a long road before God lets you become a Muslim!” my friend Umar told me, before raising his hand in a final farewell and getting into the shared taxi.

I continued on toward Tetouan. I felt a bit queasy as I considered how far it still was to Algeria and how I was feeling at that moment. Actually, I just wanted to sleep. Of course, it was dangerous to walk along the road, but the coast here had rocky shores, and at that moment I didn’t feel the slightest desire to scramble over the hills in the hinterland.

A car turned around on the road in front of me, drove back, and stopped. A gendarme was sitting inside: “Can I see your passport, please?”

He was quite nice and laughed at my story. Still, he took me to the police station in Tetouan, where they put me in a cell after a brief interview. I knocked on the door and called out that I needed to use the bathroom, but got no answer. So I had no choice but to relieve myself in an empty plastic bottle I found in the cell. But it wasn’t so bad - the main thing was, there was a blanket here I could sleep on.

A hatch opened.

“Are you hungry?”

“Yes!”

“Do you have any money?”

I handed the police officer something through the hole, and after a while I received a sandwich and a Coke.

I was too exhausted for the old game and gave my personal details, even though I felt miserable doing so and saw myself as a cowardly traitor, a traitor of the undefined being. The German consulate in Tangier was notified, and I had to go to court. On the way, I got a glimpse of Place Hassan II and part of the old town. What a fascinating, colorful, exotic scene I saw there!

The judge looked me in the eyes: “You’re sick!”

“Is it serious?”

“Only if you don’t cure it properly!”

I was to be taken to Tangier and deported from there, but first I had to spend two days in the official jail. I didn’t mind anything, as long as I could sleep. In the cell, I met a Belgian who was in for hashish and was having trouble sleeping on the hard cell floor, where this time there wasn’t even a blanket. He lived not far from my hometown of Aachen. Home? Did I have a home? Not really on this planet! But a sentimental feeling told me that I’d like to see my parents and my old friends again.

I was issued a replacement passport. They drove me to the port, made me pay for the ferry ticket, and wished me a safe journey. In Algeciras, I went straight to the hospital and had a blood test done: Hepatitis A! The doctor gave me the simple advice to take it easy as much as possible, and a kind nurse pressed a bag of milk and yogurt into my hand.

So, the liver! Among the Germanic peoples, the seat of courage! And it had clearly suffered damage!

On the way to the bus station, I hit up a German tourist, and the nice guy gave me the money for a ticket to Cadiz, the place where I could recover well, and where I'd probably caught the hepatitis in the first place—likely from a bottle of wine that a kind soul had offered me! From there, I called my parents and asked them to send me some of my remaining money; I'd come visit them then. They were, of course, relieved to hear from me and were looking forward to my visit. But it took nearly two weeks for the money to arrive. In the meantime, I hung out in the parks, sat on the beach, drank milk, got to know all sorts of people again, watched the drunks and junkies go about their business, listened to the street musicians, observed the art of the puppeteer and the tricks of the beggars, and slowly regained my strength. When the wind blew too strongly and too coldly, I sat in the train station and watched people going about their business. The illness had made me incredibly calm.

And eventually, my train left too...

Home sweet home

The desert peoples are closer to goodness than sedentary peoples, because they are closer to the primal state and farther from the evil habits that have corrupted the hearts of the sedentary.

Ibn Khaldun, Muqaddimah

Culture shock! It was late autumn; everything was dying. The streets seemed deserted to me; you saw only cars, hardly any people. Nothing had really changed with my old friends; everything was just drifting along in quiet routine. Even with my parents, the old arguments started up again after a short time.

It quickly became clear to me that I was only here on vacation! There was no way I could stand it here for long, because here I always felt particularly close to the apocalypse. Perhaps it was because I was born here, and the whole stifling atmosphere was so familiar to me, and in other countries I just didn't notice it as much. Or because so much of my past was tied up here, a past I actually wanted to put behind me in order to reach new shores.

And yet, objectively speaking, I didn't think I knew any country where rationality raged more fiercely than here, and where practical, planning-oriented thinking had permeated everything so thoroughly: the country with the most traffic lights per capita! It struck me that people here looked at themselves in the mirror—in car

or window panes—who knows how many times a day. Self-reflection and self-idolatry were indulged here! Who was the most handsome, the smartest, and the best, drove the biggest car, had the nicest house? Even the children were drawn into this vain game and infected at an early age; after all, people wanted to present their neighbors with a little boy whose achievements they could be proud of.

A single, loveless facade!

Unfortunately, I felt all too well that I, too, was deeply scarred by this disease, yet here it worsened. One could not escape the mirrors. A hundredfold fall from grace every day!

Depart from her, my people, lest you share in her sins and become partakers of her plagues...

Tuareg! They who veil their faces! The emptiness of the desert! The emptiness of the mirror! Tamanrasset! Perhaps Jan had been right after all: *similia similibus curantur*¹² ! The passport had to help me get to a place where I no longer needed one, where I could forget my identity and my self!

I still had some money and my liver was back in shape, so: get out of here fast! I went to the train station, took a train to Algeciras, and soon found myself back at the Moroccan border.

¹² The homeopathic principle of similars: Like cures like.

Hashish

You want me to describe it to you, so you can start thinking about it, just as you do with everything else. But seeing has nothing to do with thinking, which is why I can't tell you what it's like when you see.

Carlos Castaneda, Journey to Ixtlan

Just before the Moroccan border, someone struck up a conversation with me: "From Germany? What a coincidence, I have friends in Heidelberg, blah blah blah..."

"Yeah, yeah, interesting!"

I got into a taxi heading for Tetouan. Sitting next to me was a young man with a friendly face who shyly asked where I was going. As if by pure chance, we started talking about hashish, and the stranger told me his family lived in the Rif and produced some. Curious, I asked for a few details, and the man willingly provided them. Could he recommend a friend's hotel to me?

"Why not? I can always check it out."

In Tetouan, he led me through a labyrinth of narrow alleys and winding squares, so that I soon lost my bearings completely. A mysterious world, but because it was so inscrutable to me, it also felt somewhat threatening. The fear of the unknown! The hotel looked nice, and the price seemed okay too. Abdul - that was my guide's name - ordered a first-class breakfast, rolled

a top-quality joint, and just as I was settling back comfortably and getting really stoned, he asked me how many kilos I wanted to buy.

“How many kilos?” I didn’t think I’d heard him right. “I don’t want to buy anything right now, certainly not kilos!”

“Excuse me, what have we been talking about this whole time?”

“So what? That doesn’t commit me to anything!”

“Oh, really? Are you trying to joke around with me, play games, or what?” He looked deeply offended and angry.

“I’m sorry, you must have misunderstood!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” he mimicked me. “You’re smoking my hash, and you’re sorry? You tell me right now how much you want to buy, or you’re going to be in big trouble!” He reached behind his pants as if by accident, as if there were a knife there.

I thought for a split second about what I could do. What if I screamed? The hotel belonged to a friend of Abdul’s - he was probably in cahoots with him! The noise from the alley boomed up; it was unlikely anyone would have paid much attention to my scream! Get into a knife fight over money? Damn, I thought, my first encounters with Moroccans had made me too trusting! Now I was trapped!

I fished out a blue bill, for lack of smaller denominations, and thought to myself what a complete idiot I was!

“That’s not enough!”

“That’s enough! If you want more, come and get it!” My voice sounded defiant and angry.

“I can take everything from you if I want!” Abdul said with a smug smile.

“Qul-hu allahu ahad, allahussamad, lam yalid, wa lam yulad, wa lam yakullahu kufuan ahad¹³ !”

Abdul looked surprised: “Where did you learn that?”

I told him about my encounter with the construction workers.

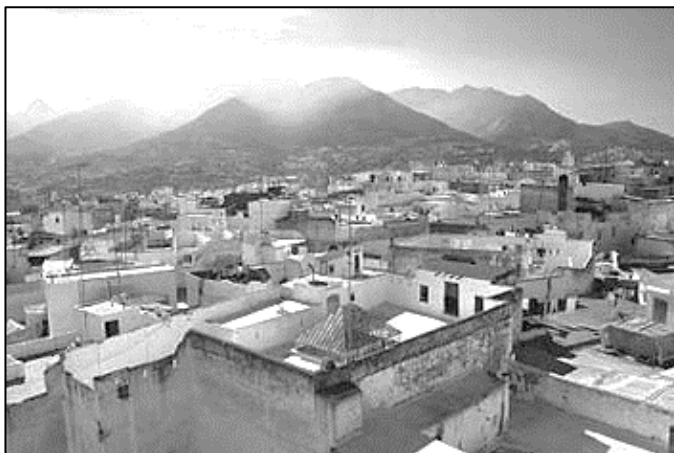
“Here, have another one.” He tossed me a piece of hash, stood up, and opened the door to order more tea. I followed him and asked for directions to the bathroom. When I returned, Abdul was talking to the landlord. He smiled at me: “Ash-hado allah ilaha illallah!”

“Wa ashado ana Mohammadarrassulallah,” I added to the creed.

“Yees,” Abdul gave me a warm hug, and all three of us grinned.

But if I thought I’d gotten my money back now, I was in for a surprise. Abdul was not a serious practicing Muslim after all. I’d lost the game and learned my lesson the hard way! The game of fear: whoever is afraid loses!

¹³ Say: He is the One God. Allah, the One and Only; He begets not, nor is He begotten, and there is none like Him.



I took a walk through the souks. There was an incredible amount to see, and I felt a bit like I was in an Arabian fairy tale. The atmosphere, however, was marred by all the hustlers and touts who were practically glued to my heels the whole time. Unfortunately, I didn't yet know a magic formula to scare them off. One of them introduced himself as Said, and when he saw that I already knew the game but still kindly invited him for tea, he told me in confidence that the police knew about it and got their cut: "As long as nothing happens to the tourists, they're fine with the rip-offs."

I drove on to Tleta de Oued-Laou, a small town that was quite pretty situated on the Mediterranean and not far from the Rif Mountains. There was only one hotel, so the choice wasn't difficult. The next day, however, I met Achmed, who rented me a little cottage that cost even less than the hotel room. A quiet place where I could easily get used to the unfamiliar Moroccan way of life. I made some nice acquaintances and was soon spared

the hustlers, who mostly loitered around the hotel waiting for a chance to rip off a tourist.

Thursday was market day, the social event of the week, when farmers from the surrounding mountains flocked in on their donkeys and horses, by bus, and in a few cars. There was even a jail, a cute square building with beautifully wrought-iron bars. The hilly countryside was mostly used for farming and worked with horses or oxen. The shouts of the farmers driving their animals and the muezzin's call at prayer times were, aside from the rare trucks, the only notable sources of noise. Otherwise, peace and quiet reigned here, and my trip to Algeria became less and less important to me. I started painting again and learned Arabic. I also moved in with Ahmed's brother Abdel, whom I had met on one of my walks along the beach while Abdel was painting a boat.

Abdel's house was situated on a slight hill. From there, you could see the entire kilometer-long sandy beach and the picturesque village, witness the sunrises over the sea, and enjoy a fantastic panoramic view of the Rif Mountains. Abdel's young wife was an excellent cook, and so I soon became familiar with the entire regional cuisine.

Once, Abdel and I went to a village 15 km away to buy hashish. Instead of the usual vegetables and wheat, cannabis was visible everywhere in the fields. We went to an acquaintance of Abdel's and bought some plants there, from which Abdel plucked the flowers and crumbled them over a cloth stretched taut over a bowl. Then he carefully began tapping the flowers with two sticks. After a while, he removed the cloth, and you

could see the sifted pollen at the bottom of the bowl. He swept the pollen together and pressed it into a ball; the hashish was ready! He stretched the cloth over the bowl again, took the same flowers once more, and tapped a little harder this time. I was told that the hashish obtained in the first round was the ZeroZero. After that, the quality declined, resulting in first, second, or even third-grade hashish. Normally, however, after the third round, the rest of the plant was chopped up into kiff.

Abdel was getting impatient now; he ground the flowers by hand and didn't care about the different grades anymore, since it was for personal use anyway. We left the rest of the plants behind, even though in Europe that would still have sold as top-grade weed. On the way home, we avoided the road and preferred to walk along narrow donkey trails so as not to run into a police patrol, because while the cultivation of cannabis was, strangely enough, legal, possession and trafficking were not.

Abdel told us how he used to smuggle the kilos to Spain by motorboat. But since he'd gotten married, and his wife was now expecting a child, he'd given it up. He was now working as an electrician, but wanted to gradually convert his house into a hotel-restaurant. The next day, I mulled over Abdel's idea again, and Abdel explained to me how he envisioned the expansion: building terraces on the slope so that every room would have a terrace with a view of the sea. It was immediately clear to me that this was a brilliant idea. The location here, not far from the road to Tetouan, with a panoramic view of the entire coast and the Rif, less than 150 meters from the

beach, far enough from town to be protected from the hustlers, with enough land to expand the business further: simply perfect!

When Abdel saw that I was enthusiastic about the idea, he asked me if I'd be interested in becoming his partner: "You wouldn't have to do much; you could take over management, for example, since you know European tastes better. Above all, tourists trust a European more! You could use your connections to Europe to drum up business. Of course, some start-up capital for the building materials would come in handy—the land's already paid for. Around 3,000 DM should be enough! And you don't need to worry about a visa; with a little money, that can be sorted out. Best of all, you'd become a Muslim, and we'd go find a wife for you—marriage isn't that expensive here."

What funny ideas Abdel had! Of course, I didn't want to go out and find a wife, and I might have liked to become a Muslim if I hadn't believed that God expected a different kind of penance from me. But becoming Abdel's partner? His offer had sounded sincere. As I knew him now, he hadn't lied to me.

That would be pretty cool! I could paint pictures in peace; we could get horses for the tourists and gallop across the beach, get a boat ready, and I'd definitely meet a lot of interesting people, which could lead to who knows what opportunities. After all, a convoy of French cars had passed through here yesterday, heading for Niger. Why not just hitch a ride?

I had lots of ideas about what we could do with the project. Financing didn't seem like a big problem, since

I was expecting a small inheritance from Grandma next year. If I explained the situation to my father, he'd surely advance me the money.

I grabbed a hoe and a shovel and started digging enthusiastically, sending clods of earth flying everywhere, but Abdel advised me to take it slow: "If a foreigner is working here, people will start talking. I need to sort everything out first. Besides, we'll need to have something to do tomorrow, too."

I drafted a contract, even though I was actually sure that Abdel didn't intend to cheat me—but as we all know, friendship ends where money begins. In the contract, I laid out the general terms and also required Abdel's signature and that of the village policeman as a witness. As Abdel read through the contract, I saw his face light up, and the test was passed. He really meant it. I wrote a letter to my father and explained the situation to him. I suddenly felt a little uneasy about how everything seemed to be going so smoothly. It was almost too good to be true! "All this will be yours if you follow me..." the devil said to Jesus in the desert.

Over time, I became convinced that this was a temptation and a test for me. But I had already given Abdel my word and sealed the pact—how could I back out of my commitment now?

And so I had the idea to burn my passport again and continue my interrupted journey to Tamanrasset. Because without a passport, Abdel would hardly want to keep me here. It couldn't be a coincidence that today was Christmas Eve, and so, with the comforting feeling that everything was meant to happen this way to bring

me back on track, I set my passport on fire. Just as the paper was blazing away merrily, Abdel walked by and asked what I was doing.

“I’m burning my passport!”

Abdel stared at the flames and managed only an “Oh, I see.” He couldn’t comprehend what was happening at all. Only after quite a while did he start scolding me: “What on earth are you doing? Are you crazy?”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t explain it to you - you wouldn’t understand. It has something to do with my philosophy.”

“Nah, I really can’t understand that. I thought you wanted to be my partner. Do you think you could stay here without a passport? I’m married and don’t want any trouble!”

“Then I guess it’s better if I leave?!”

He said nothing, because what could he say? He was right to be angry.

The next morning, I took my djellaba and the rest of my money and said goodbye. I told Abdel I wanted to write to my father. He should continue to transfer the money in installments, then the hotel could be built even without me. “InshaAllah,” Abdel said quietly, gave me some more money for the road, and shook my hand.

“I’m sorry, Abdel...” I thought.

Desert Wind

...and you will find that those who say, "We are Nazarenes," are the friendliest toward the believers. This is because there are priests and monks among them, and because they are not arrogant. And when they hear what has been revealed to the Messenger, you see their eyes overflowing with tears because of the truth they recognize therein.

Quran, The Table spread 82-83

And so I set off, once again without luggage, wrapped in my djellaba, which was to serve as both camouflage and sleeping bag. It was very warm, and when I pulled the hood over my head, surely no one suspected that a European was hiding beneath it. I headed first toward Chechaouen and used donkey trails as long as I could, until the road led through the deeply carved valley of the Oued-Laou. There wasn't much traffic, though. Whenever a car passed by, I could pull the hood over my head in complete peace of mind; I heard it coming in plenty of time. I soon realized that the djellaba was worth its weight in gold, because even when it got very cold at night, it was still bearable in it. When it got hot during the day, however, it also insulated against the heat.

I rarely passed cafés where I could have bought something to eat. But I soon learned that I could

basically ask anyone where to find bread; I was usually invited in immediately. It was considered improper for a Muslim to ask someone else for something. But in this case, I was merely asking for information, and it was a Muslim's duty to welcome a traveler with hospitality.

Tea was a must, always prepared with a small ceremony, and this honor was usually left to the elders. Then there was bread with olive oil, tagine, couscous, fried fish, soup, or other dishes. For dessert, I was often offered something to smoke—at least as long as I was near the Rif.

Strangely enough, I was glad I hadn't learned much Arabic yet, because that spared me from suspicious questioning. Since the people couldn't ask and did not get much information for thinking, they had to rely on their instincts, which apparently told them I was okay. When I encountered French-speaking people, however, I tried to throw them a red herring and fend off the questions.

"What country are you from?"

"I used to live in Germany."

"Do you have a passport?"

"How could I enter Morocco without a passport?"

"I don't know, but do you have one?"

"Why do you care?"

I had to fend off enough questions until it became inappropriate to ask any more. But I was surprised that so many people asked me for my papers, when nobody

in Germany ever cared about that. Surely they couldn't have thought I was a robber or a spy?



I bypassed Chechaouen and soon found enough small paths that took me further south. When I came to larger settlements, I hid under my hood and walked at a leisurely pace, as if I were an old man. Only at more remote farms did I not walk incognito, as I hoped to be invited to eat once again. After all, it wasn't every day that people had a European as a guest!

I passed through areas where cannabis grew like a weed along the roadside, and people held hashish by the kilo under my nose, believing that was why I was there. In some villages, time seemed to have stood still, and I felt as if I were in a forgotten age. I lost touch with my past more and more, immersing myself in a foreign world, even though, in some inexplicable way, it also felt very familiar to me. Perhaps because this simple life had accompanied people since time immemorial.

I walked through vast oak forests and was amazed, because I hadn't expected to find such forests in Morocco at all! Once, two large, angry dogs suddenly

lunged at me, and one bit my heel, which was fortunately protected by my shoe. I quickly bent down to pick up a stone when suddenly, with a loud rip, the seat of my pants tore in two. I was furious at the beasts, who, as soon as I had bent down, had already taken flight and were now just snarling stupidly at me from a respectful distance.

The forest gave way to a hilly agricultural landscape dotted with small villages and farmsteads. What warmth I was shown here! I had already been treated well in Spain, but compared to this, that had been mere charity. There, I had been the beggar to whom a charitable gift had been given. Here I was a guest to whom the Arab stallion was proudly presented. This kindness seemed so self-evident and natural that I could not believe it was shown to me simply because I was a European. What a difference from the xenophobia in my own country!

I headed first toward Fes, but at some point turned east. I often saw gendarmes and roadblocks at intersections, but I felt safe on the narrow paths. When people asked me where I was going, I told them I was on my way to Oujda, which lay on the Algerian border.

“What, that far? And all on foot?”

“InshaAllah! That’s how I get to know the country better!”

I often talked to people about religion, and they were amazed that I knew all the stories of Abraham, Noah, and Moses, and were very pleased when I recited the creed and the 112th surah; they probably thought I was on the verge of becoming a Muslim. But I still believed

that my penance had to look different from that of the Muslims: to become a despised being who, out of pain and shame, turns completely away from this world and longs only for a return to God! A being who has washed his clothes in great tribulation as a preparation for the terrible days of the End Times: *“If God had not shortened those days, even the righteous could not endure them, and no one could be saved”*. A being who truly follows in the footsteps of Jesus: a horrific death on the cross as preparation for the ultimate purification in the Hereafter!

For three days, I stopped speaking entirely and remained silent to see if I was still dependent on speech. I was showered with a warmth that was almost unbearable! Food was literally shoved into my mouth, and I almost gave myself away when I wanted to say: slow down, slow down! I was hugged and patted! It was unbelievable! In a way, I felt miserable about it, because I couldn't possibly return this love to that extent. I felt unworthy of this love! An emotional cripple, part of whose heart had already grown cold!

Slowly, the landscape grew increasingly barren; I found myself more and more often in desert-like areas where one could hear nothing but the wind. How far had the hermits of old ventured into the wilderness? What kind of faith must Moses have possessed to lead an entire people through the void? Surely, he would have been locked away as a madman today if he had announced his intention to lead several thousand people through the desert in the hope that God would rain manna from heaven!

Along a riverbank lined with olive groves and small farmsteads, I was invited into a hut again. I was offered a bath, and I accepted it as a gift from God and ended my period of penance. I also began eating with my right hand again. When I asked my host for a needle and thread using sign language, he insisted on sewing up my torn pants. He suggested I shave in the meantime.

When I continued on my way the next morning, I met three young people who spoke a little French.

“Where are you going?” they asked.

“Toward Oujda!”

“Why don’t you take the truck?”

“I want to walk!”

“On foot? Through the desert here? There’s nothing coming this way! You’d better take the road!”

“InshaAllah, I’ll find something!”

“Well then, good luck!”

I pressed on without much hesitation. This wasn’t the Sahara yet. It was winter, and it didn’t get too hot during the day. I was sure I had a few days’ leeway.

There was no sign of life here. As far as the eye could see, only brown, gray, or beige hills and stony plains. I felt as if I were in a vast ocean, with the horizon stretching endlessly. An indescribable joy and a sense of freedom welled up inside me. Eternity reigned here! I walked all day as if in a trance. The magic of the desert had captivated me! I felt no exhaustion, no hunger, and no thirst. I had been on the road for over a year to

confront the void! Over a year to lose my fear of nothingness! It was no longer a threat to me; it was freedom! What might have been a nightmare for others - standing in the middle of the desert with no luggage, no money, and no passport - I enjoyed it! Breathing became incredibly easy, and calm seemed to flow through every vein

The very next day, I reached an oasis-like settlement, and the people there were quite astonished when I arrived on foot. At first, there was some suspicious questioning, but I managed to talk my way out of it, and the mistrust soon gave way to the usual Moroccan hospitality.

The area was slowly becoming more fertile; there were olive trees and goat herds. Late in the evening, I met a shepherd, and he took me to his brothers in a small house. The brothers were just skinning a rabbit that one of them had shot, and they prepared a sumptuous meal, including a delicious dessert they made by mixing grated carrots and fresh orange juice. All the while, they were joking and singing. They wanted me to sing them a song from my homeland, and I was ashamed to realize what a poor soul I was, for apart from “Alle meine Entlein” and “Hänschen klein,” I knew only song fragments that were hardly suitable for performance.

The next day, I was given a ride for quite a distance on a horse-drawn cart and reached a rugged valley in the afternoon, where a settlement of haphazardly scattered buildings stood. A few men were sitting in front of a house, playing some kind of board game. They whistled at me, even though they couldn't see that I was European. I hesitated for a moment, wondering

whether I should respond, since one isn't supposed to react to whistling and hissing; people whistle at dogs! But the hope of perhaps being invited for tea or a meal made me turn around.

When the men saw that I was a European, a cross-examination in French began immediately. I tried to talk my way out of it as usual, but suddenly more and more people started flocking over, including the district chief, who clearly demanded that I show my papers. When I admitted I didn't have any, they decided I would have to spend the night there first, and they would discuss later what to do with me.

They took me to the village's large communal hall, which served as a gathering place for the men and where many of the elderly men also lived—thus remaining part of the community rather than being sent to some nursing home to die. Tea was prepared, and the room filled with an ever-growing number of colorful and curious figures, most of whom wore woolen djellabas and white turbans. The district chief asked me where I was coming from and where I was going, and I explained that I was on my way to Oujda, had been traveling for about a month, had covered roughly 600 kilometers on foot, and refused a passport for religious reasons. Of course, none of it sounded very credible, and I knew that too. But I figured the men might assume that if it weren't the truth, I could have come up with a better excuse, and I hoped they would decide based on their gut feeling.

The men discussed my case for about an hour, naturally in Arabic, which I understood almost none of. At least I grasped enough to realize I had a few advocates who

seemed to like me and who pointed out that there were also many Moroccans in Europe without passports.

Finally, large bowls of couscous and chicken were served, and later more tea. They then told me I was essentially free and could go wherever I wanted tomorrow; but it would be very dangerous to continue along the road, because there were bandits in the mountains, and many people had already been murdered there. It would be better to take the truck to Taourirt tomorrow and travel on from there toward Oujda. I could sleep on it and decide tomorrow morning. I nodded contentedly, and when blankets and rugs were finally brought in - enough to cover four or five people at once - I curled up, feeling reassured, in my corner.

As I drifted off to sleep, I pondered what I should do. I had eaten with the men, was literally under the same blanket with them, and they had explicitly said they wanted to keep the police out of it. It would probably have looked a bit strange if I had turned down their offer...

So the next day, accompanied by a guide, I boarded the truck after the men had given me a bag full of bread and wished me a safe journey. We drove along dusty, bumpy roads until we were enveloped by the sounds of a city. The truck stopped, I was told to get out, and what did I discover to my great dismay? The truck was parked right in the middle of a police station's courtyard.

Brutal Fundamental

Above all, they will lay hands on you and persecute you, handing you over to synagogues and prisons, and bringing you before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will result in your having to bear witness...

New Testament, Luke 21:12-13

A shiver ran through me. That fear! Was I strong enough yet? Was my faith firm? I threw the bread into my companion's arms: "Traitor!" He caught it, smiled mischievously, and was clearly unaware of any wrongdoing. What would have been considered treacherous among Europeans apparently passed here as cunning.

The familiar interrogation began: "My name is Nadie, I have no nationality, and I come from nowhere!"

The police officers began joking about this strange European and finally took me to the gendarmerie, where a report was taken and my "personal details" were recorded. Just as the officers had finished, a woman came in and inquired about her missing husband or brother. The gendarme showed her a few photos of people who had recently died in a car accident. When the woman recognized one of them, she burst into tears. The gendarmes tried to calm her down; a bit of confusion ensued, and they took her to another room, leaving me alone. To my shame, I had to admit to myself that I felt no compassion at that

moment, but was only preoccupied with thoughts of escape. I left the room and walked down the hallway toward the exit, which apparently wasn't guarded. Instead of making a run for it right away, I hesitated once again and noticed an open door leading to the courtyard. But it was a dead end! In the hallway, a gendarme noticed me and asked where I was going.

"To the restroom!"

The gendarme pointed it out to me, and I was annoyed at the missed opportunity! Once again, I hadn't acted on impulse!

"There's always a way out," a long-haul trucker had once told me. He'd picked me up while I was hitchhiking near Bordeaux and held a black belt in karate. "You just have to stay completely calm and clear your mind so you can react in a split second. Because you usually only get one chance!"

Late in the afternoon, two gendarmes drove me over a hundred kilometers to a backwater called Berkane, located near the Mediterranean Sea, where the Bureau de transmission¹⁴ was located. I already felt a chill run down my spine as we drove into the ugly town, and especially when I saw the menacing-looking gray police building.

I was handed over to an inspector, who began questioning me in a friendly tone. When he received my inadequate answers and saw no improvement after asking several times, he stood up, held his face close to

¹⁴ French: Office for Transfers

mine, and growled, "We can talk to each other differently!" A few slaps rained down, but I remained silent.

"Well, I suppose we'll have to go see the captain now!"

I was led into a huge room containing a massive desk, behind which sat a giant of a man, his pockmarked face adorned with a thick black mustache. Behind him, a portrait of Hassan II hung on the wall, his eyes glinting without humor.

"What's the matter?"

The inspector described the case.

"You don't have a passport? May I ask why not?"

"I refuse to have one on religious grounds!"

"Then perhaps you would still be so kind as to provide your personal details."

"Of course! My name is Nadie, and I come from nowhere!"

The captain and the inspector looked at each other.

"Listen carefully, buddy! I'm not a priest or an imam, and I'm certainly not the Pope!" he thundered. "This is the gendarmerie! And you're going to go with the inspector now and tell the truth, otherwise..." He smiled at me in a way that sent a chill down my spine and said with relish, "I'll cut you into ten pieces!"

The corresponding Bible verse immediately came to mind: "...others they sawed in two for the sake of their testimony."

We went back into the inspector's office, and I told the truth.

"I come from nowhere..."

"All right, kid. If that's what you want."

The torturer was already standing in the captain's room, a dim-witted, clumsy, brutal-looking man, holding a leather-wrapped stick about 1.20 meters long in his hand.

Fear came in waves. It's hard to say which fear was greater—the fear of pain, or the fear of becoming a traitor to God, a Judas, for whom a burning punishment awaited.

"Hold out your left hand!"

The pain shot through my body like electric shocks. I didn't let on, but I knew immediately that I wouldn't be able to endure the pain for long. My self-mortification had been too half-hearted!

"The other hand!"

Ten minutes passed—an eternity. My hands were already discolored and swollen thick, the skin on the verge of bursting.

"We could keep this up all night!"

Was it a lie when I said...

"I myself come from nowhere, but my body—it was born in Germany!"

"Aha! Then write down for us what your body's name is and where it lives," the captain tapped a piece of paper with his finger and held out a pen to me. I wrote down

my personal details with my swollen hand in huge, shaky handwriting and felt absolutely miserable doing it. Judas!

“Now go with the inspector! And we’ll talk again tomorrow,” he said in a calm tone, without a threat in his voice, but I thought of the carrot and the stick, and of the fact that he would probably doubt that I wanted to go to Tamanrasset without any possessions.

“You were nice to us, so now we’ll be nice to you,” the inspector said in a smarmy tone as he led me down to the station, where the rank-and-file gendarmes had their offices. “I’ll get you something to eat. Do you have any special requests?”

That was a bit too nice!

“If you could please bring me some milk.”

At first, I sat quietly in a corner of an office. The gendarmes were busy with reports and other things. The radio was playing in the next room, and I heard “Losing My Religion” by R.E.M. and felt so sad for a moment that tears ran down my cheeks. I would have gladly died right then, a martyr’s death without pain. The main thing was to return to God with a clear conscience and not as a Judas. I was more than sick of life—it was nothing but drudgery! I just wanted some peace and quiet at last! Why on earth had I even eaten the apple of knowledge? Now here I was!

The gendarmes spoke to me in a friendly manner. They didn’t seem to know exactly why I was there; they only knew the passport was gone, but why? In any case, the inspector had treated the boy courteously!

And so it came to pass that I was first served couscous, and later, as the station was slowly closing up, a mattress was laid out for me in a room, and I didn't end up in a cell behind bars. The inspector appeared with milk and sandwiches, wished me good night, and was gone, just like all the other gendarmes, except for one who was standing guard in the next room and was probably also in charge of the building's entrance.

Something woke me up. It was perhaps three in the morning; here and there, a rooster's crow could already be heard. The door to the next room was half-open. I could hear steady breathing: the guard was asleep! In my room, there was a desk against the wall, and behind it was a door. Should I try to see if it was open? It was just so cozy, and there was still a sandwich next to me.

"Come on, get up!" commanded an inner voice. I carefully pushed the desk aside and, my heart pounding, listened for the guard's breathing. The door was open! I stepped into a hallway, found my way to the stairwell, and half a floor down, an iron door locked from the inside. The bolt screeched horribly; the guard must have heard that! But nothing happened, and shortly afterward I was in the courtyard, where a few police cars were parked, and where a wide-open gate greeted me. I could hardly believe it as I ran toward the outskirts of the city in long strides: I was free!

I reached a canal that stretched on for a long time without a bridge in sight. Finally one appeared, and I was already paranoid that they were waiting for me there. I just couldn't fall into the captain's hands again! I felt a little sorry for the poor gendarmes who had let

me go and who had been so nice to me. They were surely in for some trouble!

I happily reached the orange groves on the other side of the canal and disappeared among the trees, where surely no one would find me anymore. I made a wide detour around Oujda, which was easy to spot because huge power lines stretched across the barren landscape and surely led there. After just under a week, I was in the border area and waited for dusk to sneak across into Algeria.

It was a moonless, starry night. The horizon in the east glowed brightly, and when I came over the top of a hill after a few kilometers, a glaring floodlight shone right at me. I could make out a barracks camp and military vehicles. There was an unlit spot that didn't seem to be so tightly secured, and naturally, I made my way there. But I quickly realized why that spot wasn't lit, because I soon found myself stuck in the middle of a swamp. I tried to go around the swamp, but that led me straight toward the lights. A jeep came racing around a hill, and I had to hurry to hide behind a rock just in time. One thing was certain: That was the wrong direction!

I turned around and ran in the other direction. After about an hour, I spotted a small grove and headed toward it. Just as I was about to reach it, I heard voices only a few meters away. I threw myself into a furrow in the field and waited anxiously for what seemed like an eternity until suddenly the noise grew louder, and a patrol marched off, singing a marching song. Excited, I stumbled across fields, down a valley, and reached a stream. Then I ran uphill again, past a sleeping village, and on until the floodlights were finally far behind me.

I allowed myself an hour's rest, but I didn't want to linger too long here near the border and moved on at dawn. After a few kilometers, I passed a house. A man stared at me in amazement and asked if I knew where I was.

"In Algeria!"

"Yeah, yeah, exactly! In Algeria! Wait here, I'll make some coffee."

He returned with milk coffee, bread, and butter, and as I chewed, I told him I was heading to Tamanrasset.

"On foot?"

"Of course not the whole way! Just as far as I can go. It's a kind of pilgrimage."

"A pilgrimage. I see!"

He offered to walk me to the road, where it would be pretty easy to hitchhike toward Tamanrasset.

"That's very kind of you, but as I said, I want to walk as far as possible."

Nevertheless, the man took me to the road, where we said goodbye, and I continued trudging cross-country. When I looked back after 150 meters, I saw the man frantically waving down a car, talking to the driver while pointing in my direction, and the car speeding off.

Soon I found myself in bushy terrain with sparse stunted pine trees and came to the conclusion that it would be better to hide here in the bushes for the time being and continue on at night, since in this otherwise desolate

area I could be seen from miles away. Besides, I was exhausted from the nighttime trek and longed for rest.

After an hour or two, voices woke me, and when I peered out from my bush, I saw soldiers all around me, searching the bushes with machine guns at the ready.

“There he is!” someone shouted.

I humbly raised my hands and introduced myself as a completely harmless tourist. They handcuffed me and took me to the border post I had bypassed that night. The usual routine began, but since I had no desire to repeat my last experience, I immediately said that my body came from Germany. They weren’t unfriendly and showed me a certain amount of respect for having made it across the border. To my delight, they didn’t take me back to the captain in Morocco, but to the gendarmerie in Tlemcen, where my personal details were recorded and I was locked in a cell. I didn’t know exactly why, but I decided to stop speaking again starting today.

A guard came by and asked me my name and where I was from. I pointed to my mouth and made it clear with gestures that I wouldn’t speak.

“You can’t speak—are you mute?”

The guard began gesturing as well, and we conversed for a while in sign language, understanding each other perfectly—in some ways, probably better than we ever could have with normal speech. The guard unlocked the cell, grabbed me by the shoulders, smiled at me, and rubbed his nose against my big snout. Then he gestured

for me to go to sleep and disappeared again. When I woke up, there was a sandwich next to the barred door.

The next day, I was taken to the official prison. My companion handed the guards the paper with my personal information and said goodbye with a salute. One of them picked up a book and asked for my name, whereupon I indicated again that I didn't speak and that my name was on the paper.

"No, no, I want to hear the name from you!"

I pointed to my lips again and shook my head.

"We have electric shocks for people who don't want to talk."

But when I stood my ground, he copied the name from the paper and told someone the number of the cell where he was to take the prisoner. I was led through a courtyard and brought into a room where about twenty people were already locked up. The only free space left was near the toilet, a hole in a corner with a faucet, surrounded by a waist-high wall. After briefly waving to my colleagues, I spread out the two blankets the guard had given me. But someone waved to me and said it was a lousy spot, I should come over; as he spoke, he moved over a bit, and his neighbor made some room too.

Twice a day we went out into the courtyard, where the prisoners ran back and forth, did calisthenics, or simply squinted at the sun. My hair was cut and my beard shaved; they spared only my scanty upper lip mustache. Twice a day there was a hot meal and tough white bread, as much as you wanted. What a relief for me!

I had nice cellmates, regular meals, and a warm place to sleep! Exactly what I needed after my weeks-long march! But what had really exhausted me wasn't the physical exertion, but the constant fear and the endless game of hide-and-seek. Now, finally, some peace! I slept most of the time.

On the third day, I was taken to court along with four other roommates from my shared apartment. The courtroom was packed with people. Several cases were heard before, after three hours, the first of us had to appear before the judge. The man had been caught having an extramarital tryst and got off with a fine. Two were convicted of theft, and one of disorderly conduct while under the influence of alcohol. As a European delicacy, I had apparently been saved for last, but I had to disappoint the crowd because I couldn't utter a word. A gendarme explained the facts of the case to the judge, and I was sentenced to two months' probation for illegal border crossing and vagrancy. I was also to be taken to Algiers and deported from there to Germany.

First, we went to a police station, where another man was waiting to be transported to Algiers. His name was Said, and I learned that he had tried to flee to France via Morocco with all his possessions to escape the civil war-like unrest, but had been intercepted at the border. We were both taken to a backwater town 70 km away, where we were stuck for two days. I was lucky to have Said as a "partner," because he paid for my food, which was normally unavailable in the detention centers without money. Then we continued on to Oran.

Up to that point, the country reminded me more of the Eastern Bloc than of an Arab country. The towns

consisted of rather ugly, square houses that looked like giant building blocks; a barren concrete wasteland where you could see many uniformed men and fully veiled women hurrying through the streets.



Here in Oran, for the first time, there was a palpable sense of a state of emergency. Riot police in dark green uniforms, wearing bulletproof vests, helmets, and shields, along with massive riot control vehicles that looked like snowplows, were blocking off some streets. The cell, about 10 square meters in size, was filled with 16 people—all of them, without exception, Islamic fundamentalists, except for Said and me.

I had already heard in Morocco that, although the fundamentalists had won a majority in an election, the other parties and the military had annulled the election and banned the FIS, and that this had led to unrest. They all wore long beards and had to pray five times a day, which was no small problem under these circumstances. Because right next door was the toilet, and the water there no longer drained, so the whole

mess flowed under the door. There was only a 4-square-meter concrete platform where six people could pray at once. At night, we slept in shifts, each for two to three hours, huddled closely together, until we were allowed to stand in the mess again for two hours. I developed a deep respect for these people, who endured this situation so peacefully and who shared the few things one could buy from the guards in a spirit of brotherhood.

At the break of the second night, Said and I were taken out of the cell because eight more fundamentalists were to be put in the room! Instead, we were locked in the neighboring cell, which, to my great surprise, was completely empty except for a drunkard! I began to sense the hatred the police harbored toward the fundamentalists, even though they were, after all, Muslims too.

The next day, we continued our prison tour, traveling another 80 km to the next police district and the next detention center, where we had to wait another three days. Said was a nice guy, but a real chatterbox; he paced nervously up and down the cell, talking endless, half to me, half to himself. Whenever a guard appeared, he immediately tried to strike up a conversation and kept asking why the transport was taking so long.

“This is an adventure for you, isn’t it?” he asked me. “You’ve got time, you don’t talk, and you just stare silently into space. But you can speak if you want to, right?”

I smiled at him and shrugged.

“Yeah, yeah, but when you get back home, you have to talk, you have to tell people what’s happening here! Just be careful when they take you to Algiers and offer you coffee during the interrogation; you’ll suddenly feel terribly hot, fall into a kind of trance, and tell them everything they want to know. Be careful!”

We moved on to the next prison. Something seemed to be going on here. Riot police with live weapons and bulletproof vests were standing around. A fundamentalist, who apparently had a sawed-off shotgun taken from him, was being brutally herded down the hallway. Another man was crouching on the cell floor with a pale face and seemed to be in severe pain.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“They interrogated him for over two hours, waterboarding...”

Rumor had it that large camps were being set up in the desert because the prisons were no longer sufficient.

In another prison, I met someone they’d caught at the border with a few kilos of hash.

“An acquaintance asked me to pick up the car from Morocco. I didn’t know anything about the hashish, but the judge is unlikely to believe me,” he asked me to pray for him, and I was surprised that the man would ask a non-Muslim to do so¹⁵.

¹⁵ In Islam, the belief prevails that the prayers of the oppressed are answered particularly quickly, especially the prayers of parents for their children and, in general, all prayers for others.

Eventually, I was separated from Said and taken to the center of Algiers along with a fundamentalist. The police officers were again wearing bulletproof vests and helmets, and the fundamentalist had to crouch on the floor during the ride. Apparently, the police were afraid of attacks.

The prison, located near the harbor, was once again well-filled, but not as filthy as most I had seen so far, perhaps because there were international observers here in the capital. A fairly spacious cell was filled with nearly thirty people, almost all of them fundamentalists. They wanted to know where I came from and why I was here in prison, and I made it clear to them with gestures that I didn't have a passport. They were disappointed that I didn't speak, but tried to strike up a conversation anyway. They tried so hard that I finally broke my silence, because before I was deported, I did want to have spoken with these people. Most of them were quite educated; even the mayor of Algiers was sitting there, a still quite young man who had studied in the U.S.

At first, I found it hard to speak, because my throat wasn't as lubricated after two weeks of silence. But it felt incredibly good to be with these warm-hearted people and to philosophize with them. I was amazed that the fundamentalists held so many esoteric views, since I had always had the impression that Islam was a very dogmatic and somewhat antiquated affair. For example, the mayor told me that without the devil, this world wouldn't even exist: "If we had nothing to do with him, we wouldn't even be here anymore! God has given

him a task, just like everyone else. Fate is a teacher, and it is our task to learn in order to understand ourselves.”

They could talk for hours, especially once they realized what a good listener they had. They spoke of the joys of paradise, their eyes lighting up as they did so. The time was not far off; more and more prophecies were coming true, and there was no need to be afraid, but one had to prepare. In addition to wars and earthquakes, Dajjal, the one-eyed Antichrist, would appear shortly before the end; small creatures would emerge; the Mahdi would prepare for the coming of the Messiah; and the sun would rise in the west. After death, good and bad deeds would be weighed against one another, and one would have to answer for every single thing one had done.

“What if I have sinned so much that I probably won’t be able to balance the scales in the rest of my life?” I asked.

“If you repent of your sins and do penance¹⁶, God will turn your bad deeds into good ones. Only on the day of your death, when it is certain that you must die, will repentance no longer be accepted.”

In the silence of the night, the Quran was recited with great devotion. Tears welled up in the eyes of many of the men, and I, too, was deeply moved by the sound of the words, even though I could not understand their meaning at all. I envied these people for their fellowship, and for the fact that they could bear witness

¹⁶ Repentance here means changing one’s mindset and direction, no longer following the old ways. In Spanish, repentance is “cambio de actitud,” a change in behavior.

together, while I was a lone fighter. They could strengthen one another, while I didn't even know exactly what was expected of me. I could only trust my intuition and found myself on a constant tightrope walk, with one foot always dangerously close to madness. Yet I had the good feeling that God wanted me here so that I could have this experience, for I saw that others, too, were being persecuted for their faith and suffering torment. Even though they followed a different path, this was what united us! This experience was probably far more important than reaching Tamanrasset, for the journey was the destination! Life was a fantastic theatrical play, and everyone had been given their role. It would be a mistake to constantly try to rationally analyze this role, for that would only reveal a profound meaninglessness. One had to find and play one's role without constantly asking "why"!

They invited me to pray with them, but I declined and told them that while I did believe Muhammad had been a prophet, it was likely my destiny to be a Christian. I was happy to learn from them, however, because I believed Christianity had been distorted.

"Yes," a lawyer said to me, "God has no son. And the true Christ never died on the cross. They took someone else!"

But who, then, was the man on the cross who was worshiped as if he were God, when it was said that you should not make for yourself any graven image or likeness of God?

... even though they had neither killed nor crucified him, but this was merely made to appear so to them ...¹⁷

For quite some time, I had gotten into the habit of pacing back and forth in the cell like a tiger in a cage. My digestive system was on the verge of complete collapse, for my body was accustomed to 35 km of daily exercise and good, brown Moroccan bread. But here there was almost nothing but white bread and coffee! There was a hole in the corner with a faucet next to it. Whenever someone needed to use it, two people would stand there and hold a cloth in front of it as a screen. But my ingrained sense of shame wouldn't let me use the hole; I was, quite literally, too uptight. Relief came only when, after two days, the cell was cleared and the fundamentalists were taken away, probably to one of the new camps in the desert. I was left alone and finally managed to have a relieving, if rather bloody, bowel movement. Later, photos were taken of me, and a man from the embassy recorded my personal details.

By evening, the cell was already full again. You could tell that the police had beaten some of the people, but you heard no complaints or cursing; only something like quiet grief hung in the air.

The mayor had assured me that the vast majority of fundamentalists rejected violence. It would be futile anyway to try to take action against the heavily armed army at the moment, and in a way, they were still brothers; but unfortunately, brothers who had gone astray. Killing another Muslim would be a terrible crime.

¹⁷ Surah An-Nisa 157

Even during jihad¹⁸, civilians, houses, trees, and animals were not to be harmed. But for some people, the fuse had blown, even in the face of the torments that their fathers, brothers, or friends might have suffered. Many of the terrorist attacks, however, were undoubtedly the work of the regime, which sought to discredit the fundamentalists and brand the FIS as a terrorist organization both at home and abroad.

¹⁸ Arabic: great effort (in the way of God); incorrectly translated as holy war. There are different kinds of this effort: the struggle against external enemies and the internal struggle against one's own evil inclinations, whereby the internal struggle is the greatest effort (jihad al akbar) and the external struggle is "only" the lesser effort (jihad al ashgar).

Go forth!

Zeus, in the guise of a benefactor, had created a dazzling evil and named her Pandora, meaning “the all-gifted,” for each of the immortals had given her a calamitous gift for humanity.

*Gustav Schwab,
Myths of Classical Antiquity*

"...we ask you to fasten your seatbelts and stop smoking. It is now 11:20 a.m., and, inshaAllah, we will land in Frankfurt at 3:00 p.m."

I stared out the window and watched Algiers grow smaller and smaller below me.

What could I tell the people in Germany? That I had found the fundamentalists more likable than this “democratic” system supported by France? That to me they had been like brothers, and not fanatical bomb throwers?

My father and brother picked me up from the airport and were a bit surprised by my appearance. I had left the djellaba behind in prison, but I was wearing clothes from the seventies that the consulate had gotten for me, and I still had that wind-swept, tousled hairstyle and my sparse mustache.

We glided along the highway and I began to talk, sharing a bit of my philosophy along the way—which I really should have kept to myself, because it just sounded crazy and made little sense to them! I came from a

foreign world and lived in a foreign world. They hoped I'd come to my senses quickly: "The summer semester is starting soon..."

...and has become a haunt of every unclean spirit and a haunt of every detestable bird; for all nations have drunk of the wine of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from her excessive luxury. And I heard another voice from heaven say: Come out of her, my people, so that you may not share in her sins and become partakers of her plagues...*

Dark thoughts similar to those I had during my last visit arose within me. And the conclusion was the same again: Get out of here! But where to this time?

By chance, I saw a report on TV about pilgrims heading to Santiago de Compostela, and some friends of mine mentioned they wanted to buy an old watermill in Portugal and try their hand at self-sufficiency there. Wouldn't I like to come along?

Yes, that matched!

"Go ahead, I'll catch up on foot!"

Endless space

In early Christianity, there were two types of pilgrimages: “walking for God” (ambulare pro Deo), following the example of Christ or Father Abraham, who left the city of Ur and lived in a tent from then on. The second was the “pilgrimage as punishment”: criminals found guilty of “enormous crimes” (peccata enormia) were required, based on set rates, to take on the role of the wandering beggar—complete with hat, money pouch, staff, and badge—and seek their salvation on the road. The idea that walking atones for violent crimes goes back to the wanderings imposed on Cain to atone for the murder of his brother.

Bruce Chatwin, Songlines

It was a cold, windy, and cloudy April day when I set out, once again without luggage, money, or a passport. And no sooner had I walked a few kilometers than I already felt a sense of freedom in my heart. The forests of the Eifel began, and by evening I reached the high moor of the Hohes Venn. It was biting cold up here, damp and uncomfortable. I found a lonely forester’s lodge, but the doors were locked. I felt a brief pang of guilt as I smashed a small window to reach the door bolt, hoping God would let it pass as an emergency. A heavy oak table served as my bed. I used

a plastic sheet I found in a corner as a blanket, even though I knew from experience that my body heat would cause it to condense. But the plastic also provided some insulation against the cold.

In the morning, the trees were covered in a blanket of white snow, and a deep silence lay over the forest. But then a storm began. Icy needles whipped my face, and I was soon so frozen through that I was already thinking of turning back. But wasn't that the old game—the initial energy one had to muster? The obstacle that still wanted to hold you back?

For the first time, I asked for something to eat in German shops, and the results were extremely meager. I asked seven times and was given only a small pastry at a bakery. That probably wasn't enough for a representative survey, but I didn't feel like continuing it and fled across the border to Belgium. Here the statistics were already better and like in Spain: two to three!

I discovered barns to be ideal places to sleep, and by then I'd come up with the idea of pretending to be a devout pilgrim on my way to Santiago, which wasn't exactly a lie, even though I wasn't Catholic. I had good experiences here in Belgium. A priest welcomed me very warmly and couldn't serve me enough to eat. He also wanted me to call my parents; they were surely worried by now.

After this warm welcome, it almost became a habit to ask the priest of the respective village for food or lodging. I had never been particularly fond of the

Catholic Church, but many of the clergy were quite decent to me.

Some areas of the Ardennes looked devastating. Depending on the elevation, the forest was a single field of rubble made up of fallen trees and three-meter-high root discs. But things improved as I passed through Luxembourg and neared France. I passed through endless forests and walked all day without reaching the end. I had always been a friend of the forest, but here I finally found myself thinking about chopping down a few of the little trees so I could see the sky and the horizon again.



The weather kept getting better and spring was beginning. I was now in my stride and was glad that such a long stretch lay ahead of me. I used the sun for orientation or the moss on the tree trunks, though that was a tricky thing. But a few kilometers more or less didn't really matter to me; the main thing was that I avoided major roads and stuffy cities. I easily covered

two hundred kilometers in a week, even though I made Sunday a rest day, so I soon reached France.

Somewhere in a forgotten backwater, I asked if I could sleep in the barn, but I'd obviously picked a bad time, because a funeral was taking place. The entire family poured out of the old farmhouse in their Sunday best, and I had to answer silly questions for nearly an hour. No one could believe that I wanted to go to Santiago de Compostela without any luggage. Finally, another villager who happened to be passing by took pity on me, took me to his home, fed me, and made a bed for me for the night. "We are Christians too," he said, pointing to a wooden cross on the wall, "I wish I were as young as you again and could make a journey like that once more. Pray for me when you're in Santiago de Compostela."

The next day, as I was walking along a lonely country road, a car suddenly pulled over, and one of the deceased man's daughters was sitting inside: "Sir, please forgive us—we weren't very friendly to you last night. Why don't you come back to the village with us? I can take you to Châlons later."

"Thank you very much, but I already told you yesterday that I want to walk to Santiago. It's a nice offer, though. Goodbye!"

Later, I reproached myself. Perhaps I shouldn't have clung so stubbornly to my intentions if doing so prevented something good from happening, for my refusal had been somewhat unforgiving. The people could have done me a favor and perhaps learned

something from me in the process; that would have been a blessing for everyone.

After a few more kilometers, the car stopped again, this time coming from the other direction: “Monsieur?”

She took me to Châlons-sur-Marne, and we had a lively conversation on the drive. But her husband, whom I had already met the day before, didn’t seem particularly thrilled when I showed up at their kitschily decorated apartment. They debated what to do with me, and I had already buried any hope of a pleasant evening. I was the problem here, the poor hitchhiker whom they wanted to help out of a sense of duty, but by no means a welcome or interesting guest! There was no room in their apartment; they were going to take me to the pastor.

“Yeah, yeah, okay!” I managed to say tonelessly, but I could just about muster a grateful smile. I thought about how the five of us had slept on two mattresses near Valencia and about my trek through Morocco. What did poverty mean? That one possessed little, or that one could give little? Perhaps the two of them suspected I might steal their belongings at night—the porcelain figurines or the beautifully shaped farmhouse pottery.

The pastor had a guest room, and he himself was kind and interested. He proudly showed me photos and carvings he had made, as well as a video about a gathering of young Catholics in southern France. The next day was Sunday, and I went to hear his sermon. But I felt like an alien in this congregation, a stranger among this somewhat sad group of worshippers consisting

entirely of older people. So I slipped out of the church early and then met a homeless man outside the priest's door who was probably trying to beg him for a donation, and whom I then kindly invited for a cup of coffee. The priest was quite surprised when he discovered this guest in his home, and by my warm hospitality. But he didn't seem to hold it against me; he just muttered something about the man coming by here far too often, and that he was slowly getting tired of it. He gave me some provisions for the road, and told me not to forget to pray for him in Santiago.

Later, I hitchhiked the thirty kilometers back that the woman had driven me, so that I could truly say I had walked the entire way to Portugal without a single gap. It would be silly to have to keep saying, "Yeah, yeah, I walked the whole way—except for thirty kilometers!" That's how I reached l'Epine, where the priest told me I was now truly on the old pilgrimage route to Compostela. In the church, he showed me a statue of Saint James on his way to Spain, holding a staff with a small gourd bottle dangling from it, and an angel walking ahead of him, showing him the way.

I could still make out the church in the distance for almost the entire day, as it sat on a hill, and I now entered a vast plain. Here I found myself in agricultural wastelands where the fields stretched for miles, and I, as a human, felt like a tiny speck. Tender little plants were already stretching their fresh green leaves toward the spring sun, and the air was thick with the sweet, artificial smell of pesticides. Sometimes, enormous containers of old tank cars stood by the roadside, in which the toxic brew was likely mixed.

In a small village that seemed completely out of place given the vastness of the fields, I rang the doorbell at House No. 1, which was located directly across from the church. A young man opened the door, and I asked for the pastor.

“There isn’t a pastor here anymore. What did you want from him?”

“I’m on my way to Compostela and wanted to ask the priest for something to eat.”

“And probably a place to sleep, too, right? Come on in!”

In the hallway, we ran into a Black woman who gave me a quick “Hello” and then disappeared back into the kitchen, from which a pleasant aroma was already wafting. We sat down in the cozy living room, and while the man rolled a joint, I told him about myself and how I’d gotten the idea to walk all the way to Galicia.

“And why don’t you want to use money?”

“You don’t get as far with money as you do with trust in God. Without money, you perceive things differently and live more in the moment! Look at the little birds—they don’t sow, they don’t reap! A bird doesn’t know where it will find a grain, or when it will find it. And if it doesn’t peck it up right away, it might not be there two minutes later. But we know there’s a bakery back there. And because I have money, I can get the bread now, or even in three hours—the bread will still be there. We rely on our supposed knowledge and no longer follow our instincts. We follow the images and fixed ideas in our heads, and that might one day be our undoing, because life is not a static entity, but a constant flow.”

“But we’re not animals anymore,” he said, turning on the TV. *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* was on. The movie struck me as a blasphemous parody of Jesus, but I decided to keep my mouth shut.

I moved on and reached Gien. There, the priest tried to convince me that he unfortunately had nothing to eat. As I continued my pilgrimage in a foul mood and was almost out of town, I saw a supermarket from the Intermarché chain and found piles of cheese, bread, yogurt, tomatoes, apples, pudding, and who knows what else in the dumpster. Everything was still perfectly edible, though maybe a day or two past its expiration date, or one tomato in a six-pack was moldy. I filled an entire box with stuff, lugged it back to the priest, and slipped a note inside: “A donation for the poor priest who has nothing to eat. Take a look in your parish’s trash cans if you get hungry!”

Most of the churches along my route were unfortunately closed. Even though I wasn’t Catholic, they were still a special place of worship for me. The old churches and chapels in particular radiated a solemn atmosphere, as if they had become charged with a special spiritual energy over the centuries. I enjoyed looking at the symbolism found there and the sometimes very old paintings, whose colors had in some cases already darkened so much that one could barely make anything out. Yet many of the churches also had a gloomy or cold vibe that made one shiver, so I was relieved to step back into the sunlight. Strange that such buildings were meant to proclaim a message of joy rather than death sentences.

I wandered into the marshy region of the Thousand Lakes and got my feet wet. A beautiful area with small, idyllic spots and ponds. On reed-covered shores, gray herons rose from the morning mist and flew toward the sunrise. The flight of the birds—it would always be a symbol of freedom to me! I had already come a little closer to this freedom, especially because I had no bundle on my back and my legs were now carrying me forward without complaint. I was glad not to have to speak and thus destroy the sacred silence that let me glide as if on wings. All the more did I hate roads and larger towns, which repeatedly tore me from my trance.

The farther I walked, the taller the vegetables grew in the fields. Admittedly, France was a very beautiful country! I passed through the most idyllic regions, most of which were sparsely populated, and I let the landscapes glide past me like a movie. The constant changes made it easier for me to approach my inner core, the point beyond outward appearances.

...but his true being, conceived in itself and spoken to you, is the strong necessity of the steadfast amidst the unstable, is the harmony of wisdom...but this is not the wooden cross you will see, nor am I the one on the cross...¹⁹

Finally, I reached Bordeaux and came upon the railroad line leading to Arcachon, running straight as an arrow. Then began the long sandy beach I had been looking forward to for so long. After endless kilometers along the spray of the rolling waves, I reached a beach hut and

¹⁹ The Scattered Words of Jesus

managed to unlock the door. Inside, everything was filled with surfboards, and up under the roof there was a cozy little room with a view of the beach. On the floor lay mattresses and blankets for the night, and on the walls hung photos of giant waves, surely eight meters high, in which you could make out tiny surfers.

That was my dream, too! If I wanted to enjoy this world instead of preparing for the afterlife, I'd go surfing! Surfers had the best life of all! Ever since I'd been to Nias, that magical island near Sumatra—one of the best surfing spots in the world—I'd been fascinated by waves and surfing. I could spend hours just staring at the water and watching the waves! But who was lucky enough to live on a beach with good waves and have the chance to learn how to surf?

I reached Biarritz and Bayonne and managed to cross the border without a hitch. The housekeeper of the first priest I spoke to invited me over for fried chicken and other delicacies. A warm welcome!

Santiago

To know that one does not know is the highest state. To not know that one knows is suffering. Thus, the Enlightened One, because he suffers from this suffering, no longer suffers.

Lao-Tzu, Tao Te Ching

In San Sebastian, I met a somewhat crazy Spaniard who listened to heavy metal à la Ozzy Osbourne at full volume and in the worst sound quality from a half-broken cassette player, and constantly tried to coax the player into working by tapping and shaking it. And a Portuguese guy who went through the most extreme mood swings, especially when he'd just downed some boxed wine. One minute he was cracking jokes the whole time, then suddenly he started talking to himself in a pitiful tone and quietly whimpering: "I, poor guy, now have to beg and have become a disgrace to my mother! Poor Mama, when will I finally stop causing you grief?" He raised his hands to the sky: "Dios, ayudame! Por favor, por favor!" I told him he'd better put the half-smoked cigarette butt out of his fingers while praying, which he did. But unfortunately, that was the end of his spontaneous devotion to God.

Early one morning, the three of us were roused from the sweetest slumber by police officers who asked for our passports. When I told them I was on my way to Santiago de Compostela and therefore had absolutely nothing on me, they actually let me go.

That same day, I met an African man who knew Mike, my Black roommate from Valencia, and had also arrived here as a stowaway: “I tried it three times, each time from Mozambique, where I sneaked onto the cargo ships anchored in the roadstead and hid below deck for three days until the ship was out on the high seas. Then I came up on deck and asked for asylum. The sailors took me to the captain and told him, ‘We’ve got a rat on board! What should we do with him? Throw him overboard?’ The first time I went to England. But there they grilled me and found out that I wasn’t from South Africa and wasn’t being politically persecuted either. The second time, I ended up on a Greek ship where the crew used me as a punching bag every day. Finally, I got on a French boat whose captain was quite nice and advised me to go ashore here in Spain instead, because it would be easier to get asylum here. That worked out without any problems.”

“Why don’t you say you’re from Bosnia and apply for asylum?” he suggested. “Nobody here speaks Yugoslavian. You’ll have a good life here once you get settled!”

“Nah, thanks! I’m on my way to Portugal and would really rather leave Europe altogether,” I replied.

“Take a boat, man! They can never stop the boats!”

It rained most of the time during my two weeks in San Sebastian, whereas I’d had incredible luck with the weather on my tour of France. Once it stopped drizzling here too, I moved on through the Basque Country, to Cantabria, and to Asturias. It was a rugged coastal region, very green and with the wild panorama of a

mountain range in the hinterland. What unfortunately completely ruined the atmosphere was the new highway to La Coruña. That's why I walked along the railroad tracks most of the time, which, however, had the major drawback that I had to go through countless tunnels, some of which were over a kilometer long. There were about 250 tunnels along the 450-kilometer route to El Ferrol! But I had no alternative to the highway, as there was no beach—only rocky cliffs—and no smaller roads.

It was an adventure every time to walk through a tunnel, especially when it was long or winding, and you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. Often water dripped from the ceiling onto the back of my neck, or I slipped on the slippery floor and stumbled over the old wooden sleepers into the darkness. Luckily, not many trains ran on this route—only about four or five a day. But when one did come, and I was stuck in the dark, panic set in! Although there were small niches every fifteen meters, they alternated between one side and the other, so there was usually no time left to feel my way along the soot-stained wall to the next niche. I could only quickly lie down next to the track in a push-up position, and in doing so I usually got pretty dirty, because the floor and the tunnel walls were black with diesel smoke. What a feeling when a train rattled past just 30 centimeters away from you and made the whole tunnel shake!

Near Lugo, I joined the official pilgrimage route to Santiago. The food here was excellent, as free meals were provided at many stops specifically for pilgrims. The path itself was beautifully laid out, mostly paved,

leading over small stone bridges, past chapels, and through lovely little woods and fields. It was marked with a scallop shell, the symbol of St. James.

Then, after almost exactly three months of walking, I finally reached Santiago de Compostela, just in time for the festival honoring the apostle each year. A gigantic fireworks display lit up the mighty cathedral, and gleaming streams of fire cascaded down its facade into the depths below. The entire forecourt was filled with at least forty thousand people, and the old town was also overflowing with cheerful crowds, musicians, folklore groups, jugglers, and beggars.



Open-air concerts took place daily, most of which were free. Dozens of souvenir shops sold pilgrim paraphernalia, and many tourists wandered around with walking sticks from which the famous gourd flask dangled, or with a large plastic shell around their necks. There was a free hotel for pilgrims, but you had to have

walked a certain distance and had it documented in order to secure the three days of full board. I heard about a group from Poland that was said to have covered 7,000 kilometers across Europe.

I met Santiago, an older Spanish man who had a kind word for every child and puppy. When I went into a church with him, he kissed almost every statue of the Virgin Mary, and he secretly showed me that you could pull the large nail out of the feet of a three-meter-tall sculpture of Jesus. Once I found him crying in front of the cathedral. The guards had thrown him out because he'd been talking too loudly to Mary and other people felt disturbed. A priest happened to walk by, and Santiago took the opportunity to pour out his heart to him. He was devastated that they'd banished him—of all people—from this place. The priest shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other, not quite sure what to say. So he stroked Santiago's hair comfortingly, as if he were a child, and then quickly seized the first opportunity to slip away, for many curious faces had already gathered around the two of them.

Santiago sometimes slipped me food and even money, because he knew I had even less than he did. One day he told me that a constant giving took place between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father gave to the Son, the Son to the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit back to the Father—or vice versa. I asked him in amazement if he had read that somewhere, because the mystic Meister Eckhardt had also spoken of this flow between the Trinity, and I couldn't imagine what it meant.

“No, no, I just thought of it that way!”

I developed a deep respect for this simple and kind man, whom some people considered crazy, but who had already put into practice the command to “become like children.” When he spoke of God, his eyes shone, and he was glad to have found an attentive listener in me, for since many people considered him a crackpot because of his piety, he usually kept his favorite topic to himself. He showed me a small pebble and said, “This is the entire universe, just as God holds it in His hand! I myself am nothing, you know, but God created me, and that is the source of my happiness!”

Finally, a person who wasn’t constantly seeking self-affirmation! Who didn’t need to fight for the esteem of others and didn’t have to be beautiful, rich, smart, or cool to do so. God had created him, and for that he was grateful!

The time had come when I could no longer pretend to be the Shell Man, for the pilgrimage was now over. And to wander through the countryside again with the old refrain “Tengo hambre, no tengo dinero...” would have been old hat. Harvest time had begun, so refraining from begging others for food should be a little easier for me. The fruit trees were full of pears and apples, the corn stood tall, and sometimes I stole a few potatoes for a campfire. Not exactly the done thing, but I was a beginner after all!

Along the way, I’d stumble upon packaged pastries, cookies, or chips—all still perfectly edible. Or I’d find a cornfield just in time, when hunger was setting in. Once I passed a farm and saw cut-down plants with tomatoes still hanging on them, drying out. Just as I was helping

myself, a car pulled up, a man got out, and yelled at me: “Those are my tomatoes!”

“But they’re just rotting away! Doesn’t the Bible say you should leave the last grains in the field and give them to the birds of the field and the traveler?”

“No, no; those are my tomatoes!” the man insisted.

“Yeah, yeah, fine!” I said, and as I turned to leave, I mentioned that I believed in God, to which the man replied that he did too.

I walked on, feeling pretty annoyed. He wanted to believe in God and wouldn’t even spare a poor soul a few withering tomatoes? But an inner voice advised me not to judge, lest I myself be judged.

A short distance further on, the car stopped again. The man held out a wrapped loaf of bread, a packet of cookies, and a drink, which I accepted with a grateful grin. We shook hands, and the man drove on his way.

The only way to Portugal was a bridge over the border river, and right after that came customs. So I decided to swim across the river. Later, I walked south along an endless sandy beach until, one evening, a river blocked my path. I followed its bank, hoping to find a bridge soon. Signs prohibited passage due to a military zone, but I didn’t feel like walking three kilometers back to the last village. Besides, it was already getting dark, so I kept going for the time being.

After a while, I came upon a lit-up barracks complex that blocked my path. As I tried to go around it, I ended up on the tarmac of a small airport and was suddenly ordered not to move. I heard a machine gun being

cocked and was then blinded by the beam of a flashlight. Two soldiers frisked me for weapons while I stood there awkwardly with my hands raised. Then they took me to the barracks and brought me before an officer. I tried to explain the situation to him as best I could: I had come from Santiago, where I had been on a pilgrimage, and wanted to meet some friends near Coimbra!

I seemed to strike a chord with the officer and didn't appear threatening, and when one of the soldiers whispered to the other, "He doesn't have any luggage with him—he's crazy," he started to smile and ordered that I be taken to the gate and let go.

There was a festival going on in Coimbra. Folk dance groups were performing, and cheerful people invited me to eat with them. I felt very at home here, and the Portuguese seemed more open and warm to me than the Spaniards. Perhaps because they were poorer.

Someone invited me to his home. In his apartment hung the most beautiful picture of Jesus I had ever seen: Jesus sitting in the Garden of Gethsemane, looking down upon Jerusalem at night. But as I gazed at the picture, a few thoughts occurred to me. If Jesus was one with the Father, as was claimed, why did he pray to him at all and say, "Thy will be done"? Why then did he allow himself to be baptized, whereupon the Holy Spirit descended upon him, when he was the Holy Spirit himself? Actually, quite illogical! It made more sense to me what the Muslims said, namely, that Jesus had been a prophet and the Holy Spirit was the angel Gabriel.

“If everyone were to wander the land like you do,” my host, who spoke good English, asked me as we stood together in the kitchen preparing the meal, “where would one find anything to eat if no one were tilling the fields anymore?”

“But not everyone does that! Look at the little birds; they don’t sow, they don’t reap, and yet God feeds them! Don’t you believe that? Lao-Tzu says exactly the same thing: The raven doesn’t need to paint itself black! Full becomes empty, empty becomes full! I am, and because I am, I also have the possibility of being. Everything came into being from nothing—the entire universe! Why shouldn’t another piece of bread or a shoe come into being if I believe in it? Jesus multiplied bread and fish, too!”

“God gave you two hands, and you should use them! God helps those who help themselves!”

I just shrugged and thought to myself: “I’ll do something once I’ve reached Israel and crossed the desert. But then as a free man, and no longer out of necessity, no longer as a slave...”

In Figuero dos Vinhos, I had to search for another half-day before I finally reached my destination after twenty weeks of walking and about 3,500 kilometers: the old watermill!

But not a soul was to be seen! Only the remains of what was likely a failed self-sufficiency project: some cabbage, a few tomatoes, dried-up corn, an onion about a centimeter in diameter, and a few other withering and rotting vegetable stumps!

The mill itself was a roughly cobbled-together, crooked structure, but it had a cozy porch from which one could look directly out onto the rushing stream. It lay in a very narrow valley, so the sun didn't stay out for long here. The immediate surroundings had been hit by a forest fire and were in a pitiful state, though new eucalyptus saplings were already sprouting up. The water in the stream was clear but freezing cold, so it took some effort on my part to take a full bath.

I found a note on the door addressed to Ernst-Josef, apparently the owner from whom Markus and Gabi wanted to buy the mill. It stated that Markus and Gabi were now back in Germany.

I didn't stay long! Granada wanted me back!

Henbane

Truth! Truth! Truth! crieth the Lord of the Abyss of Hallucinations. There is no silence in that Abyss: for all that men call Silence is Its Speech. This Abyss is also called "Hell", and "The Many." Its name is "Consciousness", and "The Universe", among men. But THAT which neither is silent, nor speaks, rejoices therein."

Aleister Crowley, Book of Lies

The sun was shining in Granada. I could hardly wait to see Nellie and the others again, and I huffed and puffed my way through the labyrinth of the Albayzin and up the hills of Sacromonte in the middle of the hot siesta hour. When I reached the first caves, my face flushed red, I saw Nellie and Laura, who were busy whitewashing their new cave.

"We were just wondering yesterday where you might be," Nellie greeted me. Laura stood there with her hair dyed pink and a paintbrush in her hand, smiling at us from her lime-splattered face. An old friend of the two girls from California was practicing juggling clubs, and a few other strangers were hanging around in front of the cave. I met Ross from Hawaii, a mixed-race man with Polynesian, European, and Native American ancestry; his Dutch girlfriend Ariane; a bear of a New Zealander named Terry; and Edward, a dark-skinned Englishman.

"George, you old rascal!" I exclaimed when I saw the Portuguese guy. "You're still around?"

“Hey man, how are you?” George asked.

“Great, I’m glad to be back. It’s like coming home!”

“Where have you been all this time?”

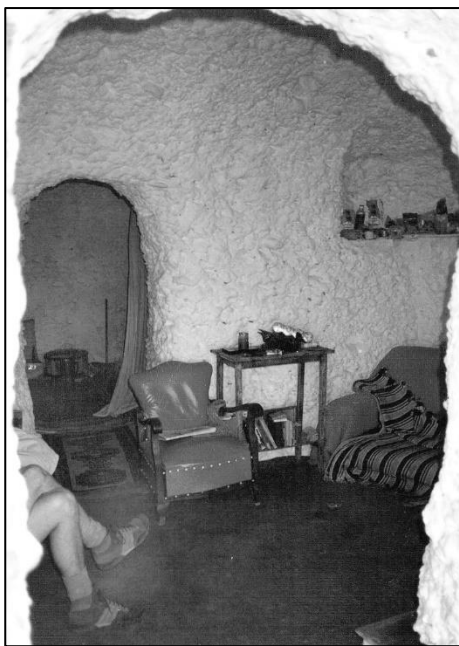
“Here and there!”

There was a lot going on in the cave world. My old cave was occupied by long-haired José, who had decorated it with black magic symbols. But Katja’s old cave was obviously uninhabited; only an iron door had been provisionally built in front of it.

“Gone, space gone,” I thought to myself as I ripped the door, anchors, and frame right out of the sandstone wall and tossed it down the embankment. The cave had three rooms and a fireplace, a terrace, and a wonderful panoramic view of the Generalife and the Alhambra Palace. Behind the terrace, the slope dropped steeply four meters. There was a larger area overgrown with almond trees, around which other caves were clustered, though most of them were uninhabited and full of rubble. Over the next few weeks, I had my hands full whitewashing the cave, clearing away trash, widening the terrace, patching the floor with cement, hauling in carpets and furniture, and building a sunshade out of wood and reeds. I furnished a small Arabic-style room with a Persian rug, cushions, and a small table; I furnished the fireplace room with a sofa and armchairs; and the third room with a guest bed. On the terrace, I built a fire pit and a small kitchen with a larger seating area.

At first, a black tomcat visited me regularly, until one day I rescued a tabby kitten from a dire situation and

gave it shelter, whereupon the tomcat, jealous and offended, took to his heels. The kitten was christened Penny Penelopé. Her favorite spot to nap was in my sleeping bag, and sometimes she'd get the funny idea to bite my toe, or turn the place upside down at dawn and terrorize everyone who wanted to sleep in a little longer.



Soon the place filled with life. There was actually always something going on, and I spent most of my time sitting on my terrace waiting for something to happen. Instead of going into town almost every day, as I had during my last stay, standing by the road, and visiting a food stall, I simply waited for everything I needed to come to me on its own. Everything came to those who could wait!

Full became empty, empty became full! Day and night, happiness and misfortune... only change was constant!

First I had a Moroccan as a guest, then two escaped convicts, after that a young Argentine woman named Maria, later old buddies from Old Germoney and other characters: my cave was almost always fully booked! But it was really crowded that winter. Certainly over a hundred people were living on the Sacromonte at the time. The residents of Granada were already annoyed by the sheer number of beggars, musicians, acrobats, and other performers, because you couldn't walk through the city without being hassled for a duro at least three times. On top of that, there were two squats where parties and concerts were frequently held—all a bit pseudo-punk, but a nice change from the cave scene.

In the caves, too, there was something going on every evening—a meal was organized or music was played. Against the nighttime backdrop of Granada, people would often juggle fire clubs and devil sticks. Simon, the Englishman, was the specialist in particular. He wore gray-black clothes that stank of kerosene, and his cave had the beguiling scent of a gas station. Another specialist was the bald, earringed Jonathan, who always wore funny hats and practiced tightrope walking.

Dominique, a Belgian of African descent, had set up camp in a cave just below my own. He was a sort of highwayman and would hassle anyone who happened to pass by his cave, asking for a cigarette or something else. He also always told wild stories about how he'd been in the Foreign Legion and other nonsense. He showed up at my place almost every day, but since he

was basically a nice guy and pretty entertaining, I put up with it.

“Hey, do you have any sugar left?”

“Good morning, do you invite me for a coffee?”

“Man, I’m starving! Do you have anything to eat?”

“Damn, I’m out of cigarettes...”

One day he brewed himself some tea from henbane, which grew everywhere along the roadside here. I ran into him that evening with huge pupils and a distraught look on his face.

“Dominique, are you okay?”

“Grrrblafmmtgagbsss...,” Dominique replied, staggering around disoriented.

The following week, Dominique was very withdrawn and had completely changed; he no longer begged anyone for food or babbled nonsense.

“Dominique, the coffee’s ready!”

“Oh no, never mind, thanks a lot! I’m sorry I’ve been so rude lately, and I want to change that now!”

“Don’t be so dramatic—you can have a cup of coffee!”

“And the story about the Foreign Legion was a lie, too. I only told it to make myself seem interesting.”

“Dominique, are you sick? I don’t even recognize you anymore!”

A few days later, I threw a spontaneous party, and before I knew it, the cave and the terrace were packed with people. In the lively atmosphere, I had a few too

many glasses of wine, and thought it was a funny idea when Dominique brewed an unusual tea.

“Here’s something special!” Dominique touted his brew, and I didn’t need to be asked twice; I downed a glass and then settled comfortably onto the sofa. Suddenly, a huge wave came crashing over me, and before everything went black, I thought to myself: “You just couldn’t get enough, now see where that gets you!”



After maybe two hours, I woke up again. The party seemed to still be in full swing, but I really just wanted to take a leak. I was very unsteady on my feet, and for fear of tumbling down the slope in front of the cave, I practically crawled along the path. An electric fence gave me electric shocks, and I was puzzled, since I

couldn't remember this fence at all. People were sitting all over the place, making it hard to find a suitable spot. I staggered off, not bothering to pull my pants back up since they were already down—I figured it wouldn't be worth the trouble. But it must have been quite a while before I finally managed to take care of business; all that time, I shuffled around with my pants hanging down to my ankles.

Then I noticed all sorts of delicious-looking objects lying on the ground, but whenever I picked them up, they turned into ordinary stones, much to my disappointment. As dawn broke, I visited my neighboring cave, which served as my trash-burning site. Sitting on the trash was a man with a horribly disfigured and melting face. I called out a "Hello" to him, but the man didn't answer.

"A terminally ill AIDS patient purifying himself here in the cave," I thought, and resolved to bring him something to eat sometime. Strangely enough, I wasn't even surprised when I spotted a few people in the thicket of reeds, staring toward the sunrise with stony faces.

My terrace was in utter chaos. Two chairs were smashed to pieces, someone must have fallen into the fire pit, and overall it looked as if a tornado had swept through. Inside the cave, people were scattered haphazardly everywhere - unfortunately, many of them were AIDS patients - so I didn't feel like joining them, even though I was tired and actually felt terribly sorry for them. So I tidied up the terrace first and then sat down in one of the armchairs. Two of the sick people were sitting in front of me, wrapped in blankets so that

one wouldn't have to look at their terrible faces. I chatted away cheerfully, even though I didn't get any answers. After all, they were in the process of saying goodbye to the world—what else was there to say?

After two hours, the first partygoers crawled out of the cave, and I remarked that things must have been quite a scene up here yesterday, with everything that had happened. But no one seemed to remember exactly what had happened. Only Astrid knew that it had been the Frenchman Stephan who had trashed the fire pit.

Suddenly, I noticed tiny creatures shimmering in rainbow colors, moving in a flowing motion over my armchair.

"Look at that!" I exclaimed excitedly.

"What?" asked Astrid, looking at the armchair.

"Well, these little creatures here!"

"Well, I don't see anything!"

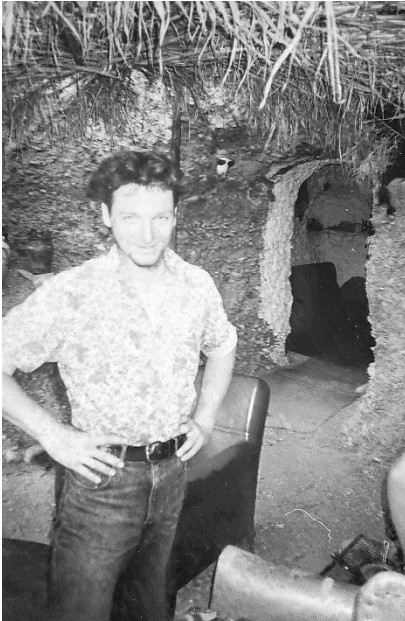
"Are you blind or something? These ones," I pointed at them with my finger.

"Yeah, I see them too!" Udo chimed in, keeping a deadpan expression.

"Are you both crazy?" Astrid snapped, but just to be safe, she took a closer look and was disappointed that she couldn't spot these fabulous creatures.

Like every morning, I started sweeping the cave and was delighted to find these creatures floating around everywhere. I crawled around on the floor and gently tapped them with my finger: "Hello, you little cuties!"

But as soon as I touched them, they emitted a faint electronic pulse and shot a thin thread in my direction, on which a part of their body came hurtling toward me with clear intent to attack. I caught them, and they were immediately ground to dust in my hand. But now I discovered massive colonies on the cave wall, and more and more threads were being shot at me. Until it finally occurred to me that this was completely impossible, and I finally realized that I was hallucinating and had just been talking to blankets for two hours.



Most of the others had had a similar experience to mine. One had run naked into the city center and had seen tanks driving around there, their gun barrels warped like wax. A kind soul gave him some clothes and took him to the hospital. There, fortunately, he came

down enough to realize that they wanted to lock him up as a lunatic, and he managed to slip away just in the nick of time. Others had been caught trying to unlock a car with a 100-peseta coin, damaging the lock in the process. And although most had had negative experiences with the old witch's herb, almost everyone who hadn't attended the legendary Fête had to try it at least once. You could now often see confused figures running around, picking up stones and dropping them again in disappointment. A naked man even wandered into my cave and claimed he was being chased by trees.

"Hey man, how's it going? I'm coming up for a coffee!" boomed the voice early in the morning toward the cave. Dominique was back to his old self! Like someone who lost his memory from a blow to the head and got it back from another blow! That shy, self-critical manner hadn't really suited him anyway.

Glowing Arrows

And you, Melkor, will discover all the secret thoughts of your mind and will realize that they are but a part of the whole and subject to it.

J.R.R. Tolkien, The Silmarillion

Daniela and Jasmin started by building bongos. For this, they used the hollowed-out trunk of a pita²⁰. Three iron rings were hammered out of structural steel, which were then used to stretch the goatskin over the trunk. But every beginning is hard, and everyone knew better, so the result sounded a little muffled.

Daniela had a dog named Rasta, who had once eaten a hash cookie that had fallen off the table and had been a bit odd ever since. He would always come up with an object in his mouth



(preferably stones), lay it down in front of you, and wait with innocent eyes and unshakable patience for you to finally throw the little stone. He couldn't get enough and was nearly chased to death by some unsuspecting people who kept throwing the stones down the hill,

²⁰ The inflorescence of *Agave americana*, also known as the Tree of Life. After this trunk, which can grow up to 8 meters tall, has formed, the plant dies.

causing Rasta to tumble down the slope in his frenzy with bleeding paws. The dogs also formed cliques here and held meetings. Sometimes as many as fifteen animals would gather, and then they were no longer entirely harmless to strangers.

The many dogs were also a nuisance for Penny Penelopé, who often ran after me like a little puppy and sometimes couldn't be shaken off even under the threat of being denied fish. She was very fit and caught her own grasshoppers, lizards, and other small creatures.

Holger was still in Granada, and I helped him renovate the little house again. His place had already been broken into three times, and he was now buying heavy cast-iron bars for the doors and windows. Only then did I notice that the entire Albayzin was barred up and everyone lived in constant fear of break-ins.

Holger confided in me that he was receiving increasingly compelling signs that told him unequivocally that he had to hit on this or that woman. He felt so driven that he could become incredibly pushy and simply didn't realize when he wasn't wanted. I never knew exactly when he started losing his mind. He often had visions of massive sickles floating in the sky and rain of blood - threats that drove him further and further, even sending him out on a quest at night. He then had to follow glowing arrows and other signs until they finally led him to his destination, that is, to the woman.

Once he pointed at José and said that guy over there had put a curse on him recently: "He accosted me for

spare change, but I refused to give him anything. Then suddenly something penetrated my aura—a kind of evil spirit. But since I know my way around magic, I was able to banish the entity and cleanse my aura through the necessary rituals.”

I was astonished by this story, because how could Holger have known that José was involved in black magic?

“That’s irresponsible!” Holger ranted. “That guy has no idea what he’s doing. He’ll pay dearly for it later, in the afterlife! For something like that, you’re sent to astral realms I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy. He can’t do anything to me with such trifles, but people who have no idea don’t even know why they suddenly feel so lousy!”

To many, Holger was just an intrusive weirdo. They didn’t know that his stream of words also held a wealth of gold. You just had to make the effort to listen and dig deeper:

“The new age will be characterized by the creation of transparent structures. People will no longer be able to hide from one another, and there will be no more deceit or arrogance. The divine will will then have become transparent, and there will be no more disobedience. But only those who integrate the new element beforehand and already try to follow the divine will will succeed.”

What astonished me was that Holger seemed to be receiving such clear signs, while for me everything unfolded in a much more subtle way. Nor could I ever tell when I was following my own ideas and when I was

following divine inspiration. But one thing was certain: these signs of divine will and this guidance did exist. In Christianity, the symbol of divine guidance was Jesus, who tends the lambs: “The lambs will hear the voice of the shepherd and follow it”; in Hinduism, it was symbolized by Krishna, the charioteer. If one has Krishna as the charioteer, that is, as the guide of the self, victory is assured, just as it was for Arjuna, the archer; Lao-Tzu called her the guide of the universe; in Buddhism, it was the Yidam or Bodhisattva who provided guidance. In Islam, divine guidance was called Hidaya.

Eighteen-year-old Sonja from Austria was found dead in a cave one morning. Heroin and narcotics had caused her circulation to collapse. Wolfgang, too, who had gotten into arguments with various people toward the end, was found dead from a drug overdose along with another German. Shortly thereafter, a large-scale police operation took place, but as an early riser, I fortunately got wind of it in time and was thus able to retreat to higher ground. From there, I watched as about fifty police officers surrounded the caves and then dragged one cave dweller after another out of bed. Some were taken away, including Terry, who was deported to New Zealand. The entire cave scene gained a bad reputation as a drug den, and public calls grew louder to clear the entire area so that the riffraff would finally disappear from the city; especially since Granada was preparing for the World Ski Championships and these incidents were, of course, bad publicity.

But it was the same story every time: there were good people who built something up and created something

beautiful, and others who spread a lot of trash and didn't give a damn about anything but themselves. Afterward, everything was lumped together, and the entire atmosphere was ruined. Among the gypsies, it only took a few to steal; among the "fundamentalists," it only took a few to plant bombs, and suddenly they'd all been branded. Whether hashish, heroin, or LSD, they were all illegal drugs and their users addicts; all the same! It was, after all, complicated and tedious to differentiate!

Dagmar sang Daniela, Astrid, and me a beautiful song from India that she had learned in a village in the Alpujarras, a village where the people lived in teepees²¹. That sounded interesting, because more and more cave dwellers were now disappearing, and I, too, was slowly getting the urge to move on. Penny Penelopé had, in the meantime, raised three sweet, lively kittens. So I had already been in the cave for a cat's generation, and I felt it was time to go. And so, like the little hobbit Bilbo Baggins, I slipped away at night after my birthday party and set off toward the moon and the mountains. Penny accompanied me for quite a while, until I took her in my arms one last time and gave her a goodbye kiss.

²¹ Native American tents

The Rainbow

At first, I tried to play the flute all by myself. But all I managed was a string of notes that left me indifferent. Later, I discovered that I had to play the flute for others if I wanted it to speak to me as well.

Hans Bemman, Stone and Flute

The mountains shimmered in the moonlight. The cold night wind swept down through the valleys, telling of the loneliness. Deeply carved valleys stood in my way. The days were hot, but there were many clear streams, and the first fruit was already hanging from the trees. I passed through barren scree fields and saw ibexes leaping about in the higher elevations. After three days, I caught sight of the sea in the distance, and after another half-day, the small town of Orgiva, nestled in the broad valley of the Alpujarras.

I had only a vague description of where the teepee village was supposed to be, but when I took a chance and trudged up the first side valley, following the clear stream further and further uphill as it led me through a shady eucalyptus grove, a teepee nearly five meters tall suddenly stood before me. A horse leaned bored against a tree, and children played in front of the tent, where I could make out the silhouette of a woman busy with a fire and a cooking pot. I passed another teepee, but its occupant seemed to still be sleeping, even though the sun was already high in the sky. I continued through a small grove and reached a little waterfall,

where I took a refreshing shower. In the morning sun, a double rainbow formed beneath the spray of the cascading water, as if to tell me that I was in a special place.



The sleeper had woken up; he had red hair and introduced himself as Lee. He was English and invited me to breakfast. For the first time in my life, I stepped into a real teepee! What an atmosphere! The interior was over four meters high, the floor lined with reeds and woven blankets, and in the center a lively fire blazed, over which a rustic coffee pot hung, exuding a tempting aroma.

“Where are you from?” Lee asked as he began rolling a joint.

“I lived in Granada for eight months and heard about this place there,” I replied cheerfully and asked in return how long Lee had been living here.

“Three weeks,” he answered, “I’m just visiting, and unfortunately, this isn’t my teepee either.”

“Yeah, a teepee is something different! A cave is nice too—you feel safe in Mother Earth. But here you feel lighter.”

“Come with me, I’ll show you the village.”

The path led us past a tree-shaded pond fed by a clear spring. Then the path zigzagged up the slope, through tunnels of reeds and blackberry vines, and we reached a few larger terraces where you could make out teepee sites, as the ground there was bare in several places.

“It’s not very busy right now. A lot of people have gone to a Rainbow Festival in Ireland,” Lee explained, leading me further up the path, which now ran alongside a small canal where the water was cheerfully babbling away. I was amazed that there was so much water here in dry Andalusia. It was like paradise!

“This is the dining area,” Lee said as we stood on a grassy terrace shaded by old olive trees, from which the silvery sounds of a wind chime rang out. Water gurgled from a hose into a basin, where pots and dishes stood neatly lined up, and at the edge of the meadow was a small altar on which small images of Hindu deities, shells, painted stones, incense sticks, and all sorts of other odds and ends were spread out.

A man with a full beard, his hair tied up in a playful bun, and wearing loose, flowing white robes appeared and welcomed me. “I’m Jaimy,” he introduced himself and reached for one of the many drums scattered around the altar. I didn’t need to be asked twice and grabbed

one myself, while Lee said goodbye. Jaimy began to sing, and I happily tapped my drum. Fate had led me to another beautiful place!

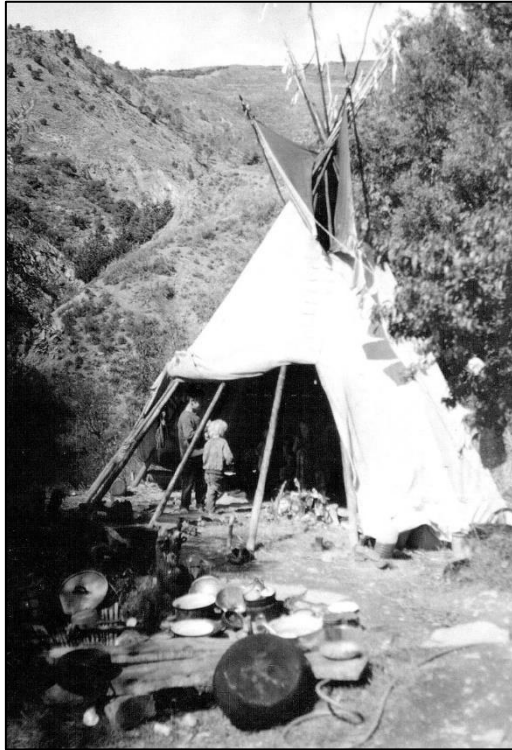
In the evening, a conch shell sounded across the valley. Ten people had already gathered around the fire. I sat down with them in the circle while the food was distributed to the sound of chanting. Then we all took each other's hands and remained silent with our eyes closed for about a minute, until we finally wished each other bon appétit. I really liked that: giving thanks for the food and feeling the sense of community, instead of just greedily digging in right away. Most of the people were from England or Wales, but there were also three Germans and one Spaniard there.

Jaimy explained a few things to me. "The 'magic hat' is hanging back there," he pointed to a colorful cloth bag dangling from a branch, "anyone can put as much money in there as they can spare, or whatever they think is appropriate. If someone wants to buy something for the community, they can take the necessary money from it. Cooking, washing dishes, gathering firewood, and other chores are all voluntary. Whoever wants to do something for his karma does it; whoever doesn't, doesn't."

"Has anything ever been stolen from you?"

"Normally, Beneficio doesn't attract bad people. It's up to us to keep the energy of this place positive! Among the few rules we have here are that dogs and alcohol are prohibited. We also don't eat meat and don't want livestock farming; instead, we aim to avoid animal products entirely whenever possible. One blast of the

conch shell means there's tea or a snack; two blasts are for a meal; three blasts are for group meditation; and more blasts signal a fire or other dangers."



One of the Germans, who had long blond hair and was wearing a Peruvian vest, prepared a chillum and handed it to me: "Bum Shiva!"

"Is that VW bus down there yours?" I asked him, smoke still rising from my nose. "I noticed it back in Granada. You always had it parked in front of the old cave disco, right?"

“Yeah, exactly! My name is Werner, but call me Franzisco. That’s what I call myself here in Spain because it’s easier for people to remember.”

We shook hands, and I learned that Franzisco was training to be a naturopath, something I’d briefly started myself once.

“My focus is on Chinese herbal medicine, acupuncture, and massage. I still have a year of training left and wanted to continue my studies in China afterward, so I have to go back to Germany soon. But those two,” he pointed to the other German guy and the girl, “apparently can’t stand it there anymore and are looking for a place where they can stay a little longer. Maybe they’ll like it here!”

The walk back to my sleeping spot proved quite difficult in the dark and while high. It took me almost half an hour, and I got lost in a blackberry bush along the way. It was pleasantly cool in the little forest during the day, and the waterfall was nearby, but having to scramble through the brush every time was just too much for me. I decided to take a closer look at the whole area the next day and search for alternatives.

There were several more terraces with teepee campsites, strange stone circles, small ponds, a meditation spot, little gardens, an old Andalusian cottage, a hidden moss-covered spring that was once again decorated with all sorts of things, and a reed hut.

“Does anyone actually live in the bamboo hut?” I asked Jaimy.

“No, it’s vacant right now. A Norwegian druid built it once, but he’s been gone for a while. We’ve always wanted to turn it into a healing space, but you’re welcome to move in there first if you want.”

Since I had no money and still didn’t want to use any if I could help it, but also didn’t want to sit around here as a freeloader, I thought about how I could make myself useful. I went to gather wood, cooked, cleaned up the place, went on forays into the lower plantations, and wherever I saw fruit rotting and apparently not being harvested, I gathered oranges and almonds. I cleared the ditches of silt and hacked away at the lush, overgrown thorn bushes, but soon realized that this caused the vines to sprout side shoots, and the whole thing grew more and more into an inextricable tangle.

Every morning I got up at dawn and spent the first three or four hours tackling the blackberry bushes, which were up to five meters high. Beneficio was being smothered by them! It had once been an olive grove with orchards. But nowadays neither the almond trees nor the vines were pruned, and the olives could no longer be harvested because the undergrowth was rampant beneath the trees and it was no longer possible to stretch nets.

I heard the amusing story that people didn’t want to use the standard harvesting method so they wouldn’t have to beat the trees with long sticks. Instead, they had started picking the olives one by one, which was, of course, backbreaking work and was soon abandoned. Many people also believed that nature should be left to its own devices, and that weeding was unnecessary.

I let the cut vines dry and then burned them in piles. After six weeks, I had made good progress and cleared quite a few trees. They looked rather pitiful, as if they were standing there naked and ashamed. They had developed severely stunted branches in an attempt to reach the light through the thicket, but they hadn't stood a chance against the fast-growing berries. I pruned them back heavily and was certain they would soon recover.



An American Indian sweat lodge was usually held on the new and full moons. After nightfall, a large fire was lit and stones were heated until they glowed, while people stood in a circle around the fire and sang Native American chants or other spiritual songs. Many had since returned from the Rainbow Festival in Ireland, and visitors from El-Moreon also showed up frequently, so that each time around thirty or more freaks gathered. That was Hanuman's hour—an older German man who always had to put on a show, prancing and dancing around the fire, baring his teeth and letting out primal screams, all while wildly waving a stick about. The whole time, people sang or chanted:

“Earth my body, water my blood, air my breath and fire my spirit...”

“We all come from the garden. And to her we shall return, like a drop of rain flowing to the ocean.”

Once the stones were red-hot, they were carried into the inipi²² with a shovel while chanting, and piled into a heap in the center. As soon as the first people were inside the inipi, they began chanting the Sanskrit syllable Om²³. Once everyone was in the tent and had acclimated a bit, water and herbs were poured over the stones. It soon became extremely hot. For people who weren't used to it, this was a tough ordeal. You could then feel exactly whether you had mistreated your body, eaten too much, smoked too much, or smoked too much weed.

But after a while, you felt that the worst was now over and could fully surrender to the cleansing. You could feel your body detoxifying and the toxins being sweated out. After about twenty minutes, you'd leave the hut steaming and head to the nearest pond to cool off in the clear mountain water. After that, depending on your mood, you could go back in or dry off by the fire.

²² A flat, igloo-shaped tent, the sweat lodge.

²³ Isvara (the Supreme Ruler) is a special purusa (Beholder), untouched by suffering, actions, their effects, and desires. In Him, that omniscience becomes infinite, which in others is merely a seed. He was the teacher even of the teachers of antiquity, since He is not limited by time. The word that reveals Him is Om. The repetition of this Om and meditation on its meaning is the path. Through this, the realization of inner vision is gained and the destruction of obstacles is achieved. (Yoga Sutras)

Later, we'd play music and have a meal together in the big teepee, the "Big Lodge."

The major difference from a sauna was the spiritual aspect of the sweat lodge, which was completely dark except for the gentle glow of the stones. The singing and the ritual sometimes performed gave the whole experience a mystical dimension. And in the extreme temperatures, you truly experienced a small death. The only refuge, if you didn't want to leave the inipi, was your inner center, where you remained as still as possible. It was a reenactment of death and rebirth!

Hanuman, who often stayed as a guest in Beneficio, would sometimes create a tense atmosphere, for example, when he would shout "Give me the morning lllllight!" loudly across all the tipis at sunrise to cleanse his chakras²⁴. This resulted in angry protests from those he had woken up, and once it even came to a physical altercation. While I found Hanuman insolent on the one hand, on the other hand I'd never had a soft spot for late sleepers, and breakfast here at ten or eleven o'clock was probably more suited to a summer camp than to a spiritual community that spent the most energetic time of the day in sweet slumber.

²⁴ The feminine power Shakti resides at the base of the spine in the form of the sleeping serpent Kundalini. There she is in a kind of exile, separated from her Lord, the highest cosmic principle, who eagerly awaits her return and who has his seat in the head. One must awaken the sleeping serpent and guide it through the vertical channel, the Sushumna, into the head. This channel runs through the chakras, subtle energy centers that symbolize various forms of consciousness and are activated by the serpent.

Richie was the most active person in Beneficio. He had laid out a pretty garden around the house with many colorful flowers and was currently renovating the old Andalusian cottage. I helped him build a new roof using traditional construction methods, and it seemed to do us both good. We didn't talk much, but that wasn't necessary, because working together was a form of communication in itself. We were both the type to prefer solitude and avoid idle chatter whenever possible. For Richie, the formalities and the hustle and bustle down at the "Big Lodge" were too much, and he preferred to live up here, where he had his peace and quiet.

The polar opposite of the hardworking Richie was fat Tony from Wales, who was very hard to motivate to wash dishes or do any other work. He preferred to occupy himself with "gorilla yoga," as he called it. That is, devouring peanuts, bananas, and basically anything edible in the most relaxing position possible, and maybe rolling a joint now and then to work up a new appetite.

I, too, often took part in this kind of meditation to find some balance. After all, deep down I had never been a fan of strict asceticism, even though it had often seemed like a shining ideal to me. I enjoyed singing the Indian songs, even though I didn't really get much out of Kali, Shiva, and whatever else the deities were called. It was a very cozy feeling, sitting around the fire here in the teepee, eating together, drumming and singing, and chatting with a constant stream of new people. Many

of them were into naturopathy, and I received a Reiki²⁵ and a Shiatsu massage twice, both of which worked very well. I learned various massage techniques and developed something of a personal style.

Completely out of the blue, my father showed up one day just as I was giving a massage. Dietrich, an old friend of mine who was studying in Seville and had already visited me twice in my cave—and to whom I had told of my intention to go to Beneficio when I left Granada—had given my father a rather vague description of the location. Seized by a spirit of adventure, my father had gone to scout out the place. Ever since his visit to Granada, he had been very interested in where his son was and what he was experiencing this time.

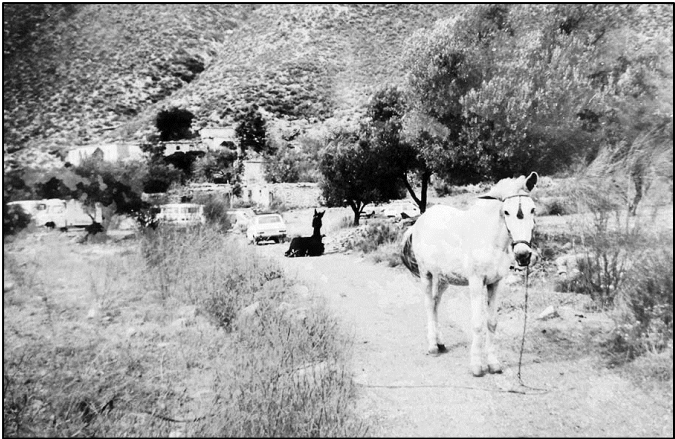
²⁵ A form of healing with the hands, in which the person becomes a channel of divine or cosmic energy, which they pass on to the patient. Shiatsu is similar, but combines it with conventional massage.

Broad beans

Believe me, for I have learned it: you will find more in the woods than in books; trees and stones will teach you what you will never hear from any teacher.

Bernard of Clairvaux

We drove together to El-Moreon, a hippie settlement less than six kilometers from Beneficio, situated at the foot of the great mountain that separated the Alpujarras from the Mediterranean. There we visited Juan, an old acquaintance from Granada, who lived here in a small cottage.



Juan told us that he planned to travel to northern Spain soon, and that I could take over the cottage then. That came at just the right time, because as nice as it was in Beneficio, after three months I couldn't stand the Indian

chants anymore. Besides, it was getting more and more crowded and harder to find a quiet spot.

The old cottage was a bit secluded from the settlement and consisted of just one room with a fireplace. Behind it lay a small eucalyptus grove, and about 100 meters further on, the Guadelfeo River rushed by—my ice-cold bathtub. In front of the cottage stood a fig tree, which was currently bearing delicious fruit, a few pomegranate saplings, and a terrace overgrown with delicious grapes. The whole area was also full of orange, lemon, and almond trees. So you certainly wouldn't starve here! One day, on the opposite side of the river, I spotted some ibexes on a steep cliff face. When they noticed me, they scrambled up the next ridge, disappeared behind the crest, and left me standing there, deeply impressed by their climbing skills and powerful presence. Once, a wild boar even ran past me while I was standing naked in the middle of the river. I was getting a bit scared when that big beast came charging at me so suddenly, but it seemed to be fleeing from something else and barely paid me any attention.

My task this time seemed to be to get the garden back in shape, which obviously hadn't been tended to in quite a while. I found the necessary tools for the job inside the house. It took a little while to clear away the lush, overgrown weeds and the trash, and for the garden beds to become visible again. Then I started digging. Before I started sowing, however, I had to take care of something else: putting up a fence around the entire property. After all, yesterday a donkey had simply strolled into the garden without knocking or saying hello and had headed straight for the fig tree,

trampling the freshly dug-up bed flat in the process. A herd of goats had also paid an unannounced visit and had bleated at me!



The settlement consisted of several houses, mostly inhabited by freaks. A few teepees were scattered about, and many people—mostly English—arrived in converted trucks or buses. There was always something going on somewhere; a few people would gather for a party or hang out together. A small circus tent had been set up, where parties were now held frequently. The tent was lit with candles and torches, and the drums boomed all night long.

My neighbor invited me over for breakfast. His name was Bernd, and his friend Christian was there too. Both were from Bavaria, which made the conversation quite entertaining for me, as I found their dialect absolutely hilarious.

Bernd had done a lot to his little cottage; it was really cozy. There were a few instruments, and Christian, who wore long, shaggy Rasta hair with his Bavarian vest, soon picked up a guitar and played a Bob Marley song: "...when we came to understand, a mighty god is a living man. You can fool some people sometimes, but you can't fool all the people all the time..." I grabbed one of the many drums while Bernd served coffee, dried figs, and almonds. Later, I asked Christian for a tip on what I could plant right now.

"Right now you can plant beans. Just go to a store and buy a packet of the big ones. If you stop by sometime, I can give you seeds for all sorts of things, too." He walked me back to my little cottage. "First you need to haul in some horse manure. And you'll need a fence! It's good that someone's finally putting in the work here—your predecessors let everything go to ruin. Have you found the irrigation ditch yet? Marko used to have the place full of flowers; I'd ask him where exactly the ditch runs. Because when it gets hot later, you'll hardly be able to haul all that water from the river with buckets. Besides, the river water isn't the best either, since all the sewage from Orgiva flows into it."

Carlos and José rode by and waved to us; there was plenty of horse manure lying around here. I got right to work and collected a few bags full. Then I carved a handle for the axe and started on the fence. An old

Spaniard came by and watched me for a while. “Muy bien, hombre!” he muttered, seeming pleased that something was finally happening here again. Rural exodus was rampant in Spain too, and increasing drought and mismanagement did the rest; more and more land was becoming barren. In Moorish times, this must have been a thriving region, a vast garden. But the Spaniards didn’t always treat their land with much care. It sometimes hurt to see how brutally “order” was being imposed here. Slash-and-burn farming was common, and the yellow plane from Orgiva sprayed the olive trees over a wide area with poison. Underneath the trees, the weeds were sprayed away instead of being plowed under as in the past, but so heavily that a whole hillside near my place had turned brown from the runoff of poisoned water. The weeds later interfered with the olive harvest, which was normally pressed into oil at one of the numerous mills.

Holger, who had found out by chance where I was, came to visit me every now and then, brought tools with him, and set to work on the surrounding trees. He cut away the dead wood and gave them a new shape.

“Did you learn that somewhere?” I asked him.

“No, my intuition tells me what to do. What’s aesthetically pleasing in nature is usually also practical. Look at this one,” he pointed to a fig tree with gnarled branches, “without human help, it just muddles along. Humans have let nature down.”

“Yes, but nature has been around a lot longer than humans, and it certainly manages best when you leave it completely alone.”

“I have to show you something,” he said, and drove me a few kilometers to a finca. Everything looked neglected; weeds were growing everywhere, and the trees looked pitiful. A deathly silence hung over this land, which had clearly been abandoned.

“Okay, that looks bad. But this isn’t natural vegetation here, it’s an abandoned monoculture.”

Holger led me to a neighboring property. A blossoming life greeted us. The ground around the trees was neatly plowed, and the branches looked lush. But the plantation was teeming with life in other ways, too. Magnificent bushes, flowers, and other plants thrived here; insects buzzed about, and birds chirped.

“You can feel it,” Holger said, “happy people live here. It’s not just that the plants are well-watered. Nature is treated with love here, and she repays that love. Overgrown nature doesn’t produce the beauty of a garden. Humans have forgotten their purpose!”

I had to agree with Holger on that point. The symbol of paradise was a blooming garden!

Holger stopped the car next to a huge California pine tree and began collecting its thick seeds: “We have to spread these everywhere. The Alpujarras needs trees if it’s not to wither away.” We took a few seeds to a nursery, and Holger gave the people money so they would plant the seeds. He would come back to pick up the seedlings later. He also pressed a few into my hand: “For your garden!”

The fence was finished, and the beans were sprouting from the ground. The garlic, lettuce, cabbage, and a few

herbs were also peeking out at the world with curiosity. Since it froze at night, I had to carefully cover them with mulch in the evenings: “Sweet dreams, my dear veggies!” I also had to take care of their physical well-being in other ways, keeping the numerous weeds at bay and giving them water. As long as the irrigation channel was unusable, I still had to haul water from the river, which gave me my morning exercise every day. I also built a patio with a large fire pit in the middle, pruned the grapevine and the pomegranate tree, and fought the blackberries as usual.



Sometimes I had the feeling Holger was on the verge of madness when he would suddenly freeze in the street and run into some side alley because a glowing arrow had once again shown him the way. Or when he would suddenly brake while driving and say he had to turn around and drive here and there, because a woman was waiting for him there.

“Well, Holger, you’re certainly right about something—you have to follow your instincts, and spontaneously, before the vibration shifts to a different quality. But what I don’t understand is why this applies so extremely to women in your case.”

“The whole game revolves around the union of opposites!” That was all he would say, and he was probably sometimes shocked himself by his mental state and his visions.

Manuel, an old acquaintance from Granada, stopped by for two days and mentioned he wanted to go to the carnival in Tenerife. They said it was the second-largest carnival in the world. A Swiss woman also told me about it when I visited her in her little cave, and we were listening to Kate Bush. A deep longing for the sea gripped me; after all, I’d been in these mountains for over a year and was really a water baby. But it was dangerous on the coast, and to get to the Canary Islands, you probably needed an ID, and likely money too. Hadn’t someone once told me that sailboats leave from the Canary Islands for South America, and that they sometimes take people along for free?

But the joy of watching the vegetables grow and seeing the little house become more and more livable made me forget about the sea for the time being. Marko showed me the exact course of the irrigation ditch, which ran through tunnels and sometimes formed a waterfall.

“When you hear the water rushing down the slope behind your house, you know that nobody needs it at that moment. There are irrigation schedules here and a

water tax, but since you're last in line, you can just take whatever's left. Best to do it at night, when no one else wants to water their vegetables anyway."

It took me more than a week to clear the canal of weeds. The owner of the fields the canal ran through didn't realize what I was up to until I was just ten meters from the connection point. He got really upset, and also about the fact that I'd just pruned his grapevines. I'd assumed that no one was taking care of the vines growing wild on the stone walls anymore.

"You have to pay attention to the phases of the moon; you can't just cut it whenever it suits you!" the farmer ranted.

I apologized and said, "I assumed there was something like a right of way for the canal. How else was I supposed to get the water? It must have been possible at one time."

When I heard the water rushing down the slope the next day and hurried eagerly to the connection point to inaugurate the canal, I discovered that the old Spaniard had blocked off a small tunnel with an iron door. Furious as I was, I was already thinking of breaking the lock, but managed to restrain myself. The freaks already had enough to contend with in terms of prejudice from the local population!

"I'll talk to his son," Marko said later, "I know him, and he's okay. It's just the old man who's a bit stubborn at times."

Well, why get upset over the beans? I hadn't planted them for the great harvest anyway! Wasn't the journey the destination?

Surfing

It is not through virtue that you grasp its essence, nor through the mind or much learning. Only those whom it chooses will understand it, and only life reveals life.

Katha Upanishad 2.33

My father came to visit again. This time he had brought along an older couple from southern Germany with whom he wanted to take a tour of Andalusia, and he would have liked to have me along as a travel companion. We drove into the mountains and went for a walk. But it quickly got too chilly up here for the two Swabians, so we set out to find a hotel.

“By the way, you still have money,” my father said that evening in our shared room.

“Really? I didn't know anything about that!”

“Well, we didn't donate it to a good cause back then, as you had instructed us to do, because we assumed you might need it again. Dietrich had also gotten in touch

with us again and said he wanted to visit a friend in Seville. Maybe you two could meet up there.”

“That’s some nice news!” I said, thinking of the sea and the waves. I hadn’t used any money in a year and a half!

The next day we drove to Granada and visited the Alhambra. Afterward, I let the three of them explore the city on their own while I stopped by my old hideout. A complete wasteland awaited me there. The almond tree square was littered with trash, the awning was destroyed, the furniture was gone, ugly graffiti covered the walls, and there was even feces in one of the rooms. Well, the good times in Sacromonte seemed to be over. Only change was constant.

In Seville, our paths parted, and I made my way to the Toro del Oro, where Dietrich was already waiting for me, gazing pensively at the Guadalquivir River. I tried to sneak up on him from behind to surprise him, but he instinctively turned around and grinned at me from behind his black sunglasses: “Old friend, long time no see!”

We rushed into the nearest bar and threw a welcome party over beer and tapas. Then we wandered through downtown, played pool and table tennis, and finally ended up at the huge Plaza España.

“So what are your plans now?” Dietrich asked me.

“Not sure! With the money, I could buy a horse—El Moreon is a nice place for that. I’d really like to see the harvest, and all my stuff is still lying around there. On the other hand, I’m drawn to the sea and the waves. I’d love to go to the Canary Islands! That’s where all the

yachts heading to South America pass by. Maybe that would be my chance to leave Europe after all. But I certainly can't make it there by plane, and the ferry is supposed to take two days—they'll probably want to see ID, too..."

We looked out at the surroundings in silence. Just as I was rolling a cigarette and the paper blew onto the ground, my gaze fell on the tiled floor of the square, where in front of each of the countless benches there was a coat of arms and a small map of a Spanish province. The entire vast expanse of the square was tiled with various motifs, but right in front of our bench, the Canary Islands were depicted.

"Could that be a coincidence, Dietrich?" I asked, pointing to the ground.

"Hardly! So off to the Canary Islands!"

I couldn't stay in my seat any longer: "I'm sorry, Dietrich, that we only got to see each other for such a short time, but Seville isn't really my thing. I'm going to head to the bus station, see which destination catches my eye first, and then I'll be on my way."

"Well then..." said Dietrich, walking with me a little further before we hugged and went our separate ways.

"Cadiz" was written above the counter that caught my eye first. The bus was already waiting, and I soon set off toward a fiery sunset, glad that fate had led me out of the mountains once again, as I'd been feeling a bit cramped lately in the mountains and had been longing for open spaces and the horizon.

As the bus pulled into Cadiz, a large ferry was already docked at the pier, as if it had been waiting just for me.

“Where is it going, please?” I asked a guard at the harbor.

“To Tenerife!” he replied good-naturedly.

“And when?”

“Tomorrow evening!”

It was just what I’d hoped for!



The next morning, I went back to the harbor. Other passengers were already buying their tickets, cars were lined up in rows, and trucks and containers were already being loaded. But every passenger had to obediently show their ID when buying a ticket, so I first went to the stern of the ship, where officers with walkie-talkies were supervising the loading of the containers.

Was it possible to hitch a ride as a stowaway? Just boldly walk past the officers and then hide among the trucks? Audacity wins...

A light inside the ship turned green.

My signal! Go now!

But I hesitated and first went to a harbor bar to have a coffee and use the restroom to change my pants. All in blue, so that I might give the impression I belonged to the ship. Then I bought a newspaper and went back to the stern hatch. Half-immersed in my newspaper, I walked past the officer and was already feeling pleased when suddenly an old sea dog stood in front of me.

“Where are you going?” he asked gruffly.

“Well, on board, of course!”

“Show me your ticket!”

“Why, can’t I buy the ticket on board too?”

“Nope, you can only get that at the ticket counter!” he grunted at me.

“Oh, really? Well then, thanks for the info!” I said and quickly made a beeline for the exit, past the disinterested officer.

Well, I hesitated too long again and missed my chance! If you didn’t act on the spot, you lost the game! But maybe it just wasn’t meant to be!

I went back into town and was already planning to head back to El-Moreon when I suddenly saw the Swiss woman sitting on the steps in front of the cathedral with a couple of weirdos.

“What a coincidence!”

“Hey there!” she greeted me and gave me a kiss, which her boyfriend—who looked half like Jimi Hendrix and

half like a Corsican pirate—didn't seem to mind.
"Where are you headed?"

"Actually, to the Canary Islands!"

"Really? Us too! But we want to celebrate Carnival here in Cádiz first, and then go to Tenerife. Carnival there is a little later."

"The only problem is, I can't get a ticket without an ID."

"Oh, Bruno doesn't have a passport either," she patted her boyfriend on the shoulder, "I'll buy the ticket for him and yours too, if you want!"

"That would be great!"

"We were just about to head to the harbor to ask how much it costs. You can come along."

We went to the harbor and the Swiss girl asked about the price: "Just under 28,000 pesetas each—pretty expensive! But we'll have that together in a week!"

"Do you mind buying my ticket right now? I actually wanted to leave today!" I couldn't let another opportunity slip by! A week was a long time; everything could have changed again by then.

I gave her the money, and she soon came back with the ticket and boarding pass.

"Thanks, that's so sweet of you!"

"You're welcome! Well then, have a good trip. If it's meant to be, we'll meet in Santa Cruz."

An officer was collecting the stubs of the boarding passes. "Oh, a woman!" he said, smiling at me. "You'll have to wait a little while, please!" Only then did I notice

that there were red and orange boarding passes. Mine was red and meant for a woman! My ears burned, and I got a little nervous. What the hell was I supposed to wait for?

But other passengers were arriving too and had to wait until a minibus finally showed up and took us inside the ship. At the reception desk, we were handed a punch card, which was presumably meant to serve as the key to the cabin. But I stayed on deck for the time being and waited until Cadiz was finally far behind us and we, accompanied by seagulls, sailed into the fading light of the sunset. Only then did I knock on my cabin door, whereupon a woman opened it.

“Yes?” Two other women’s faces peered curiously over her shoulder.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I got the cabin wrong!”

The restaurant had soft, cushioned benches, and I settled in there for the night. A steward came by and looked puzzled.

“Oh, you see, it’s too cramped in the cabin with so many strangers; I get claustrophobic. If possible, I’d rather sleep here.”

“As you wish, Señor. Sleep well.”

Nothing but the vast ocean was visible. The first early risers came out on deck, and a few of them started doing gymnastics. The sky was growing brighter and more golden in the east, and everyone waited eagerly for the sun to finally appear above the horizon.

At eight o'clock, the breakfast buffet was served, and a man my age with long curly hair asked, "Esta libre aqui?"

"Sure, sure, sit down! You can speak German here!"

He smiled and set down.

"Didn't I see you in a red VW bus, packed full of surfboards?" I asked him, cracking my breakfast egg as I spoke.

"That could well be! I'm a surf instructor and I'm heading to Fuerteventura. And you, where are you off to?"

"I'm not sure yet, let's see what happens!"

"You don't look like you're on vacation!" the surf instructor mumbled from behind his jam sandwich, and I told him I'd been on the road for quite some time.

"You're right! I want to experience something in this world, too! Whenever I come to Germany and hear my old friends rambling on about their jobs and careers, it gets to me. 'Hey guys, spare me your nonsense—I don't care how much money you make,' I tell them. Then they ask me what I plan to do when I'm no longer a surf instructor, and all that crap. What about my pension then! They think they can insure themselves against everything! In reality, they're just afraid of life and want to secure themselves with life preservers everywhere."

"Hey, do you surf too?"

"Of course, that's the ultimate! It's pretty frustrating at first, but once you get the hang of it... I'd leave any woman for that!"

“And is that good in the Canary Islands?”

“Sure! There are a few good spots on Tenerife, Gran Canaria, and Fuerteventura, but the biggest waves are on Lanzarote. At least in the winter. Fuerteventura has the advantage of almost always having waves, even if sometimes they’re just wind waves that don’t break as nicely. But I can really only make money with windsurfing.”

“Do you think I’m already too old to learn? I once heard that you should start by the time you’re thirteen or fourteen at the latest.”

“Oh, nonsense! You look perfectly fit! Sure, you won’t become a pro, but after a year you might already be able to carve along the waves pretty well!”

“Want to sit out on deck and have a smoke?”

We went up on deck, lay down on two lounge chairs in the sun, let a gentle sea breeze caress us, and got pretty stoned. Suddenly it occurred to me that I was in a bardo!

Nothingness surrounded me. There was no solid ground anymore, just blue: the light of Vairocana²⁶ !

²⁶ At this time, you must not fear the blue, clear, radiant and transparent light, for it is the light of sublime wisdom—do not fear it! It is called the light of the Tathâgata, and it is the primordial wisdom of the sphere of Being-in-itself; therefore, offer it your faith and devotion. Remember, this is the light of compassion of Tathâgata Vairocana! Thus, implore it! Thus, Tathâgata Vairocana has come to receive you on the abysmal path of the intermediate state. (The Tibetan Book of the Dead)

Surfing! My dream! Maybe it was coming true now, after eight years!

Surfing... that was it! The brilliant symbolism! Just as the traffic light on the ship turned green, a wave had come that I could have surfed. But I had waited too long, so I had missed it. When my father came to pick me up in El-Moreon, that had been a wave, too. I had caught that one and surfed all the way here. You just had to wait patiently for a wave and then react spontaneously. Sometimes a few big ones came one after another, then none for a long time, and always a few small ones in between! Yes, that was it! Everything was energy, everything was vibration. As above, so below²⁷ ! I had now learned to swim, and if God willed it, I wouldn't go under even in the desert without money or luggage! But now I had to learn to surf!

“Hey, man, I just invented a new philosophy!”

“Yeah, that dope is really good, where'd you get it?”

²⁷ Philosopher's Stone

Socorro!

*Whoever has drunk deeply and thirstily
is drawn down by the miraculous spring,
so that he himself flows melodiously as
a wave, upon which the world shatters
into a thousand sparks.*

Eichendorff

The next morning we docked in Santa Cruz de Tenerife. The Guardia Civil searched a few cars with dogs, but they didn't want anything to do with me. The city was bustling because Carnival had already begun. Music blared everywhere, and in the pedestrian arcade, vendor stood next to vendor. A few freaks were making music with drums, guitar, and singing. I recognized an old acquaintance from Granada, an Italian woman who had once given me a book by Salman Rushdie, which I had lent out and never read myself.

"Hi Francesca, how are you?"

"What a surprise! How did you end up here?"

We chatted for almost an hour, during which she told me she'd met Astrid and Daniela on Gomera. They'd been living in a cave on some off-the-beaten-path beach. Unfortunately, she'd forgotten the name of the place.

"Are you coming with me to La Caleta tomorrow?" she asked, lighting a cigarette. "There's a little village there, and I live there."

“Why not? I’m not in the mood for big crowds, noise, and parties anyway.”

I wrote another note to Marko saying I was now in Tenerife and he could have the little house, since I knew my plants would be fine there. And I wrote a letter to my parents. My mother had actually planned to visit me in El Moreon during the Easter break. But she was afraid of flying and might not want to come to Tenerife. What a lousy situation! After all, it was only thanks to my father’s generosity that I’d gotten the money for the crossing! We hadn’t seen each other in nearly two years.

I was a little shocked when the bus drove to Playa de las Americas the next day on the dry, karstic, and built-up southern side of Tenerife. I had imagined the Canary Islands differently! And then there were those high-rise vacation complexes! What kind of people were vacationing here?

“Listen, Francesca, where are you taking me?”

“Stay calm! We’re not there yet!”

We walked over three kilometers along the coast, passed a small fishing village called La Caleta, and finally stood at the edge of a gorge. In the hinterland, we could see a bizarre volcanic landscape and a high plateau reminiscent of the Grand Canyon.

The gorge was covered in sparse, primeval-looking vegetation. Huts with palm-thatched roofs were scattered about, the sea crashed its waves against white sandstone cliffs, and there was a small pebble-covered beach. After walking a few meters down the

gorge, the nightmare of the vacation silos was already forgotten, and we plunged into another world. The poorest people had the most romantic spot! That was divine justice!



The next morning, I walked around the cliffs to the next cove, where there was a bit of a sandy beach, and threw myself into the waves. For nearly half an hour, I splashed around in the cold water and couldn't get enough of body surfing.

In the middle of the beach was a platform built of round, black volcanic stones, on which stood a teepee made of palm leaves. A wild drumming boomed out continuously, and you could see an older, gaunt little man drumming himself into a frenzy, like the animal from *The Muppet Show* over his drum set.

After my swim, I took a walk up the hills and reached a banana plantation, where I got the idea to snatch a few fruits for breakfast. But it turned out that it wasn't all that easy to find ripe bananas here, since they were always harvested while still green.

A worker with a machete was roaming through the plantation, cutting down useless shrubs. I wished him a good morning and told him bluntly that I was looking for breakfast. The man nodded and led me to a suitable spot, where he cut off pounds of bananas for me.

"Oh, thank you, I think that's enough! I can't possibly carry all of these!"

"You're still young and strong!" the man laughed and went back to his work, while I huffed and puffed my way off. When I finally reached the first huts, sweating with my haul, Manuel suddenly stepped out of one of them.

"Manuel, you're here too?" I asked stupidly and immediately seized the opportunity. "You'd surely like a few bananas!"

"Man, I'm sick of bananas! Come on in first—the coffee's ready."

The hut belonged to Edison, a Brazilian, who greeted me warmly: "Would you like some gofio for your bananas?"

“Gofio? Qu’est-ce que c’est?”

Edison handed me a bag of some kind of flour: “Just mix it with the bananas. Here, add some milk too!”

“Mmm! Not bad!”

There was coffee, and I settled back comfortably and enjoyed the view of the waves. Finally back by the sea! But I didn’t feel entirely at ease in that spot. And when I went for a walk again a few days later, I suddenly saw two Guardia Civil officers observing the “freak village” through binoculars. I figured that I’d quickly find myself trapped here in the gorge, and that if the police were already watching, there’d probably be a raid soon.

In La Caleta, there was a bar where many of the freaks went later in the day to have a beer, play pool, or hang out. There I met a guy from Bavaria named Mark who claimed he could surf: “Up north there’s a good beach, Playa del Socorro, near Puerta de la Cruz.”

“And how much does a used board cost?”

“Maybe around 300 DM, if you don’t want junk. But here you need a wetsuit if you’re not used to the water. That’ll cost you another 250 DM or so.”

I had enough money for the board, but not for the wetsuit. The whole thing was damn expensive, and pretty impractical, too, having to lug a board around like that!

I told Mark about Nias, and how the guys there zoomed along the coral reef at over fifty kilometers per hour in seven-meter-high waves.

“That’s the best sport there is!” Mark said, explaining a few things I needed to keep in mind: “Look, this is how you hold the board.” He gripped the table’s edge with both hands. “And when you feel you’ve got enough speed, and just before the wave breaks, you jump on!” He hopped onto the table in one leap, sending the beers and glasses tumbling all over the place. “And then you’re off, man!” he yelled, and everyone stared at him. “This is more than just a sport—it’s a philosophy!”

That’s exactly what I thought!

When I called my parents the next day, my mom told me she’d finally taken the plunge and had just booked a flight and a hotel in Puerto de la Cruz ten minutes earlier. I was relieved that the visit was still happening after all, and that it hadn’t fallen through because of my spontaneous departure and Dad’s good-naturedness: “Well, see you in two weeks, and don’t be afraid of the flight!”

I set off before dawn. The moon cast a pale light, and down on the beach a campfire was still burning, around which four figures were huddled, presumably waiting for morning. In the next cove, you could already hear the old man’s drum.

A bus headed toward Puerto de la Cruz, and for the first time I caught sight of Mount Teide, Spain’s highest peak. The elevation changes the road had to navigate were enormous, and as soon as the bus crossed the pass onto the island’s north side, it was enveloped in fog, and the sparse vegetation gave way to lush greenery. Suddenly, the island took on a completely different character and seemed almost like a large

garden, for the trade wind clouds were bringing rain here, and the volcanic soil appeared to be fertile.

From the stop where the bus driver let me off, a narrow road sloped steeply down to the coast and finally opened up to a view of a beach covered in black gravel: Playa del Socorro²⁸ ! Rough surf crashed against the shore, and although I was a good swimmer, the sight made me uneasy. A red flag fluttered in the wind, and the only person to be seen on the beach was a muscular athlete who was rapidly doing over fifty push-ups, working on his abs, and sprinting across the beach before finally diving headfirst into the waves. But even he only ventured a few meters from the shore, and you could see the current tugging at him. I realized I certainly wasn't fit enough for this beach yet, because this was where the fun ended, and you had to know what you were doing.



The next few days I slept in a nearby plantation, ate fruit, and started my fitness training. It turned out that the first day had been particularly rough, because the

²⁸ Spanish: Danger! Help!

surf had calmed down a bit in the meantime and a few surfers had shown up. I watched them for hours and could hardly wait to have my own board.

One morning, just as I had finished washing my clothes and spread them out on the rocks to dry, a Mitsubishi Pajero suddenly pulled up. Two men got out and started examining the rocks on the beach. The older of the two pointed to a few of the larger ones, which the other then loaded into the car. Since I had nothing else to do—and thus time to do something for my karma—I asked if I could help.

“You speak Spanish, but you’re not Spanish!” the older man stated matter-of-factly. He was probably around sixty years old and had a rather pleasant face.

“I used to live in Germany,” I replied.

“Then we can certainly speak German,” the man said and asked what I was doing here.

“I want to learn to surf and am just checking out the beach.”

“And where are you staying? There aren’t any hotels here.”

“Oh, somewhere. It doesn’t really matter to me!”

“I see!” The man looked out at the sea for a moment and seemed to be thinking. “I live in La Orotava, which isn’t very far from here. If you’d like, you can come with me.”

“Sure, why not? Thanks for the offer!” I gathered my things and got in the back. “A wave...,” I thought.

The car pulled up in front of a large, old townhouse, and we began unloading the stones. We entered a small hallway, where I spotted a sculpture of the Archangel Michael in a wall niche, went down a flight of stairs, and found ourselves in a sun-drenched garden. A cocker spaniel greeted us excitedly, a fountain was splashing away, and a trumpet tree was exuding a heady, sweet scent. The stones we'd brought served as borders for the flower beds, from which lush vegetation sprang forth: strelitzias, rubber trees, avocado, orange, and lemon trees, and magnificent bougainvilleas that wound their way up from the first-floor gallery to the roof of the house.

"I'll treat you to a drink first," said the man, leading me to the first floor, through the rather German-looking kitchen, and out onto the white-tiled terrace, from which one could see part of the old town, the sea, and the cloud-shrouded Mount Teide.

"You have a lovely place here," I couldn't help but remark, "in such a large estate, there's surely always something to do. I used to work as a gardener for a short time myself."

"And what do you do now—are you in college?"

"So to speak. But I don't go to college—life is my school!"

"I see, life! And your parents—what do they say about that?"

"Of course, they're not exactly thrilled. But I've been on the road for over three years now, and they can see that I'm not going under and that I usually end up in pretty

nice places. I guess they see it as my wandering years. My father has also come to visit me here and there; he's always very interested. By the way, in ten days they're planning to fly to Tenerife, and they've already rented a room in Puerta de la Cruz."

"If you'd like, you can stay here in the meantime and lend Alejandro a hand. I have to go to Namibia in three weeks and want to have the garden and a few other things in order by then."

"May I ask what you're doing in Namibia?"

"I'm shooting a film for the BBC and doing a documentary on the country."

"Aren't you afraid I might steal from you? You don't even know me yet!"

"I think I'm pretty good at reading people! I used to study psychology."

"You're a psychologist, a producer, and what else?"

"Brain surgeon—that's my actual profession. I also write books. But never mind that. You can call me Klaus."

He showed me my room, which was under the roof and accessible via a steep ladder. It had its own bathroom, a window overlooking the garden, the sea, and the volcano, and was completely paneled in wood.

After I'd spent a few days with Klaus, he finally said, "You could do me a favor while I'm away in Namibia for seven weeks. You could look after the house, the garden, and Tibor. You have a library and paints at your disposal, so hopefully you won't get bored."

“Um, in principle I’d really like to do that, but I have to admit that I don’t have any ID.”

“You don’t have an ID? Why on earth not?”

“I don’t have one for religious and philosophical reasons.”

“Please explain that to me!”

“That’s a bit difficult. Let’s put it this way: everything has two sides. A passport gives you great freedom; you can travel anywhere, work legally, and won’t get in trouble with the police. With so many advantages, are there really no disadvantages at all?”

“I don’t see any!”

“I don’t believe I’m the person defined on that ID. My true self is beyond all definitions and limitations! To me, it’s a lie!”

“Well, so you don’t have a passport. That’s why you can still look after the house. Nothing can really happen in Orotava, and I have pretty good connections with the local police. But of course, you don’t have a driver’s license either?”

“Not really!”

“Then take it easy when you’re driving the Mitsubishi around.”

The next day I went to the airport and almost missed my parents, who were already sitting on the tour bus when I found them. It was a joyful reunion, especially for my mother, of course!

“So, you’re heading to the hotel now, and I’ll come visit you there tomorrow morning.”

At the front desk of the Hotel Florida, I was told that my parents were staying in an annex, and there I was given a message that they were currently in a restaurant. When I finally found my parents, they were in the middle of a discussion with the tour guide.

“We were promised a 5-star hotel, and now we’re stuck in an annex overlooking the backyard, with construction workers still all over the place making a huge racket. This is a scam!”

“I’m sorry, but the main building is full. I don’t understand how this could have happened either.”

I chimed in: “You’re welcome to come with us to Orotava. The house is big enough; you’ll have your own room and some peace and quiet away from all the tourists. Besides, it’s more practical anyway if you stay in the same house. Klaus even offered it to me specifically!”

My parents were so appalled by their hotel that they accepted the offer. They packed their bags and took a taxi with me to Orotava.

“Is this where you live?” My parents could hardly believe it when they stood in front of the house.

“Good afternoon,” they said politely as the door opened, “we’re terribly sorry to bother you, but we really got ripped off with our room.”

“But please, you’re not bothering me at all. I was actually quite curious to meet you.”

“Oh, how lovely it is here!” my mother exclaimed as she stood on the terrace and took in the view of the garden and the sea. Klaus showed them to their room, and as I lugged the suitcases behind them, I heard constant cries of delight.

We took tours around the island, with Klaus often acting as our guide. I went hiking with my parents, took a boat tour, and visited Loro Park, where there was, among other things, a dolphin show in which a trainer surfed through the water on the back of a dolphin; an underwater tunnel where sharks and rays swam around us; and the world’s largest collection of parrots. My parents paid me the rest of Grandma’s inheritance, and I was finally able to afford the surfboard and wetsuit I’d been longing for.

My first attempts, however, were pretty frustrating; I couldn’t even make it through the surf with the board. I hadn’t figured out the technique for diving under the waves yet, and after twenty minutes I was already completely out of breath.

A couple of guys from the neighborhood checked out the board. “Buena tabla!” they said, but they added that it would be tough for a beginner right now—the waves were still too high.

“You guys were in La Gomera the other day—how was it?”

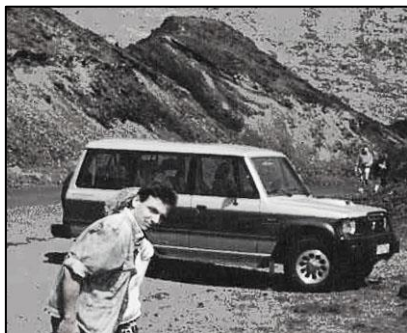
“Pretty good! There were waves over three meters high in Valle Gran Rey!”

Maybe I'll go to Gomera sometime later! Astrid and Daniela were supposed to be there, and it had been Columbus's last stop before he discovered America.

"Klaus, do you think my parents are more willing to accept my life path now that they've spent two weeks here?"

"No! To them, it's just a cup of coffee that will soon go cold again. They think you were just lucky. They'll have a hard time understanding that you made yourself ready and open to receive such gifts of fate in the first place. Their measure of success in life is different."

Soon after, he set off for Namibia, and I drove him to the airport. He left me some money for food and small errands, and I drove to La Caleta first to get away from the bourgeois world.



I often went to Playa del Socorro and was slowly making progress with surfing; I even managed to ride the waves lying on my stomach, riding ahead of the spray. I spent a lot of time in the library, set up the drum set in the room of Klaus's oldest son, did some painting, and

wrote to old buddies in Germany: Check this out, I'm sitting in a millionaire's villa right now!

I received the first letter from Gerret, in which he wrote that he wanted to come by soon because he was getting bored out of his mind in Germany. He also shared a little anecdote about how he'd lost his bike:

“Uli just got back from Asia and showed up here Thursday evening... the three of us rode into town, chained our bikes together in front of headquarters, and started drinking like there was no tomorrow... Uli had a bag full of nails, I had a hammer with me, so I was able to keep myself busy by hammering those nail heads into all sorts of places, which in turn elicited some interesting reactions from the barkeepers....a certain Volker had joined us and deliberately bombarded me with various tequilas, without having any himself...in the end, the new day had long since dawned, we were sitting at Wigger on Kaiserplatz in front of the freshly tapped beer, and I had the brilliant idea to go pick up the bikes. Dead drunk, I stood at HQ, had already unlocked the bikes, and was just realizing that it can be difficult to push three bikes at once: then some guy came up—I certainly wouldn't recognize him again—said, “You've got three bikes, give me one,” and I gave him mine and didn't think twice....until the guy on my bike had shrunk to the size of an ant on the city horizon: that's when it suddenly dawned on me—MY BIKE IS GONE: it was a real downer, pushed the remaining ones to Wigger, went into the bar, poured my beer into the ashtray in front of Uli & Katja, and then went straight home. Well, well, I basically gave the bike away, and I had to think that I surely had that guy in Tenerife to thank for it, who

had written to me shortly before: "Screw this junk like a bike and a stereo—what's this crap worth in the face of death?" Hey, champ, you see, I'm following the unsolicited advice of a younger guy (cit.) and ridding myself of my earthly shackles...

The gloomy life in Aachen is the life of the settled person in general and of the German in particular, and as such, it's a mind-numbingly shitty compulsion to repeat... unimportant... nothing is more important than everything else.... I think I'll be coming to Orotava soon. See you..."

When Klaus was finally back, I headed to La Gomera. I immediately noticed that the island had a completely different character than Tenerife, a bit more laid-back and not quite so ravaged by "progress" yet. The drive took us through the rainforest and finally over endless switchbacks into the deeply carved, palm-covered valley of Valle Gran Rey. I lugged my surfboard from the little village that was simply called Playa to a beach called Playa del Inglés, sat down in the sand, and studied the waves.

This probably wasn't a particularly good spot for surfing. The waves were high enough, but they broke very steeply, leaving hardly any time to ride them. Besides, it might be difficult to find a good spot to camp where I could leave the board unattended, since a massive cliff rose up not too far from the beach. But a feeling told me that I was in the right place here anyway, and that Valle Gran Rey was a good spot.

I just slept on the beach for the time being, and early in the morning at low tide, I jumped into the waves. It took

a while before I found the right position on the board and could build up enough speed to really ride the wave. If I was too far back, the wave would just lift me up and I wouldn't catch it. If I was too far forward, I'd dip the nose into the water and flip over. A few days passed before I could at least ride the wave on my stomach without any trouble, which was already a lot of fun—unlike body surfing, I was able to use my body to break free from the wave's vortex, giving me more of a feeling of flying.



Once, as I was trudging a bit further along the coast, I came upon another cove after some scrambling, though it had only a coarse gravel beach. There was an overhang on a rock face that had been extended into a sort of cave with a small stone wall. Remnants of palm fronds and bamboo were scattered about, and I immediately thought this would be a nice spot for a hut. I built a platform about 1.50 meters high in front of the cave, gathered sticks and palm fronds, and constructed

a roof. I lined the floor with beach mats I'd found: my little surf hut was ready!

From the little village of Playa, a dusty track ran along the coast, past a small, shallow beach called Baby Beach because children could swim there safely. Then you reached Vueltas, a small town where the harbor was located. A few yachts bobbed idly in the water, and the sight of them made my heart race. To sail to South America on one of those! But only one yacht looked quirky enough that you could imagine being taken along on it: an old wooden boat, a bit smaller than the others. It seemed to me as if it came from another time.

A dusty track led from the harbor around the cliffs, and I came to a cove with a dark sandy beach, over which an imposing rock face arched, featuring several small caves, in front of which some crooked palm-leaf structures were meant to provide shade from the sun. A few long-haired nudists were visible, children were playing in the sand, and the muffled rhythm of a pita drum boomed from one of the caves. I took a refreshing swim first and then sat down in the hot sand to dry off. "Yoo-hoo!" I suddenly heard behind me, and when I turned around, Daniela was standing in front of me.

"Astrid is still in Germany right now because she wants to take care of a few things there."

"And you guys want to sail to South America, too! I think that's pretty brave of you!"

"Maybe we can even sail together or meet up somewhere in South America. Most of the yachts haven't arrived yet, since the best time is supposed to

be between October and January, so there are still four whole months until the season starts.”

“I need to find a cool guy who’ll take me along even without a passport. That’s definitely not going to be easy. But if it’s meant to be...”



When I got out of the water with my surfboard the next morning, there was someone with long hair sitting on the beach who had apparently just finished meditating. On a whim, I asked him if he’d like to have breakfast with me.

“Yes, I’d love to!” he replied politely. “I’ve seen you around a few times and have been wondering where you always go with your board.” His name was Vicente, and he owned a bar in El Medano. “I used to surf too, mostly in Playa de las Americas, back when it wasn’t so crowded.”

“And you don’t surf anymore?”

“Unfortunately, only rarely. I once got caught in waves that were too high and almost drowned. Since then, I hardly surf anymore—I got scared.”

“You can surely give me a few tips.”

“Sure!” he said, and first showed me a dry drill where you jump up from a push-up position in one go, as if you were about to step onto the board. “You should do this a hundred times a day, because there’s only a brief window of opportunity you have to use to get onto the board. When there are no waves, swim up and down the bay with your board so you’re fit enough when they come. If you have to dive under a wave, push it underwater with your arms first and hold the board tight with your legs. As soon as you can, brake with your arms so you don’t get pulled back.”

He examined the underside of the board and pointed out the problem areas to me.

“It’s a good board, maybe a little too small for you as a beginner. You already have some small dents here, but luckily no water has gotten in yet. If you press on it and water comes out, you have to let it dry out first, otherwise the foam will disintegrate. My sister is coming by in two days. I’ll call her and tell her to bring some resin and hardener from my workshop. You can use that to repair these spots. It’s like a bike repair kit!” he grinned.

Don’t worry about what you’re going to eat—life is more than just food!

Now I even got my surf instructor and special varnish for my board!

When Vicente talked about surfing, his eyes lit up: “I love it so much, you know. But I don’t go out in the big waves anymore. The sea can be treacherous!”

That night, there was a party on the beach with a big bonfire. Quite a few people had brought drums and other musical instruments, as well as cakes and other food. I recognized a few faces by now, and I quickly felt like I belonged to a big family again. There was a lot of drumming and noise until, late into the night, a girl suddenly began to sing in a loud, clear voice, and the murmur of the crowd grew quieter. Many of the people were now just gazing dreamily into the fire or watching the moon, which appeared shining over the cliffs and casting its magical light. I knew most of the songs. They were Indian chants or other hippie songs that I had also sung in Beneficio. However, the lyrics weren’t exactly the same, so I often had to stop singing along with her, only to pick up the thread again later. Besides, I didn’t stand a chance against her voice and was hopelessly drowned out by my own croaking. But when she realized I knew it differently, she’d sometimes soften her voice and try to adjust to mine.

“Fly like an eagle, fly so high! Circling the universe, on wings of pure light...”

“Have you been in India for a long time?” she asked me later, when we happened to be sitting next to each other.

“I’ve never been to India. I learned the songs in southern Spain, in a village where people live in teepees.” She had a sweet face. “And you?”

“I lived there for almost two years.”

“That’s a long time for a European! Isn’t that pretty tough?”

“Yeah, sometimes it is! Especially when you’ve got long bus rides ahead of you and you’ve just got diarrhea again!”

My attention was suddenly diverted when I recognized the owner of the wooden yacht, who was just taking a leisurely drag on a joint. “Excuse me...” I sat down next to him, but unfortunately the joint went the other way.

“Isn’t that old boat in the harbor yours?” I asked rather bluntly.

“Yes, that’s mine!” he replied, introducing himself as John.

“And where are you headed?”

“Maybe to the Caribbean. But first I have to go to England and scrape together some money. And what do you do?”

“I have a surfboard and am making my first clumsy attempts.”

“Surfing? I once surfed on my boat when I got caught in a storm—on ten-meter-high waves!”

I was seized by sheer horror: “No sailor’s yarn?” But John didn’t seem like the type to spin legends.

The huts are burning

Even if it's difficult, you can still attain the great knowledge; don't expect it to fit in here, for that is impossible. Just as the rich, out of love to God's riches, penny by penny, grain by grain, so that they may attain the quality of "wealth" from the ray of (God's) wealth. Wealth says: "I call to you from this great wealth. Why do you draw me here, where I do not fit? Come to this great wealth!"

*Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi,
Fihi ma fihi*

A man whom I had seen sleeping here on the beach for quite some time was cleaning up the party area.

"You're doing a great job!" I couldn't help but remark.

"Yeah, gotta do something for my karma!" he replied with an unmistakable Dutch accent. "If I'm good to the beach, it's good to me." He held up a cookie package that was still almost half full, smiling.

"Well, if you're hungry, come by my place. I live a little further up the coast."

"Thanks for the offer, maybe I'll come visit you sometime today!"

He showed up in the afternoon, just as Vicente was visiting, and introduced himself as Hans.

“Man, this is such a great spot,” he said, shaking the roof structure, “I’ve got to build something like this myself.”



We walked along the coast together, and Hans pointed to a spot where he would have liked to build his hut. But Vicente and I made it clear to him that that would be sheer madness, because a wave could easily wash him away at night if the sea got rough, and besides, there was a high probability that at some point a rock would fall from the overhanging cliff and hit him on the head. We showed him another spot, and I explained what I thought would be the best approach: “You use roughly this floor plan, build a stone wall maybe 30–40 cm high, tie poles together on top of it like a tent, and then lay palm fronds over them.”

“But isn’t that a little small? I really like that you can stand up straight in your hut. It’s annoying if you have to crawl around all the time!”

“My spot is also more sheltered from the wind and has that overhanging rock, so I need less material. But do whatever you want—it’s your hut!”

In high spirits, Hans began marking out a massive foundation with stones, and spent three days just building his little wall. Busy as an ant, he began hauling in building materials, at first only early in the morning and in the evening so that as few people as possible would notice; but after a week, he was already too annoyed to be considerate anymore and just wanted to get it finished at some point.

We often ate our meals together, because I had a wind-protected fire pit and some dishes. We usually had lively conversations while doing so.

“There is such a thing as ‘crazy wisdom,’” Hans said once, “People who possess this wisdom are called the fools of God. They follow God’s will, even if they seem crazy and unreasonable to other people.”

I told him about the book I was reading at the time. In the story, after countless detours and adventures, the hero finally found the woman he had long envisioned in his dreams. But tragically, he could not live with her, since he could not leave the protective forest and she could not live without the open sky. So they lived for a time at the edge of the forest, but eventually parted ways because the situation was untenable, and the woman married another man.

“She is his Shekinah²⁹,” said Hans, “but why can’t they live together?”

“Perhaps because in this world polarities cannot unite; it can never be day and night at the same time, even though the extremes are in reality one...”

While we were still philosophizing like this, a police officer suddenly climbed around the cliffs, and a chill ran through my limbs. Did he want to see my ID now?

“Building huts is prohibited here. You have ten minutes to throw all that junk into the sea,” the policeman said harshly, turning to Hans, “that one back there—is that your hut?”

“That’s mine!” Hans, who had celebrated its completion just three days ago, admitted through gritted teeth, and angrily blurted out: “You’re not making any money off

²⁹ Hebrew: inherent. Kabbalistic: The Bride of God. There are various interpretations: She is God’s inherent feminine pole, similar to Vimarsa in Buddhist mythology. The moment the feminine principle became active toward creative manifestation, the masculine part experienced itself as the self (Eve, who gave Adam the apple to eat). In another interpretation, the Shekinah is the radiance of God’s invisible glory, whose flame encircles God and is the reason for the creation of the angels, the throne of God, and the human soul. She is also a symbol of the soul, which suffers in this world due to its limitations, has become susceptible to sin, and must eventually return to God. A further interpretation posits that at the creation of the world, when the original unity dissolved into polarity, the female half was separated from its male counterpart. Every soul therefore possesses a twin soul. Both souls are interdependent in their development and will reunite at the end of time. “O mankind, fear your Lord, who created you from a single soul and created its mate from it.” (Sura 4:1)

us, are you? We'd be better off living in those nice new apartments!"

The police officer didn't reply, but just made another impatient gesture with his hand: "I'll be back in half an hour. By then, you'll be gone!"

"How do you think they found out?" Hans asked.

"Who cares? Maybe a fisherman told them, or someone saw you walking around with all that junk. They just know what's going on in their town. The main thing is, he didn't ask to see my ID!"

I packed up my things and figured I deserved one last fireworks display to wrap things up. I set my hut on fire and watched as the flames spread quickly, devouring the palm-thatched roof with a crackling roar.

"Why are you doing that?"

"Before the cops do it! At least this way I get something out of it!"

Hans set his hut on fire too, and you could see his heart was breaking as he did it.

"It's just a hut, Hans!"

"Maybe we shouldn't have done that. Let them set the huts on fire; maybe it'll make them realize what they're doing."

For me, that was a signal to leave, because rather than looking for a new spot again, I decided to head to a place where the surfing was better.

I went to Fuerteventura and stayed there for six weeks on a gorgeous beach, where I had my first successful

rides on the board. The water here was turquoise, fading into azure, and formed a sharp contrast to the reddish earth of Lanzarote and Isla de Lobos, which seemed close enough to touch in the clear air.



When I returned to Playa del Inglés, who did I see hopping out of the water naked?

“Hi, Gerret!”

Gerret came running, shouted “Yippee!” or something like that, hugged me, wet as he was, and threw me into the sand with joy. Hans came running over too, and the three of us rolled around on the ground like three playful dogs.

“Have you heard yet?” Hans asked, “they’ve cleared out the Hippie beach. We’re not the only ones whose hut burned down.”

I went to the Hippie Beach and saw only blackened rock walls and a few small objects that had escaped the flames. The only hippie I spotted was the old man from

La Caleta, the tireless drummer, rummaging through the rocks and building a little wall.

“Did they clear out Caleta too, since you’re here now?” I asked. At first, the old man didn’t answer, as if I’d interrupted him from something terribly important. Then he muttered something like, “They can’t just burn everything down all the time...,” and went back to stacking stone upon stone. I marveled at his energy. He was surely over fifty, had gray hair, and was almost nothing but skin and bones. He barely had any teeth left, but he possessed a wiry stamina. He didn’t seem much of a conversationalist, though, so I set off on my way back.

The Valle-Bote commented on a similar expulsion in later years as follows:

No sooner had the battered flower children managed to dry their clothes somewhat than the combined Spanish forces of law and order arrived and made it unmistakably clear once again that the days of free-of-charge tourism were now over on Gomera as well. The Hippie beach was forcibly cleared, all residents were chased away, and all the huts were burned down.

People did rail against the authorities, railed against pogroms and fascism, and suspected that the Spanish troops withdrawn from Iraq were now being deployed to wage a sustained war against international hippiedom, but none of it did any good. As they did every year, the displaced hippies grumbled their way to Playa del Medio in Santiago and waited until the cops had cleared out.

Only Angelo was lucky. He fell in love just in time and was thus able to weather the hard times of constitutional hippie persecution in a decidedly comfortable apartment at the beach.

It looked pretty sad afterward in Valle Gran Rey’s last economic enclave. Smoke blackened the caves, charred the remnants of a

carefree, alternative way of life, and littered the beach with all the little things people couldn't take with them in their flight.

Thankfully, such displacements on Gomera don't last nearly as long as we always hear about in other crisis zones around the world. No one was locked up in camps, no one was seriously expelled from the country. A few weeks in Santiago, then they trickled back in—the Love & Peace crowd from better times.

Once the worst damage had been repaired, the blackest rocks cleaned, the caves made “habitable” again, and even the famous Poop Rock was fully functional once more, our Hippie beach returned to its vibrant life.

I happened to run into Karsten at the harbor, and he told me where I could find Daniela. She was now living in a house with Christa and Moni.

The door was open, but a curtain hung in front of the entrance. “Come on in, everyone,” a voice called out when I knocked.

“Oh no, look at that! We were just talking about you!” Daniela exclaimed as I entered the apartment, which consisted of a small kitchen, a table with three chairs, a sofa, and an adjoining room where a baby could be seen lying on a bed. Two women were sitting at the table, obviously Christa and Moni. I knew one of them only vaguely by sight; the other was the girl who had sung the Indian chants by the campfire.

“You were talking about me? Why's that?” I asked, and sat down on the sofa for lack of any other options.

“Moni told us about the evening when she met someone who also knew all those Indian songs, and I thought that must be the guy I lived with in the caves of Granada.”

She chattered away cheerfully, offering me some gofio porridge to try now and then and telling the story of how the Guardia Civil had cleared out the cove. While Daniela was talking, Christa went into the other room and calmed the baby, who had started crying. Moni grabbed the guitar and strummed quietly to herself. Strange, she seemed so different here than by the fire, so delicate. What beautiful, delicate hands she had!

“But the best part is,” Daniela startled me out of my thoughts, “we found a yacht!”

“Who’s ‘we’?”

“Moni and me! We’re setting sail in a week!”

Moni looked up and smiled: “Yes, Danny, the wide world is calling us!”

“So a new team has formed again,” I said, and while I was still asking where Astrid had gone, and Daniela replied that Astrid was still in Germany and she had written to her about the planned departure, Moni began to play louder and sang: “We are the wild women, running with the wolf...”

Christa and Daniela joined in, and I would have loved to sing along because I liked the melody, but this song was apparently reserved for wild women only. As they struck up the next song, which poked fun at the weaknesses and atrocities of men—who seemed to be both a woman’s dream and her nightmare—and I shifted back and forth on the sofa, growing increasingly nervous, a blond, long-haired, bearded old hippie entered the house and asked if he could use the oven now.

“Sure, Phil, go ahead!”

He slid two baking sheets of dough into the oven, rolled a cigarette, winked at me, and sat down next to me. “Wild women, huh?” he grinned. “But who are the wolves supposed to be—us, maybe?”

I learned that Moni composed the songs herself, and that Phil had owned his own boat in the Shetland Islands.

“Do you know the boat the girls want to take?”

“Yeah, it’s the best one in the harbor right now!”

“Isn’t it still too early? I heard the season doesn’t start until the end of September.”

“They might still run into a storm. But the boat is practically unsinkable. If the weather gets too rough, you just close the hatches and wait for calmer weather. Even if the boat were to capsize, it would right itself like a roly-poly toy thanks to the lead keel. The trip to England is much more dangerous because the coast is close by there and you have to maneuver. The westerly wind can then push you into the Bay of Biscay or onto the cliffs of Brittany.”

“And you want to go to South America, too?”

“Maybe! Or to the Caribbean! Or somewhere else!”

The skipper also showed up, a former pharmacist named Kai, who had sold his shop and bought the boat instead.

“Tomorrow I’ll fill the water tanks,” he said, “450 liters! Then I’ll get some extra canisters so we’ll have about

550 liters. That should be enough! Of course, we'll have to wash and bathe with salt water."

White horses

*„Quel malheur donc peut-il me survenir?
Il n'y a pas de désert, pas de précipice ni
d'océan que je ne traverserais avec toi.
A mesure que nous vivrons ensemble ce
sera comme une étreinte chaque jour
plus serrée, plus complète! Nous
n'aurons rien qui nous trouble, pas de
soucis, nul obstacle! Nous serons seuls,
tout à nous, éternellement... Parle donc,
réponds-moi."*

*Gustave Flaubert,
Madame Bovary*

I stopped by quite often over the next few days; I was rooting for the two girls and would, of course, have loved to go with them right away. The day before departure, I found Moni alone in the house and accompanied her on a few errands. She wanted to call Germany, but it took a while before she got a line. As we sat there together waiting, I suddenly felt quite strange, as if I were facing a great loss, and I was sad, even though I didn't know why.

I helped the girls carry their things to the boat and looked inside a yacht for the first time in my life. My eyes lit up; I climbed around on the deck, felt the sailcloth, stared up at the mast, sat here and there, and felt an endless longing for distant places. In addition to the four of us, Phil and the skipper of a neighboring yacht also came on board that evening. We all sat outside on the seating area at the stern, listened to the lapping of the water, and watched the stars reflect on the sea.

“Here comes Astrid!” Daniela suddenly shouted and jumped up, “Yay!”

It echoed back: “Yay!”

After receiving Daniela’s letter, Astrid had immediately booked the first flight she could get and had apparently already arrived in Gomera that morning. Of course, the two old friends would have preferred to sail together. Kai was clearly not particularly thrilled about it. But good-natured as he was, he seemed to be letting himself be persuaded when the other skipper intervened: “You’d be crazy, Kai, if you did that. Four people are actually already too many for the boat! Not only would you have to ration water right from the start, but it’s also way too cramped. You’ll be on the voyage for over a month, maybe even longer! For a short trip that would be okay, but all the way to South America? That would be pretty reckless!”

Kai, who had never made the crossing himself, was inclined to agree with him, even though it seemed to hurt him that he couldn’t take Astrid along. Daniela, however, still wouldn’t let it go and had to keep arguing.

“Kai, you’re the captain,” the skipper interjected once more, “you’re in charge and shouldn’t even be getting into arguments on your boat.”

“I’ll come with Astrid,” I said, “we can meet up somewhere in South America!”

“Yeah,” Moni said, “there’s a gathering at Machu Picchu at the end of November. We could try to meet up there.” As she said this, she looked me in the eyes, and I suddenly felt so strange. And while the matter was still being discussed, I sank silently into Moni’s eyes, eventually stood up, sat down next to her, and took her in my arms.

“Get a passport and then come with Astrid,” she said.

Chasing after a woman and even accepting a passport for it? Why did I have to fall in love with her today of all days, when she was leaving me again tomorrow? Maybe I’d never see her again!

“Are you very sad that I’m leaving?”

“Well... I’m happy for you, because I think it will take you a long way. It’s an experience I’d love to have myself.”

“That’s why I came here from India, you know. Because of this very journey.”

I didn’t want to say anything else, just feel her closeness.

Astrid found a spot in a ravine near Argaval, while I had been sleeping in the bushes at Baby Beach for quite some time—a place with many hidden bush caves accessible through tunnels. Recently, there had been

frequent checks at Playa del Inglés, and the police were confiscating passports from people who had simply slept on the beach. Now you weren't even allowed to sleep on God's earth anymore! Every fruit tree was already privately owned! You couldn't drink from the rivers anymore because they were poisoned! And without money or a passport, you had fewer rights than an animal and had to hide in the bushes! But patience—eventually, all that lovely money wouldn't buy you anything anymore!

I often went to visit Phil, who was now living on John's boat; John had left for England as planned. Next to the boat lay the "ZigZag," which belonged to a Frenchman who had also gone away. Julio, an Italian, was now looking after the yacht. He had music playing constantly and a few "drunken sailors" on board. Astrid and other people also came to visit often, and the two boats became a popular hangout, which the harbor guards and the Guardia Civil watched with suspicion.

"They don't understand anything anymore," Phil quipped, "first they burn down the shacks, and suddenly they have all these hippies right under their noses and can't do a thing about it."

Here, too, history repeats itself, and we may once again quote the Valle-Bote:

For ten years, the "Swagman" languished in the harbor of Valle Gran Rey, while its merry owner preferred to "sail the seas" at the bars of local sailors' pubs. Passing mendicant monks found a roof over their heads; guests on board would occasionally set the cabin ablaze; and the unpaid harbor fees had long since far exceeded the value of the wreck.

Now the time had come: The “Swagman” had sprung a leak and was sinking deeper and deeper into the harbor water at its mooring. Panic! If the ship sinks in the harbor, it becomes very complicated and expensive to salvage the wreck. So: Tow it out and anchor it offshore.

A concerted effort by the Club de Mar in a strong southerly wind and as darkness fell. Hopefully, the old tub wouldn’t sink in the middle of the harbor entrance while being towed out. It didn’t. Only when the anchor was dropped in the bay in front of the finca did it lift its stern one last time and sink into the sea—soon to be an attraction for “Fish & Co.” as a wreck for divers. A huge sigh of relief in the harbor.

Astrid and I rented a dinghy and paddled out to sea to go fishing. But since we were complete beginners, we waited in vain for an hour.

“Astrid, I can’t get Moni out of my head—what can I do?”

“Just wait and see!”

“It might be difficult to meet the two of them in Peru!”

“Don’t you want to get a passport after all? Is that really so important?”

I stared at the water, my mind a jumbled mess. I headed into the rainforest of Gomera for three days to figure out what I wanted to do next. The chances of me making it to Machu Picchu without a passport and with little money were slim, let alone together with Astrid. Besides, I was also putting the person who gave me a ride at risk, and so this philosophy was no longer just my private affair. But did I really want a passport again? On the other hand, did I want to rot away on Gomera?

I wrestled with myself and prayed to God to show me the way. Finally, I let fate decide, and shortly thereafter I bounded down the slopes: America, here I come!

I was able to earn the money for the crossing to Tenerife working for a German named Werner, a former doctor from Berlin whom I had met through Gerret. Because there was a German consulate on Tenerife where I could get a new passport. But now that I had a new passport, I might as well visit my parents and old friends and maybe scrape together some money—after all, I hadn't been back to Germany in over two years!

"Hi, it's me, your son! ... How are you? ... Yeah, me too. I want to get a passport and could come visit you at your new house. ... Yeah, that's exactly the problem! Won't you pay for my flight? 500 DM should be enough. ... Great! Thanks a lot! ... Poste restante at Santa Cruz! ... All right, I'll check in again. Bye!"

When I went to visit Phil again, Amie and Purva were just on board—two English women from London. Purva had grown up in India, which is where she got her name and her exotic charm.

"We want to go to Tenerife too," she said, "but on Brad's sailboat. Don't you want to come along? Brad wanted 10,000 pesetas for the trip, and if you come along, it'll be cheaper for us too."

Brad was a South African whose boat was moored right next to John's. He had two cats on board, one of which had already jumped over twice and shamelessly pooped on Phil's bunk, whereupon Phil had flung it overboard in a high arc. But as she paddled around in the water, snorting, he'd taken pity on her and rescued her with

the dinghy, which the poor creature had clung to in panic, nearly causing it to sink.

Phil blew the antique foghorn in farewell as we chugged out of the harbor the next morning and then slowly made our way along the coast. There was no wind yet, but as soon as we passed Playa de Santiago and Tenerife was already in sight, the wind picked up, and not too far away, white foam could be seen on the waves.

“Let’s ride the white horses,” said Brad, and trimmed the sails. He put on his oilskins and advised us to do the same. But I figured a few splashes wouldn’t hurt me.

No sooner had we emerged from the lee of Gomera, however, than the boat heeled over at nearly 45° and plowed across the water in great leaps. Huge breaking waves came from the windward side and seemed to want to bury the boat beneath them. But as if by a miracle, it kept climbing over the crest of the waves. Sometimes, however, the upper edge of the wave broke and hit the boat almost broadside, causing the entire yacht to shake. In an instant, I didn’t have a single dry thread left on me and started shivering slightly from the cold and excitement. I hadn’t imagined sailing to be this thrilling, and I wondered what it must be like to get caught in a real storm. This was just a strong wind, after all!

A pod of whales appeared, and the sea calmed down a bit. Brad let me take the helm for a while, and I was thrilled. That was exactly what I needed—a mobile home! Europe in turmoil? Civil war in Africa? Inflation in America? Bye, folks; I’m off to surf in Oceania!

In the evening we reached Los Cristianos, and I caught the last bus to Santa Cruz. The very next day I was at the consulate, which issued me a replacement passport within a day. Only the money from Germany was taking its time.

In memory of old times, I stood by the roadside with my flute and otherwise passed the time with walks. One evening, a redhead spoke to me in German, claiming he was the best pizza maker in Tenerife and that his name was Michael. He took my cardboard box of spare change and started hustling passersby, and it turned out he spoke excellent Spanish.

“This is such a lousy job!” he complained after a while and asked if I wanted to come with him to his place in San Andrés. So we took the bus and drove to this backwater 6 km away, where Playa de las Teresitas was also located—an artificial beach whose white sand had been specially shipped in from the Sahara. Michael’s apartment was right on the water, had three rooms, but was practically empty except for a few scattered pieces of furniture.

Michael chattered almost nonstop, but otherwise seemed like a good guy. As he placed a tiny paper ball of heroin on the table, rolled a small tube, and smoothed out a piece of aluminum foil, he told me his life story. “I’ve been living here for five years. I built up the pizzeria, drove a big car, had a beautiful wife... Here, take a hit,” he interrupted himself and held the stuff out to me, “one day I found my wife’s diary and read in it how she’d met a rich man, and other things of a particularly intimate nature. My vision went black, and when my wife came back, I kicked her out immediately

and threw all her stuff out right after her. She lives with her mother now; you can see the house from here.” He pointed through the window into the darkness, but I was too tired and uninterested to bother going over to the window.

“Soon after that, I got into trouble at work, and before long I didn’t have any friends left either. As long as you’re doing well, they’re there, but as soon as you’re not... Come on, have another smoke!”

But I’d already had more than enough and was hanging out in blissful peace. I got my own room, the former bedroom, where Michael understandably didn’t want to sleep anymore. The next morning, he gave me the second house key, and we made plans to meet up that evening at a bar where he wanted to wrap up a few deals. Buying, downsizing the package, reselling! And that all day long!

Just before we got to the bar, a pretty hooker approached me: “Hey, sweetie, how about the two of us?”

“I don’t have any money,” I made up an excuse.

There were probably a dozen people hanging around outside the bar—prostitutes, dealers, freeloaders, and others. Across from the bar was a building under construction where people kept disappearing. You could hear murmuring and sometimes see lighters flashing. Michael wasn’t there yet, so I sat down in the bar and had a beer. An old man who exuded the aura of an aging flamenco singer asked me for a light, rolled a joint, and good-naturedly gave me half. I watched the scene in silence. The Black people seemed to have the

situation under control. They probably smoked too, but clearly knew their limits. They also had a stronger sense of community and seemed to watch each other's backs. Many of them wore gold chains, and every so often someone would come up and try to palm off another piece of jewelry on them because, once again, he had no money. Most people just stood around somewhere, waiting for something to happen or for an opportunity to broker a deal or score something else. Half of my pack of cigarettes had already been scrounged away when Michael finally showed up.

"What a load of crap," he said, "I'd already got seven pellets together when suddenly this huge black guy comes jogging toward me. I'm thinking, what does he want, and before I even realize what's going on, he smacks me right in the face and all the pellets roll out onto the street. Now I have to start all over again! Listen; go ahead and drive up, you've got a key!"

Early in the morning, I was woken up by voices. Michael had brought a Black guy along and was talking his ear off. "Come on, cough something up," he pleaded, sometimes in a pleading tone, sometimes in a demanding one, but the Black guy seemed like he was about to fall asleep standing up.

"Come on, I always gave you something when you didn't have anything!"

But the Black guy lay down on the sofa and was already snoring loudly within a minute.

"What a pig," Michael said angrily, taking off his sneakers, "he's got something, but he won't give anything away. He only thinks of himself!"

“I’ve never seen feet like that before,” I remarked, shocked and disgusted, when I saw Michael’s sweat-soaked, furrowed, cracked, and stinking feet.

“I’ve been running around like an idiot the whole time,” he said, wiping his eyes, “things didn’t go well at all today!”

By early afternoon, he was back on his feet: “Man, I’m so hungover!”

“Want something to eat?”

“Hey, you’ve done a great job!” he said when he spotted the set table. “And the place is even tidy!” He poured himself some coffee and nudged the Black guy with his foot: “Come on, get up, Blackie!” A long, drawn-out yawn was the answer.

After Michael had been talking to the black guy for nearly twenty minutes, he finally gave in and prepared an alu foil. Shortly after, both of them were gone again. “Make yourself comfortable and keep your fingers crossed that things go better today.”

What was supposed to go better? It was the only thing on his mind! I just wondered how this system worked at all. Why didn’t everyone just buy from the cheapest guy?

Late at night, Michael came back. He had a little something to smoke, but he was pretty depressed: “I need help! I can’t go on like this anymore!”

“Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Yeah, maybe you could write a letter to my parents. Not that I’m using heroin, but to say I’m sorry I haven’t been in touch for so long.”

“They know your handwriting. Wouldn’t it be nicer if you wrote the letter yourself?”

“I can’t get it together! I’m not good at stuff like that!”

But I kept pushing him until he finally pulled himself together and wrote the letter. He also got some photos of his child, gave me both, and the address as well.

“When I’m in Germany, I’ll mail it.”

“Yes, thank you!”

“When I go back to Gomera, I’ll stop by here. You can decide then if you want to come along.”

“If you want to do that... I need someone to look after me while I’m recovering. For at least three weeks!”

“We’ll see if we can work that out!”

“Gomera is definitely nice. There isn’t so much of that filth there...”

He’d been given 100 kroner by someone, but thought they were worthless, just like Italian lire. But when I exchanged them for him at the bank, it turned out they were worth over five thousand pesetas.

“Man, this will get me back in business. This is a chance!” he said happily.

“Well, if you say so! I’ll try to be back soon. If something comes up, I’ll write to you.”

“I’ll be waiting for you...”

Habib

Betrayed! Betrayed! A false ring of the night bell, once answered — it can never be made right.

Franz Kafka, A Country Doctor

A somewhat strange feeling, being back in Germany. It was my homeland, and yet it wasn't. An old book full of memories, some of which were still vivid. It was nice to see my parents and old friends, but also a bit unreal. What could I really tell them? I gave them a few pieces, from which they pieced together a meager puzzle. Understanding was something else entirely! But what could one really understand about another person? One always imagined a lot, but did one really know anyone?

Klaus, who was currently staying at his apartment in Hamburg, found out that I was back in the country and asked if I'd like to go to Tunisia with him.

Nice offer, but what would I do in Tunisia? Michael, Astrid, and Moni were waiting!

I agreed on the spot, even though I had no idea why. Did I see it as a wave I should ride, or could it be that I wanted to impress my old buddies and parents? "Look at that, I've just been invited to Tunisia by a millionaire! Bye, take care, I'm off again!"

We drove to Genoa in a Mitsubishi converted for desert tours. "Habib" was the name of the ferry that took us to Tunis in first class. We spent the evening not far from

ancient Carthage, and Klaus, who knew his way around here well, showed me a few sights, told entertaining stories, and treated me to tea in an old Tunisian café. On the way back to the hotel, his toupee got caught on a tree, and his ears turned bright red as he hurried to fix it. I pretended not to notice, even though I could barely contain myself. Oh, vanity! One should thank God when He ridicules it in such a humorous way. It could be punished in other ways, too!

In just one day, Klaus raced along dusty tracks to the island of Djerba, where he spent his vacation almost every year. It consisted mostly of sand and date palms, and once again one marveled at how adaptable people were. Klaus had rented a little cottage not far from the beach, in front of which a few horses were searching for the sparse blades of grass. Construction was in full swing everywhere, and as far as the eye could see along the beach, vacation homes and hotels stood side by side. I was deeply disappointed, because I had imagined it to be completely different and more romantic.

There wasn't much to do. We went on a few outings; otherwise, I read, played my newly acquired Tunisian drum, and when I found two crossword puzzle books, I started solving two of the puzzles out of sheer boredom. That, however, upset Klaus, and one of our somewhat one-sided discussions about ownership began again: "Those are my crossword puzzles! And you'd better ask me before you use them!" This was followed by a monologue in which he explained to me everything he didn't like about my attitude, and once again I was the not particularly remorseful listener. Yeah, yeah, he was right! His crossword puzzles! How

did I even end up doing something like this? Michael and Astrid were waiting, and I was sitting here solving crossword puzzles! And I'd even fallen into a kind of servitude, because everything here belonged to Klaus! Moni must already be in South America by now.

I skimmed through my finances: 350 DM left, the remainder of the money that had actually been earmarked for the return flight to the Canary Islands. Klaus drove me to the travel agency, and I was lucky—the money was enough for the bus and the ferry. The bus was stopped on the way to Tunis and inspected by grim-looking gendarmes, and a strange feeling welled up inside me, even though this time, after nearly three years without one, I had a passport again. I almost felt guilty that I now had nothing more to fear from these henchmen!

The “Habib” took me back to Genoa, and I made it to the Swiss border as a stowaway on an overcrowded train. I was lucky, and from there I hitchhiked back to Aachen in a day.

Wolfram was back from Egypt and told me about his diving course on the Red Sea and his plan to get his diving instructor's license after finishing his psychology degree. I listened enthusiastically, because that was exactly the idea! Offering diving trips on a yacht, with a few surfboards in tow! Just the thing for my gypsy lifestyle! And if I ever had a family, the kids would surely have a good life too!

Wait, why was I suddenly thinking about a family?

A few days later, it dawned on me. Moni was the first woman I'd met with whom I'd wanted to have a child! A little surfer...

I worked at a mail-order company, sticking addresses on packages. A monotonous job, but my mind was elsewhere anyway. Yet the longer I worked, the more pangs of conscience I felt. Wasn't I betraying all my ideals? Hadn't God freed me from the yoke and slavery? Wasn't I now serving the vile Mammon again?

Then I drove a truck down to Madrid with a friend. My main job was to keep my buddy awake and roll joints. He already had dark circles under his eyes because he'd been doing this job for quite some time. Even though he was a pretty good driver, I didn't feel entirely comfortable with it.

And then I went back to laying crane rails! I was doing exactly the job I had hated so much four years ago and never wanted to do again! For a long time, it had been the very symbol of slavery to me! Now I drove to Rostock and was shocked by the ugliness of this city, with its square, practical, functional architecture. The industrial area looked as if a war had just raged here. We worked in sleet and, with temperatures around freezing, installed the iron with our bare hands.

Wolfram told me the prices for the diving courses, and I booked a flight to Cairo for mid-January. I wrote a letter to Michael and told him that unfortunately things had turned out differently, but that I had sent the letter to his parents. I didn't feel particularly good about it, but... that's just how life was, right? And where was Moni?

I'd written to Gerret in Gomera and asked him if he'd heard anything from her or if he could find out her parents' address, because, idiotically, I didn't even know her last name. But I waited in vain for a long time. I still had a week of work left, and after that, it was time for a cozy Christmas with the family. I'd saved up enough money over the five weeks to take a few courses and see if I even liked diving. But actually, I'd also saved enough to stop by Gomera first and pick up Moni's trail while it was still fresh. At the very least, I had to find out her parents' address, and there were surely a few of her friends there who knew it. I booked a flight for January 1st.

A day later, I received a letter from Moni!

"You've surely already heard about Danny's and my odyssey," she wrote, and: "I'm currently here on Gomera, penniless and without a plan, and when I found out your address from Gerret, I thought I had to write to you right away!"

I felt hot and cold at the same time and didn't know where to turn. A gift from fate! Perhaps a reward for having been so persistent and wanting to go to Gomera just for her address! If only I had already been there!

The last week of work dragged on agonizingly slowly. But finally, the day of my departure had arrived. Once I arrived in Tenerife, I made my way to Santa Cruz. Even though I wanted nothing more than to finally be in Moni's arms, I had to find Michael first. I couldn't have borne the thought of finding my own happiness while leaving Michael to suffer in his misery.

But he no longer lived in his apartment, and I walked past the bar a few times without seeing him. That evening, I sat down inside for another hour and waited for him over a beer, even though I wasn't sure if I even wanted to see him—he would have been a burden to me by now.

A police car drove slowly down the street, and several of the touts crowded into the bar. A few people recognized me and greeted me. A bald Black man with a gold chain and a long scar on his cheek slapped my hand in greeting and asked in a subdued tone if I wanted to buy something.

"I'm looking for a friend, a German guy with short red hair."

"Yeah, I know him. But I haven't seen him in a while."

"Do you have any idea where he might be?"

"Puede ser arriba!"

"Que es arriba?"

The black man held his wrists together, as if he were wearing handcuffs.

I didn't feel great when I realized once again how selfish I was, but to be honest, I was glad I'd missed Michael. I should have been here earlier...

The bus had broken down and stopped just before the valley of Valle Gran Rey. Instead of waiting for a replacement bus like the other passengers, I set off on foot because I was too nervous to sit there idly. Far down on the coast, you could see white foam edging the

waves, and I knew immediately that this meant high waves.



A red BMW drove past me, and I stuck out my thumb. But the car seemed to be full already and drove on by. Someone looked back at me through the rear window, but the glass was reflective, and I could only make out the face vaguely. Wasn't that Moni?

A little later, a couple of tourists stopped and gave me a ride to Vueltas. High waves were crashing onto the shore, and I could already imagine what it must look like right now at Playa del Inglés, where the waves were still a bit higher than at this point along the coast.

Phil came toward me with an empty bread basket and threw his arms around me. "Hello, old fellow," he said and pulled me into the nearest bar. We had a beer or two or three to celebrate, and I found out that Moni had gone to Vallehermoso with Martin.

"Who's Martin?"

“A Swiss guy she met about three days ago who lives in Vallehermoso.”

“Her new boyfriend?” I asked anxiously.

“Don’t worry, son. I don’t think it’s serious...”

I hurried to the Hippie beach, where Astrid and Daniela were supposed to be, eager to hear more news. They were sitting among the rocks with a few other people and were thrilled to see me.

“Then tell me about your odyssey,” I asked Daniela once the initial greeting commotion had died down. And Daniela recounted how, shortly after they’d set sail, Kai had approached both of them and then gotten angry because he didn’t stand a chance with them. And how they’d both come down with hepatitis and eventually ended up in Cape Verde. From there, they’d gone to Germany, but they hadn’t lasted long there.

“And Moni has fallen in love with Martin now?” I asked shakily.

“I’m not really sure,” Astrid replied, “we all love each other, don’t we?” She looked at me more closely and noticed a reddish rash on my neck.

“Must be from the nerves and the unfamiliar sunlight,” I said.

“Yeah, try to relax first. You just got here from Germany and need to get used to a quieter life again.”

She was right! I tried to relax as best I could and jumped into the water. I played in the water with Janni, Karen’s eight-year-old son, and spun him around in the air by his feet. Just like his mother, the boy had long blond

hair; he was a pretty lively little guy and couldn't get enough of the fun.

A few of the local kids and teens were now surfing at Playa Beach, where the waves hadn't even been a meter high during my last stay. I watched them enthusiastically and decided to pick up my surfboard from Werner tomorrow, no matter what happened with Moni. A silly surfer saying I'd read in Corralejo popped into my head: "My girlfriend said she'd leave me if I don't give up surfing. I'll miss her!"

Early in the morning, I continued up the valley and looked for the house where Daniela, Astrid, Phil, Karen, Janni, the Italian Julio, and Moni were supposed to be staying, and which everyone simply called "the temple." I knocked on the yellow door and heard Astrid call out that the door was open. With a pounding heart, I stepped inside and found myself in a large room with a door leading to the kitchen, where Astrid was apparently busy preparing breakfast. On the floor, two mattresses were arranged around a low table, on which stood overflowing ashtrays and glasses.

There she was! With eyes still half-asleep! Next to her lay a guy with short, dark blond hair.

"Hello," Moni said, not very loudly. I walked over to her without saying a word and took her in my arms. I felt that nothing much more than a croak would have come out of my constricted throat anyway, so I decided to keep my mouth shut!

But it was just a ritual, a lie of varying magnitude! For her, the situation in front of Martin was embarrassing; she felt like she was being watched and was probably

wondering how much warmth she could afford to show me at that moment and to what extent she was allowed to comfort me. This encounter could hardly have been more painful! To feel her closeness and warmth and at the same time sense this distance! How often had I dreamed of this moment, in what beautiful colors had I imagined it! And now this caricature! I felt so stupid that I had to smile again and even managed to shake Martin's hand in a friendly manner.

The atmosphere was slightly tense, and we rolled a cigarette to start with. Luckily, the other residents showed up soon after, and I didn't have to fill the sacred silence with some silly small talk. I was kindly almost completely ignored and could indulge in my self-pity in peace and grapple with my fate. At some point, Moni took her coffee and disappeared into a neighboring room. When she still hadn't reappeared after five minutes, I got up and followed her. A quick glance at Martin showed me that he apparently had no objection.

She was sitting on a bed, laying out a kind of Native American tarot deck, the Medicine Wheel.

"Well, what do the cards say?" I asked, sitting down next to her.

"Oh..." she said simply, looking into my eyes searchingly and feigning a guilty conscience.

She seemed moved that I still harbored such feelings for her after so long and despite our brief encounter, and ran her hand comfortingly through my hair. I trembled inside at her touch and could no longer bear being so close to her and yet not close enough.

Farewell

*I bemoan the wounds of Fortune
with weeping eyes,
for the gifts she made me
she perversely takes away.*

*Carmina Burana,
Fortuna Imperatrix Mundi*

Completely numb, I stumbled down the long path to the beach. A lump sat in my stomach, and my view of the street was blurred by tears. I never would have dreamed in the past that I could suffer so much because of a girl, and I was furious at the entire female gender for being able to treat men so badly. I thought of Michael and of how many drunks I'd met on my travels who'd ended up on the street because of a woman. Over the next three days, my frustration kept finding a way out. Sometimes tears would suddenly run down my cheeks, or a sudden rage would seize me and I'd kick the nearest defenseless trash can. For three days, I barely ate or slept and was hardly good for anything. I didn't even go get my surfboard and spent most of my time on the beach, apathetic and withdrawn, staring out at the sea and watching the endless play of the waves.

I stopped by Werner's place to pick up the board. Werner was lying on his bed with a terrible hangover, while Per, the Swede, was just making breakfast. To my horror, the board had sustained some serious damage—Werner must have smashed it against the

rocks. Kind as Werner was, he offered to pay for the damage. But I waved him off. How was he supposed to do that?

I patched up the scratches with candle wax for the time being and washed my sleeping bag, which I'd left here and which was now in just as sorry a state as the surfboard. But none of these matters could really upset me at the moment; my head was still filled with thoughts of Moni.

When I got back to the house with him, Martin had also returned from Vallehermoso. Everyone was busy again coming up with ideas for the upcoming festival. Janni enthusiastically told Karen about his first attempts on the surfboard, and Karen thanked me for looking after him. Then she leaned over toward me, gently placed her hand on my knee, and said in a soft voice with a smile, "If you can't be with the people you love, love the people you're with!"

I grinned back slightly, but automatically found myself looking at Moni. Admittedly, the two of them were a cute couple. They were currently rehearsing a number in which Martin managed to cross his legs behind his head while playing guitar, while Moni sang along in a headstand. They probably complemented each other very well, since she loved to sing so much and he played the guitar so well.

So I pondered to myself, wavering back and forth between jealousy and goodwill toward Martin. "I look in the sky, see the colors," Moni began to sing, "...gonna set you free, set you free..."

Suddenly, I became fully aware of my own selfishness. I wasn't suffering because I loved her, but because I wanted to possess her! What was stopping me from loving her? Why wasn't I happy for her that she was with a guy who seemed so nice, who might even be a better match for her?

I felt the healing slowly set in, and when the food was served, I had an appetite for the first time in a long while.

"You seem to be feeling better again," Daniela remarked as I grinned to myself for no apparent reason.

"Yeah, thanks! It's about time!"

"We could set up a sweat lodge at the festival too," someone suggested.

"Maybe I can take care of that," I said.

"You? Didn't you want to go diving in Egypt?" asked Astrid.

"I changed my mind. What was I doing in Egypt anyway? I'm glad to be back here, and there's no way I'm going to miss your festival!"

I sold my return ticket to Germany and asked my mom to give the travel agency a quick call and cancel the flight to Egypt. "There are also dive centers on Hierro and Tenerife," I said, "so I don't need to fly all the way to Egypt for that." Later I found out that there was also a diving school in Playa de Santiago, and I decided to stop by there after the festival.

One day I was sitting on Playa del Inglés with a few people and my surfboard. The waves, however, were

certainly four meters high, and surfing was out of the question³⁰. On the side of the beach where I was talking to Peter about UFOs—which were supposedly found here, and which Peter claimed to have seen hovering over Hierro—the sandy beach gradually gave way to rocks. Suddenly, to my astonishment, I saw one of the swimmers who had ventured a little further out drifting past us. Peter noticed him too and jumped right up.

“Man, get out of the water—you’re drifting toward the rocks!” he yelled. The man turned around and realized with horror that behind him was already a rocky shore, where the waves were crashing furiously against the rocks. Desperately, he tried to swim against the current, but he didn’t stand a chance and began calling for help. By now, half the beach had noticed the man, and a woman began screaming hysterically, “My husband, my husband!” She ran into the water but was immediately knocked off her feet by the spray and had to be held back by someone because she was completely losing her mind. The man had apparently realized by then that no one could help him and, after his initial panic, remained calm. He seemed to be a good swimmer and realized he had no chance of making it safely through the rocks, even though a few idiots were shouting at him to try. He was probably waiting for a good moment to dive through the belt of waves, but one giant breaking wave after another crashed in front of him, and mountains of spray up to three meters high rolled over him.

³⁰ The height of a wave does not necessarily determine its danger, but rather how it breaks, what eddies form, and what currents prevail.

I couldn't bear to stand by and watch any longer. With my board, I was probably the only one who could help him. It was pointless to try to swim out to him, but maybe I could make it through the waves, and if the man managed to do the same, I could offer him my surfboard as a lifeline.

"If you drown, God will reward you!" I thought, and jumped into my wetsuit, strapped the board's leash to my foot, and walked as far as possible to the other side of the beach to buy time before the current drove me toward the rocks. I started paddling, but only managed to get closer to the roaring maw of the breakers. The mountains of spray swept me off the board every time, and since I sank because of the high air content in the spray, it took too long before I had my board back under me and could paddle on. I was also spun around so often that I could barely feel which way was up and which was down. Soon I realized it was impossible with the board and turned back. By then, however, the first rocks were already between me and the beach. I clung to the board, barely managing to hold on, and shot toward the shore with the spray. A rock loomed in front of me. I closed my eyes and thought of God.

Miraculously, I missed the rock and finally reached the beach, gasping for air. The man, however, had managed to reach the open sea in the meantime and was incredibly lucky that a fishing boat happened to be passing by and pulled him out of the water, pale as a sheet.

"Glad you made it out!" said Gerret, who came to meet me.

“The first time I’ve ever been afraid of the sea,” I replied, lying down on the warm sand and taking quite a while to process the experience. One thing made me incredibly happy: that I had thought of God at the decisive moment!

I started a diving course in Playa de Santiago, the first four basic lessons of which took place in the pool of the only large hotel on Gomera.

Soon the first open-water dive took place. We went down to a depth of 14 meters, and at first it felt like quite an adventure to be so deep in this foreign element. But pretty soon all the gear around me started to annoy me—the mask, the wetsuit, the weight belt, the BCD, the tank, the plastic thing in my mouth, and the bubbling. And just floating leisurely around and playing the voyeur wasn’t my thing. The idea of doing this as a job, plus having a few tourists in tow, didn’t particularly appeal to me. Even if I were to own a boat later on—or perhaps precisely because of that—it meant having too much baggage. It was too much of a hassle and didn’t align with my philosophy of “less is more!”

I kept mulling it over, and a wave crashing against the rocky shore gave me the push I needed.

I now had a passport. I still had some money. “I’m outta here,” I told myself, “I’m going to Nias! I still have four months to get in shape before the season starts and the ten-meter waves show up. Maybe I can do it: the wave tunnel!” I now knew what I wanted! And what I didn’t want! I went to the dive school and canceled my last dive. Then I drove to Valle Gran Rey and bought a ticket

for a flight in a week. In high spirits, I returned to the temple.

Habu, the muesli freak, taught me “Hey Joe” on the guitar, and for a whole hour I strummed away until suddenly Karen started singing: “Hey, hey, Klaus, where you go with that surfboard in your hand? Hey, hey, Klaus, where you go with that surfboard in your hand?”

“I’m goin’ down to Nias, Karen, I wanna ride on big big waves...,” I sang back, but lost my rhythm on the guitar, and Janni started shouting: “I also wanna go to Nias, mummy. Let’s go together!”

My plan was to work for a while longer to build up a small financial cushion, which I could perhaps use to do a little trading in Southeast Asia. A new school year in the school of life, I thought to myself! Phil had told me how he’d bought batik in Bali and then resold it on Ko Samui in Thailand, and I had something similar in mind. I could still remember a failed deal involving blue sapphires that I’d bought back then with Dietrich in Bangkok, and I basically knew I probably wasn’t much of a businessman, but how else could I make ends meet down there? I had to leave Indonesia after just two months because of the visa and needed money for travel expenses!

I went back to laying crane rails, because I couldn’t make as much money any other way as I did on construction sites. This time I was slaving away at a juice factory near Wesel. But it soon started snowing, so the whole construction site was flooded, and my colleague was so upset that he called it quits after four days. “We’ll pick it up next week!” he growled, and I started

thinking it over and felt a pang of guilt. It was a lousy job! Sure, the world wouldn't end if I installed a few rails, but I didn't exactly feel like I was doing humanity any good.

By chance, I saw offers for one-way tickets at a travel agency, and another thought crossed my mind. My passport would soon be valid for only another six months; after that, they wouldn't let me back into Indonesia. So I had two options: apply for a new passport, keep working, and get caught up in the general madness, or set off right away, with little money, no return ticket, but with a clearer conscience.

I booked a flight to Kuala Lumpur, quit my job, and told my astonished parents.

"I thought you wanted to stay down there longer," my mother said.

"Yeah, let's see how long the money lasts. Everything's pretty cheap down there, even the tickets," I explained truthfully, though I wasn't thinking about a return flight, but rather that with the thousand marks I might make it there just long enough until the high waves appeared.

No Name book shop

The will of the mind to dominate is a sacrilege against life, and that is why the sacrilegious are struck by life's vengeful backlash. This sentence will remain true as long as humanity exists, and it will have proven itself terribly true when degenerate humanity finally perishes from the rationalistic disenchantment of life.

*Ludwig Klages,
The Cosmogonic Eros*

The plane began its descent, and I recognized palm trees, houses, and the dome of a huge mosque below me. The bus took me into the sticky heat of Kuala Lumpur, where things were quite hectic, so I hurried to catch the first bus to Penang. The speedboat took me to Medan in a few hours. Upon entry, a female customs officer remarked that I was actually a day late, since my passport would no longer be valid for another six months, and asked if I had a return ticket. "No, but enough money to buy one!" I replied, and received the stamp. One thing was clear: I wouldn't get through customs a second time with this passport!

In the evening, I caught the bus to Prapat and was surprised at how quickly I arrived at Lake Toba. The trip used to take almost three times as long, but back then there were neither these well-paved roads nor these buses, in which I even had enough room for my long

legs. I took a boat to Tomok on Samosir Island, which lay in the middle of the lake³¹. It had become loud and bustling here, and I set off immediately, walking north along the road. The landscape was just as beautiful as before, though there were now far more bungalows along the shore. The lush vegetation and the intense green of the rice terraces remained, but the peace and mysterious atmosphere of the past had vanished. Here, too, the dark mystique had given way to a bright rationality.

A young man on a decrepit moped pulled up beside me and asked in English where I was going.

“To Tuk-Tuk-Timbul,” I replied.

“You’ve already passed it; this is Ambarita!”

“Oh, really? Well, never mind! I quite enjoy walking through this countryside.”

“Don’t you want to come with me? I have something to rent, too.”

“Why not? I can always take a look.”

I strapped my guitar case to my back, and then we sped down the road, past curious water buffalo and screaming children. Finally, we stopped at the “No Name Bookshop,” a newly built house in Western style, behind which stood a large old Batak house—whose

³¹ A lake in northern Sumatra, about two and a half times the size of Lake Constance, surrounded by numerous volcanoes and a destination for Western visitors since the hippie era.

traditional roof, once covered with palm fronds³², had since been replaced with corrugated iron. The Batak house was quite cozy, the lakeshore had a sandy beach, and there were no tourists to be seen far and wide. When my host noticed that I liked it, he asked me how much I was willing to pay for the hut, whereupon I named a price with which he seemed satisfied.



Inside, my little Batak house had a sort of raised veranda from which one could look out over the green hinterland and the mountains of Samosir. I usually ate my meals in the house with Hendri, his young wife, and the two boys who lived there and did odd jobs in exchange for room and board. One of them was still in school, and once I had become somewhat friendly with him, the boy confided in me that his father was dead and his mother was very poor. Bashfully, he asked me if

³² The roofs of the Batak houses are curved upward at their ends and are said to resemble buffalo's horns.

I would go to school with him and pay his tuition for two months.

“How much is that?”

“3,000 rupiahs³³ a month.”

“Well, sure, I can!”

So the next morning I went to Ambarita, but had to wait for Eppy since he was still in class. While waiting, I struck up a conversation with a few friendly teachers and learned that an Indonesian teacher earned about 80 DM a month and had to support an entire family on that.

“Couldn’t you pay the tuition for half a year up front?” the English teacher asked me. “Eppy’s mother is really very poor and has several other children to care for.”

I didn’t need to be asked twice and paid the amount, which seemed ridiculous to me. If only they knew that I had earned as much in four days of assembly work as they did in just under a year! And if everything was already so cheap for me here, how much did the industrialized countries pay for their raw materials? As if colonialism had been abolished!

Eppy was incredibly happy about the news and invited me to his mother’s village. Together we drove into the mountains of Samosir. The original rainforest was no longer there, just a thicket of young growth. Only in some valleys could you still see a few of the old giants, which gave me a rough idea of what it had once looked like here. We had to cover the remaining ten kilometers

³³ Back then (1995) approx. €1.20

on foot, and the further we moved away from the road, the further back in time we seemed to go. There were no TV antennas here yet, and when we finally reached the village, the roofs of the Batak houses had regained their traditional palm-leaf covering. The village street was a single mass of mud. Pigs and chickens were running about. Mud-smearing children came running up and surrounded us, curious and shy. I was probably the first white person they had ever seen.

A bony old man waved to us warmly and invited us into his house. Word of our arrival spread quickly, and soon the room was packed with people and the entrance blocked by an excited crowd of children. Coffee was served, and I introduced myself to the villagers using the few bits of Indonesian I had learned in the meantime. There was a lot of laughter, and the men smoked, rolling one cigarette after another. About fifty people watched my every move. They admired my nose and my skin color. They said their skin was dirty and rubbed their arms as they spoke. Eppy had to translate for me that I liked brown skin, which was noted with delight. They listened spellbound as I told them that in winter there was ice and snow in Germany, and the trees had no leaves then. They wanted to know if there was a technique to prevent the nose from growing wider. I was overjoyed that my nose was finally receiving the recognition it deserved and told them that God had made it that way, so no special measures needed to be taken. When the food was served, the hut emptied out a bit and most of the children were shooed away. Everyone was thrilled that the guest enjoyed the food and seemed to be feeling at home here.

I met Eppy's mother, in whose old Batak house we spent the night. I woke up before dawn. A few pigs and a rooster were already active under the house, and from the next room I heard the mother saying her prayers between sobs. What a kind woman! She had been so happy when she heard that the school fees had been paid! It was a strange feeling and a bit embarrassing for me that someone was so excited about my meager twenty marks!

From time to time, tourists came into the bookstore to buy or borrow books. Once, three Germans showed up, and Hendri asked them if they'd be interested in magic mushrooms. But the Germans were hesitant and fearful, so I stepped in and encouraged them.

"A real specialty—you've got to try them!" I said. A small business opportunity for Hendri and perhaps a good experience for the three of them, because the mushrooms were truly magical. "I'll keep you company too," I said, and we finally ordered four mushroom omelets for the next day.

The omelets tasted good, but had only a fairly mild effect. Disappointed, we wandered around the area and eventually ended up at my cabin. Hendri seemed embarrassed by the lack of effect and apologized to us by rolling one joint after another.

"He surely didn't mean to rip us off, he was just being cautious with people who don't know the effects," I said in German so Hendri wouldn't understand.

"It's okay, I'm high enough!" said one of them, gazing with tiny eyes at the calm water of the lake.

Two days later, I set out with the other boy to look for mushrooms. I told him I wanted to buy an omelet from him, but the boy had to show me where he got the mushrooms and how many he'd use for one. It turned out the little mushrooms were very easy to find if you knew the right spots where there was enough moisture and buffalo dung. We gathered two handfuls while the buffalo watched us search, curious and chewing their cud. I ordered the omelet for the next day at noon and reminded him again that I'd like to watch him prepare it. But the boy reassured me: "If the mushrooms don't work properly, you don't have to pay for the omelet!"

The next day he called out to me: "The omelet is ready!"

"Didn't I want to watch you prepare it?" I asked, annoyed. The boy hemmed and hawed, and I felt bad about the tone I'd used with him—a tone the sensitive Indonesians were clearly not used to.

"How much did you use?" I asked, a little more gently.

"A handful," said the boy, making a vague gesture with his hand.

"All right. Well, bon appétit. May God bless me with insight..."

After just ten minutes, I felt the first effects and could tell this was going to be a rough trip. I immediately set off to find a quiet, nice spot, somewhere in nature where I wouldn't be watched. It was very hot and humid, and the effects of the mushrooms only intensified that feeling. It was as if the ozone hole were right above me! I stopped in the shade of a tree, but a few people were staring at me, so I kept walking along

the road by the lake. The effects were getting stronger and stronger, and panic rose within me. An overdose! The guy wanted to make sure the mushrooms worked and that he got his money, but he had no idea about the dosage!

All I could think about was getting out of the sun and finding a spot where there were no people, because I was already completely unable to communicate and didn't want to be thought of as crazy. The entire surroundings had by now turned into a living abyss. With great effort, I made out a path leading up a hill, stumbled my way up it, and just barely made it to a terrace with fruit trees. Under one of the trees, I sank down cross-legged and tried to calm myself. I would have liked to take off my heavy shoes, but I was no longer able to do so. A voice rang out from far away: "Ticket paid?" Another voice answered with a faint echo: "Yes, he can pass!"

Every consecration is now received; it is the deity itself that bestows it upon the initiate, whereby the soul of the mystic is the feminine half. The sacred wedding signifies a mystical transformation... but man only participates in it in a state of extreme pathos, a state that, measured against the sense of reality of the waking self, appears as its annihilation and therefore as death...³⁴

Let go of everything... do not try to understand anything or cling to anything... let go... allow the pain to be, do not try to escape! There is no escape! Look it in the eye! Focus on the voice that urges you to trust and remain

³⁴ Ludwig Klages, *The Cosmogonic Eros*

calm... the abyss... the Hungry One... a merciless horror deep beneath you... do not look... stay calm... do not be afraid... hold on to nothing... if you try to hold on, you will fall... have faith... now you feel it, you have your balance... you could now balance on a needle... the pure realms in the clear light appear before you... not yet within reach... the final gate is still closed... the final veil not yet lifted... the waiting begins... a long wait... it will be over soon...

With my wings spread wide, I prepared for a soft landing, but I kept my eyes closed for a while longer, for I knew instinctively that if I opened them, it would be as unpleasant for me as it is for a newborn who must leave the warm womb.

“Hello,” I heard someone call out. It must have been a couple of children, who were probably wondering why a European was sitting under a tree here for hours on end, not getting up even in the pouring rain. Completely exhausted, I opened my eyes and was startled by the ugliness of this world. Back in samsara, back in the world of change!

“Hello,” I heard again. As I stretched my legs, I managed to slowly turn my head, though I was still dizzy, and I saw three small children and a woman looking at me curiously from a distance. I smiled at them and raised my arm cautiously in greeting, as if I had to get used to having body parts again. They waved back, and the smallest child called out “Hello” once more and then began chattering at me in Indonesian, while the woman continued on her way. I thanked God that he hadn’t let me fall. I knew now: The abysses of madness were deeper than those of death!

I slowly stood up out of the mud, and the children laughed at me. I grinned back, and they told me all sorts of important things, to which I had to nod my head in agreement. Slowly, I walked back to the street, paying no attention to my right or left. My wet clothes steamed in the tropical heat. I was ashamed of my shorts and felt naked.

“Here’s your money for the omelet.”

“They were strong enough, weren’t they?”

“Please listen to me carefully. Leave the mushrooms to people who know the proper dosage. If you’d given an omelet like that to a tourist who had no idea, they would’ve gone crazy for sure. This is absolutely no joke!”

“Yeah, yeah, okay!”

It didn’t sound like he meant it very seriously; after all, that was a lot of money for him. But maybe he’d at least be more careful with the dosage in the future. Drugs like that really should be reserved for the shaman, who knows the necessary rituals and can provide guidance.

Sorake Beach

What is important for us is that the wizards and shamans here on earth can, as often as they wish, achieve “stepping out” of the body—that is, death—which alone can transform the rest of humanity into “birds.” Shamans and sorcerers may enjoy the state of “souls,” of “disincarnated beings,” which the profane attain only at the moment of their death.

*Prof. Mircea Eliade,
Shamanism and Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*

The trip to Sibolga³⁵ went surprisingly quickly. No dramatic winding roads like last time and the road got well paved. No vomiting, because the passengers had to stuff themselves with GadoGado³⁶ during the last stop and no children peeing in the aisle either.

There was a daily boat to Telukdalam. On the crossing, I met a nice German guy who was cycling through Sumatra. After we arrived, we first went to a warung for fried bananas for breakfast, and while we were sitting there, someone approached us and asked if we'd like to come with him to Lagundri and check out his guesthouse. The man didn't look unfriendly, so I rode

³⁵ A port city in northwestern Sumatra, from where ferries cross to the island of Nias.

³⁶ Vegetable salad with peanut sauce

ahead on the moped while Andi cycled the eleven kilometers behind me. I was thrilled to arrive at the place that had remained vivid in my memory for nine years and that had been, for me, the most idyllic spot on earth I could imagine.

Fifteen years earlier, human sacrifices had still been made there, and when I'd walked along the beach by the coral reef back then, I'd sometimes had the feeling that cannibals could burst out of the palm forest at any moment. The atmosphere had been mysterious and almost otherworldly, especially when standing face-to-face with the gigantic, ten-meter-high waves. An indescribable magic had emanated from everything, and the surfers I had met here had seemed almost like demigods. They had lived in another world and had eyes only for the waves, through whose towering tunnels they had raced as if in a dream.

But as expected, it had grown light here too; rationalistic disenchantment had destroyed the dark mystique. A road wound all the way around the bay; there were numbered entrances to the beach—"Gate 19," for example—and one guesthouse lined up next to the next. Of course, compared to European standards, this was still paradise, since at most the foundations of the houses were made of concrete. Otherwise, they were still nailed together from palm trunks and rough planks.

The bungalow was located pretty much at the end of the road. This part of the beach was called Sorake, which was really only of interest to surfers, since the water here was shallow and the seabed consisted partly of razor-sharp coral that stretched nearly a hundred

meters out into the sea and encircled the coast like a belt. At the end of the reef, the waves crashed, and since the coast curved here to flow into Lagundri Bay, wave tunnels—the so-called “pipes”—formed. Since the waves broke on the right side first, you could ride along them, and at this fantastic spot, for more than 100 meters!

My host showed me his broken surfboard and the scar he’d gotten when it snapped in two.

“If you pay for the repair, you can use it as often as you want,” he suggested.

“But can it even be repaired? I’ve heard that if the wooden strip in the middle is broken, you have to throw the board away.”

“Of course it can still be repaired!”

Maybe the Indonesians could fix it. After all, they couldn’t afford the Western throwaway mentality either. And as a beginner, I couldn’t handle the big waves where a patched-up board would be dangerous anyway.

“I’ll think about it,” I said, and rented a board for a day at the “Sea Breeze” losmen. A little monkey watched me as I got ready to surf. It let me pet it and clung to me with its cute little fingers.

The waves weren’t particularly high, maybe just a meter and a half. Too boring for most surfers. So, apart from three other people, I was the only one in the water. I managed the first wave pretty well, but tipped over when I tried to stand up on the board. But by the third try, I’d got the hang of it, and I rode right along the wave

for over fifty meters. I was thrilled! I'd been trying for so long, and here it worked on the very first day! What a fantastic spot! Here you could learn it in two or three weeks, whereas in Gomera you couldn't manage it in half a year because the waves were too steep!

I surfed until I realized I was on the verge of a massive sunburn and could barely feel my arms anymore. Exhausted but thoroughly satisfied, I let myself drift back to shore.

I saw other boards that had also been patched up and actually looked pretty solid. Certainly not for extreme conditions, but definitely okay for me.

"All right, have the board repaired," I told my host, and it turned out that the board was perfectly suited for me.

Since Andi didn't surf, he soon left again, because it was too touristy for him here, and he was annoyed by the countless children and vendors, up to twenty of whom would show up at the cabin on some days:

"Coconut bread?"

"You like bananas?"

"Hello, sir, fresh pineapple?"

"Souvenirs? Why not? I'll give you a good price!"

"Are you sure you don't want that nice fish?"

"Hey, my friend. Take a look at this lobster!"

A boy was selling used books, but unfortunately his backpack was filled almost entirely with trashy novels.

"The Odyssey of Odysseus, how much is that?"

“7,000 rupiah!”

“That’s pretty expensive! Do you trade books too?”

“It depends—what do you have?”

I showed him “Gulliver’s Travels,” and the boy didn’t seem very enthusiastic: “Not many people read German around here!”

“Well, anyway, 7,000 rupiah is too much!”

“I’m selling this book for someone else, and he wanted that price!”

“Then ask him if he’d sell it for 4,000 rupiah.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“And the Quran, how much does that cost?”

“6,000 rupiah!”

“Come back when you have different prices.”

I would have been interested in Odysseus—wasn’t I on an odyssey of my own? But the Koran was certainly not relaxing bedtime reading, and besides, he had nothing but junk.

The next day, the boy was back.

“What about the Odysseus—has it gotten cheaper in the meantime?”

“The man doesn’t want to sell the book after all.”

“Well, tough luck!”

“Don’t you want to buy the Quran instead?”

“Nah, I don’t think so.”

“5,000, and you’ll throw in your book too!”

“What, my book is only worth 1,000?”

“Nobody reads that kind of thing around here. Come on, please.”

The boy kept whining until I finally gave in.

“You’re sure to become a successful businessman one day,” I said as I handed him the book and the money. The boy grinned and walked off, and I stood there with the English translation of the Quran, which didn’t really interest me much. Some traveler must have brought it over from India.



Every morning at dawn, I walked along the coast to a relatively secluded spot where I had marked out a circular meditation area with coconut shells. I usually sat there for over an hour, focusing on my breathing, even though mosquitoes were starting to bother me and my legs were already aching after half an hour. The memory of the “flight” was still very vivid, and

meditation was more important to me than surfing, even though the addiction was slowly taking hold of me again.

The waves were now getting too high for me at times. The higher they got, the faster you had to ride along them to avoid getting hit by the spray. If you didn't make it, you'd get pushed far back and had to struggle your way forward again. Now, just as things were really getting started for most surfers, it was slowly coming to an end for me, even though the waves weren't that huge yet—it was only April. But then again, I hadn't grown up on Bondi Beach or in Waikiki!

My host's younger brother got me some mushrooms. They looked very mysterious, lying there on their large tropical leaf. As if charged with a special energy! The lady of the house prepared them for me, and I went to my meditation spot, this time wearing long pants and no shoes, said a prayer, and then sat down cross-legged, relaxed.

The wave swelled slowly. The mushrooms weren't as strong as last time. I could have stayed grounded if I'd wanted to. I could have kept my eyes open and surrendered to the simple sensory shifts. But I had spread my wings and lost the fear of losing my footing. I just needed to let go...

Soon you will enter the realm where pain awaits you. But you now know that this pain is nothing other than the evil deeds you have committed, which confront you in a different form. Since you have lost your fear and can look them in the face, you recognize this indescribable thing as your ego dissolving and thereby inflicting this

pain upon you—your vanity, your greed, your lack of love, and all your wickedness. You have sinned to the extent that you followed the reflection and betrayed your true self. It is nothing foreign that threatens and torments you there. That is why you need not fear it, and that is why you cannot escape it. You must look your true self in the eye, no matter how bitter it may be. You must let go of everything—everything that is not God. The more you glorified yourself before, the more you will now be humbled. The more you have puffed up your ego with possessions, knowledge, beauty, strength, and power—with everything that served not God but selfishness—the more it will burn! You must now give up everything and may believe in nothing and cling to nothing anymore, except the merciful God who can forgive your mistakes and give you the strength to endure the purification. But with the pain, your purity also grows, allowing you to endure the pain. You can even enjoy the pain and welcome it, for it brings you freedom.

Once all impurities have been burned away, the pain has centered you and led you to your core. You can now balance on the tip of a needle and thereby become capable of crossing the abyss, the abyss of being. Beneath you, the gaping maw will open, the Hungry One: negation that remains in existence! Hell! Suffering in the spirit! Negation of God's existence! For the souls who denied and sought to escape their true being, because they did not recognize it and feared it! Who had made God a companion to their ego, which they could no longer let go of, and to which they clung! The reflection of God, the reflection of light: fire! Negation that remains in being! You will see this abyss. There is

no true symbolism in this world for the mere inkling of this horror deep beneath you...

At some point I heard voices, but I knew that under no circumstances was I allowed to open my eyes. If I were to direct my concentration toward the mirror, I would likely lose my balance and fall.

The long wait began... The long, painful descent... Then it was over, and I slowly opened my eyes. Once again, the ugliness of this world startled me, even though I was in one of the most beautiful places on earth. I was disgusted to be back in my body.

My host suddenly came rushing over.

“How are you feeling?” he asked worriedly.

“I’m okay! Why do you ask?”

“People came to me and said you were here and had food poisoning or something, because you weren’t answering them. And a Japanese man had an accident here.”

“A Japanese man?”

“Yes, come on, get up! He’s lying back there.”

He pulled me up by the arm, and I staggered after my host, still a little dazed. Less than thirty meters away, a surfer was lying on the beach. He was deathly pale with pain, and over a dozen people were standing around him. A few Indonesians had meanwhile fashioned a stretcher out of sticks and were lifting him up with it.

“His hip or thigh is broken!”

I looked out at the sea and shuddered at the sight of the waves. How on earth could anyone surf out there? Were they crazy?

I was so lucky! It was a miracle that all those people had left me alone! Otherwise, I might have fallen too, and that would have been worse than a broken bone!

It was a stormy day and it was raining. The water was dark green, and every now and then lightning flashed down. The palm trees groaned under the onslaught of the wind, and white foam danced on the waves. Besides me, there were only two other surfers out there, two friends of the Japanese guy who'd had the accident. It was incredibly exhilarating to surf in this weather, and we cheered every time one of us caught a wave. A green mountain, its crest covered in foam, pushed me upward, and I gained enough speed to swing myself onto the board. What ecstasy, gliding through the rain here while lightning flashed all around! The wave was surely three meters high, and behind me, right where it was breaking, the thunder of the crashing water rumbled. The wave carried me a long way, and suddenly I felt the water arching over me as a moment of silence settled in. But that moment was too brief to truly grasp. I was already at the spot where the wave rolled in, and I was hurled onto the coral reef along with the spray. I was lucky—nothing happened—but I knew I should have cut the ride short sooner. Still, I had done it! Even if the destination of my dreams had been just a fleeting moment: I had been in the wave tunnel!

Slowly, all the hustle and bustle of Lagundri started to get on my nerves. And when I heard about an archipelago where you could also surf, but had to cook

for yourself, my mind was made up. The ferry was leaving tomorrow, and I packed my things. I left the guitar with my host's brother, who had gotten me those good mushrooms and who had also kept coming by to practice on the guitar. I had realized that the guitar wasn't really my thing after all, and I was making only slow progress. So it was easy for me to part with it, because I hated heavy luggage.

At the dock, I met an Australian and a New Zealander, both heavily laden with two surfboards each and provisions for ten days.

"Isn't there anything to buy in Tello?" I asked.

"No idea! We were told to stock up here."

Their names were Gerry and Thomas.

"They say there's a hundred-and-one islands there, right on the equator..."

Prahu

Though I've passed one hundred thousand miles I'm feeling very still. And I think my spaceship knows which way to go. Tell my wife I love her very much—she knows.

David Bowie, Space Oddity

From Tello, a small town whose importance stemmed from the fact that the ferry terminal was located there, making it a hub with several shops, the three of us took a becak³⁷ that drove us a few kilometers along the coast. The becak driver for the two surfers, however, soon grew exhausted from the heavy luggage and the two burly guys, so Thomas took over pedaling himself, while children ran out of the huts along the roadside shouting, “Hello, mister!”

We finally stopped at a school. On the beach behind the school, dugout canoes were waiting to take us to a neighboring island just under a kilometer away, which looked like almost any coral island: a white beach with coconut palms, surrounded by a coral reef.

There were a few huts roughly hammered together and a sort of kitchen with a fire pit, where a few sooty pots hung. A petite Japanese man was the only guest on the island at the moment. Gerry and Thomas immediately asked him where the good surf spots were and set off

³⁷ A bicycle with a sidecar that serves as a taxi.

right away with their boards, but returned disappointed after just an hour because the waves were too small.

I made myself comfortable on the hut's veranda and read the translation of the Quran, which was beginning to fascinate me more and more, even though I had to get used to the style first.

*Know that the life of the world is only play, and idle talk, and pageantry, and boasting among you ... the life of the world is but matter of illusion ... and We caused Jesus, son of Mary, to follow, and gave him the Gospel, and placed compassion and mercy in the hearts of those who followed him. But monasticism they invented - We ordained it not for them - only seeking Allah's pleasure, and they observed it not with right observance ... and He will appoint for you a light wherein ye shall walk, and will forgive you. Allah is Forgiving, Merciful.*³⁸

Gerry was slowly getting impatient because there were still no waves after three days, while Thomas was able to occupy himself with other things besides surfing. He often philosophized with me and told me about his time as a Buddhist monk in New Zealand. We borrowed a dugout canoe and went fishing at the reef. Thomas was more skilled, because I caught only a single, but beautiful, yellow fish. I felt sorry for the fish as it gasped for air pitifully on the bottom of the prahu, and I would have loved to throw it back into the water, but when it later sizzled golden-brown in the pan, spreading an incredibly delicious aroma, my pity had subsided.

³⁸ Iron 20, 27, 28

Gerry had brought diving goggles and a snorkel, and we were all overwhelmed by the underwater world. The colors and shapes nature had created here were simply indescribable. Schools of colorful fish darted through the turquoise water, and fantastic coral mountains were home to all kinds of shellfish and strange, unknown creatures.



As I walked around the island once more—a journey that took just under an hour—I saw prahus with their colorful sails disappearing toward the horizon, heading for one of the countless islands. A longing for distant lands seized me, and I thought about how my visa would expire in three weeks. And even in this little hut here, they wanted my personal details and to know when I had arrived in Indonesia! Where could one still live undefined these days, untouched by analytical thinking? If I had a dugout canoe like that, I might be able to find a place where no one else went. After all, there were over a hundred islands here. I could fish and pick coconuts. And collect rainwater with a sheet of plastic...

A few boys from a nearby fishing village would drop by now and then to learn English or just to gawk at the white people. I asked them if they knew where one could buy a prahu and how much it cost. A boy named Jono offered to go with me to Tello and look around for a boat there. And so the next day we paddled the ten kilometers to Tello, where I inspected a few dugout canoes. The first one was patched up and didn't look particularly trustworthy; the second was too big, so it would probably drift away quickly in strong winds; the third seemed a bit small, but looked very well-made.

"What do you think, Jono?" I asked.

"It looks nice!"

"Not too small?"

Jono shrugged. I haggled the price down to 70,000 rupiah and even got paddles and outriggers thrown in. Which, as it turned out later, had been a bit hasty, because when I climbed into the boat with my eighty kilos, it nearly sank. I hardly dared to move because the water was about to spill over the side, and so I drifted helplessly further and further away from the shore while the crowd of Indonesians who had been watching the prahu purchase burst into roaring laughter. Finally, I managed to maneuver the boat back to shore, but by then I already had a wet behind and wasn't in the best of moods. Why hadn't I, the idiot, tried out the prahu before buying it?

"You take the big prahu; I'll paddle back in the small one," Jono suggested.

“That won’t do me any good! I have to exchange the boat!”

“But the guy’s probably already gone.”

“Then we’ll just have to look for him! Or find someone who’ll trade the small one for a bigger one.”

But Jono made no move to get out of the boat and obviously wanted to leave soon because he was embarrassed by the situation in front of his fellow countrymen: “You liked the boat, and you bought it!”

“And you were the one who advised me on the purchase and thought it was a good idea. But if you want to go, just go ahead—I’ll handle this on my own,” I said in a tone that wasn’t exactly gentle. Jono jumped out of the prahu and set off to look for the man, but came back after a surprisingly short time: “The man isn’t there anymore. Here’s what we’ll do: you take the big one and I’ll take the small prahu—we’ll swap!”

“If you really want to do that! I can throw in some extra cash.”

“We’ll talk about that later; let’s just get going first...”

On the way back, I was in high spirits, because the prahu I was now sitting in seemed tailor-made for me. It even had a mount for a mast. We sang together the song I’d learned from Hendri back then, and Jono kept asking me to sing new songs. When we finally reached Simprano, Jono said, “I have to talk to my brother first—the boat belongs to both of us,” which made me a little suspicious.

That evening, we negotiated over the prahu. The brother wanted an additional 100,000 rupiah, which seemed too expensive to me. But the man wouldn't budge on the price and seemed willing to make the sale only because of his younger brother's promise. In the end, I agreed to the price, since the prahu was so perfect for me. The man kept looking at the boat for quite a while, as if he were saying a silent goodbye to it.

It wasn't until later that I found out I'd been taken for a fool and had practically given the little prahu away for free. But hey, what tourist here hasn't been taken for a ride? It was about time I headed to areas where no tourists went and I wasn't constantly seen as nothing more than a walking wallet!

I rowed back to Tello and bought a few things: plastic sheeting, twine and rope for the sail; paint and brushes; a water canister; an axe, nails, a saw; fabric; a pot and a pan; oil, rice, flour, sugar, tea; fishing hooks and line; a special soft rope for climbing coconut palms; plates and cutlery; a raffia hat and other odds and ends. While I was shopping, I always had quite a few onlookers and gawkers around me, who also accompanied me to my prahu, which I had tied to a designated pole just like cowboys tie their horses. I found this somewhat uncomfortable, as I actually wanted to avoid drawing too much attention to myself and becoming the subject of gossip, especially since I planned to sail through the archipelago without a visa soon. As I set sail, a few girls poked their heads out of the windows, waved at me,

and called out: “Cinta padamu³⁹.” Then they started giggling and quickly hid back inside the house.

I had the man, who often picked kelapa muda⁴⁰ for me from the trees, make the sail and ordered two new outriggers, since the old ones seemed too wobbly to me. The old man was quite modest and charged a reasonable price, which later upset Jono’s brother. I didn’t yet understand enough Indonesian to grasp the exact wording, but the meaning was clear: You couldn’t possibly let the tourists get away with paying so little!

“Actually, the rip-off artist is right,” I thought to myself, and gave the man a generous tip when he proudly presented me with the freshly made, 6 m² blue plastic sail. The man explained to me how to handle the sail, and I was surprised at how well the Indonesians could improvise with such simple means. Compared to a real sailboat, it was certainly a laborious and, above all, a wobbly affair to hoist the sail, but it worked.

In the meantime, leaks had been sealed with a special mixture of an unspecified powder and gasoline, and the boat had been painted sky blue. The outriggers were also finished, and while the paint and the mixture had to dry for two days, I came up with a name for the boat. At first I wanted to call it “Raden,” but then I decided on “Vairocana,” the name of the Buddha who could guide one across the abyss of “being-in-itself,” and whose color matched the sky-blue of the prahu.

³⁹ Indonesian: I love you!

⁴⁰ Indonesian: young coconut for drinking, whose flesh is still soft.

That evening, there was a dinner at Tomo's place. Bob and Eric, two South Africans who had since replaced Thomas and Gerry, spread a map out on the table. The entire archipelago, with its hundred islands, was depicted on a nautical chart scale, complete with water depths. Tomo, who had just arrived from India and maintained good contacts in Kashmir and Japan—which is how he financed his surfing—rolled a thick joint, leaned over the map, and let out a whistle.

"Every reef is marked on there," he said admiringly.

"A friend of ours works as a geographer," Eric explained, tossing his long black hair over his shoulder. "We should rent a motorboat for three days and check out the most promising reefs. It can't cost the earth!"

At the very bottom edge of the map, a small piece of land was still visible.

"Is that Siberut down here?" I asked.

"Yeah, not that far away, is it?" Eric confirmed.

If I made it to Siberut, my trail would be covered! The authorities could only verify that I'd taken the ferry to Tello and rented the bungalow here. Once I left the archipelago, I'd be plunging into the undefined void!

The big debut took place the next day. A light breeze was blowing, promising pleasant sailing weather. I rowed a short distance from the shore and then tried to hoist the sail, which wasn't so easy. But once I'd managed it and the sail was properly set, I glided across the water surprisingly fast. When the wind picked up, I had to lean far over the gunwale to keep the boat balanced and the outriggers above water. Quick tacking

maneuvers were out of the question, however, since the yard and boom vang couldn't be rotated around the mast like on a normal sailboat, and you first had to lower the entire sail a bit. Since the dugout canoe had no centerboard, there was also a significant sideways drift. This made sailing against the wind almost impossible, so it was better to paddle against the wind. There were many little tricks to learn, and it took some time before I felt reasonably confident in the boat and also knew the necessary knots to, for example, quickly tie the mainsheet to the outriggers' crossbar and untie it again just as quickly; or, for example, to manage to stay on course while paddling on just one side, which required a slight twist of the paddle during the stroke.

Finally, the big day arrived. At the first light of dawn, I filled the water canister at the well and loaded my prahu. Tomo and two Indonesians accompanied me to the beach, gave my boat a little push, and waved me off.

The crabs are attacking!

*The road was long, yes, we traveled far
Through long dark nights without a guiding star
Visions of an angel came along the way
Told us, "Don't be fearful
For there comes a brighter day."*

*Jah Wobble,
The Sun Does Rise*

There was no wind, so I had to paddle the two kilometers to the opposite island. Fishermen showed me a natural channel that ran past mangrove-covered banks and eventually opened into a strait between two islands. On both sides, a mighty jungle rose up, and the cries of exotic birds echoed through the air. Gradually a light breeze picked up, and since I was now tired from the unfamiliar paddling, I hoisted the sail and slowly made my way between the two islands. Eventually the shores receded and I could see a few huts with children playing in front of them and a couple of prahus bobbing on the turquoise water. Ahead of me, about ten kilometers away, rose a large island that stretched all the way to the distant horizon. In front of it lay several small coral islands covered with coconut palms, and colorful triangular sails could be seen scattered across the sea. I headed diagonally toward the large island, steering slightly south. As soon as I was out of the lee of the two islands behind me, my prahu sped along at a brisk pace. I cheered with joy and suddenly felt incredibly free and full of a spirit of adventure. Hadn't I wished for a sailboat?

Sometimes schools of smaller fish leaped out of the water and swam alongside my boat, chased in turn by a few larger ones. On the distant horizon, several islands and smaller reefs were visible, where the waves broke into foaming white crests. The color of the water had turned a deep blue, while the clouds glowed purple in places.

A large fishing boat chugged past me about a hundred meters away, but I simply pulled my straw hat down over my face, which provided just as perfect a disguise as my djellaba had in Morocco. In the evening, I spotted a small island about seven kilometers away and headed toward it. By the time I finally reached it, the wind had died down and the sun had vanished, blood-red, behind the horizon amid gigantic anvil-shaped clouds. On the eastern side of the island, I saw smoke rising above the palm trees and briefly wondered if I was in the mood for company, but then decided I'd rather go ashore on the northern side. Although the waves weren't particularly high, it turned out to be risky to try landing here on the reef. I was thrown by a breaking wave onto the water's surface, which was a meter lower, and the prahu scraped against a coral outcrop. But I was lucky, and the boat was unharmed. Slowly, I drifted across the shallow waters of the reef toward the white beach.

By now quite exhausted from the long day's journey and the intense sunlight, I dragged my luggage under the palm trees, scooped out the water that had seeped into the boat using the bottom of an old water bucket, and pulled the prahu as far up the beach as I could. I tied it to two palm trees, and then made myself a place to sleep using the plastic sheeting and the fabric of a

sarong. The rice I had cooked the night before and packed in plastic bags already tasted slightly sour, but hunger and a lack of alternatives left me no room to be picky.

I woke up during the night. The wind had picked up; waves were crashing against the boat and pushing it against the palm trees. As I tried to pull the boat further up the beach, thunder and lightning began, and eventually it poured down in torrents. A glance at the sea told me that I never wanted to be caught in a storm at sea; it was hard to believe anyone could survive that in a prahu! I crawled under my plastic sheet, even though I was already soaked to the bone anyway, and waited impatiently for morning. But as it slowly grew lighter, the storm had only intensified, and all around me coconuts were crashing down. According to statistics, about three thousand people worldwide are killed by coconuts every year. If I were to count myself among the lucky survivors, I would at least have something to eat now, since I couldn't cook anyway.

By noon, the rain had stopped. I gathered a few of the nuts and cracked one open, which took some effort despite the machete, as the fibrous outer shell was extremely stubborn. After my nutty meal, I inspected my luggage and discovered that some of my things had gotten wet because I'd carelessly left them lying around the night before.

Suddenly, a young man came strolling along the beach and was quite surprised when he spotted me. He invited me to come with him to his family, and I went along willingly, hoping for a hot drink. The man introduced himself as Alwin and the island as Samaleke.

We reached a palm hut, under whose wide canopy sat a friendly old man and a gaunt woman, as well as two younger boys and two girls, apparently Alwin's siblings. All six were highly surprised that a white man had strayed here in a prahu, but the mother immediately sent one of the daughters to the kitchen to make coffee. I told them in my broken Indonesian that I was traveling as a tourist and had arrived here last night. They listened intently and, when the coffee was served, offered me the fine kretek cigarettes⁴¹, while the old man crushed a betel nut, wrapped it in a leaf, and popped it into his mouth with a grin.

The family seemed to take a liking to me and invited me to stay here until the weather improved and my clothes had dried. They showed me a small room where I could sleep. I gratefully accepted the offer, brought my luggage over, gave some of my provisions to the mother, and offered to bake chapatis⁴² for everyone. With great interest, they prepared a small fire pit for me, and I began to cook. To go with the chapatis, I grated coconut and mixed it with sugar, which here was usually served as a side dish with sweet potatoes. Satisfied, smacking faces rewarded my efforts, and the mother wanted to memorize the recipe for this roti⁴³.

On the family's advice, I brought the prahu over. The old man examined it expertly, for as it turned out, he was a boatbuilder by trade. He praised the sail, but said the crossbars of the outriggers weren't sturdy enough.

⁴¹ Indonesian clove cigarettes

⁴² Thin flatbread that can be baked in a pan.

⁴³ Indonesian: Bread

I timidly asked the old man if he could make me new ones, and how much they would cost.

“We’re Christians here, you know; I’ll make them for you for free,” he said in his calm, unhurried way, trudged into the forest with a machete, and soon returned with two slender saplings. He took measurements and peeled off the bark with a plane. Then he chopped the pole into shape and finally leaned it against a felled tree trunk so that it would take on a slight curve as it dried.

I tried to work on the other sapling in the same way, but it took me at least five times as long as it did the old man.

The next day, I went fishing with Alwin. Alwin reeled in one fish after another, while I sat there enviously with my line in my hand.

“What am I doing wrong?” I asked.

“You have to let the bait sink all the way to the bottom and then pull it up a little bit. When you feel a fish nibbling at it, you jerk it up,” Alwin explained to the greenhorn, and shortly after, I got the hang of it too. Red-and-black and dark-blue fish soon filled the bottom of the prahu, and suddenly a pod of dolphins appeared right next to the boat. I invited them to come a little closer, saying I’d treat them to a fish too, but they didn’t take me up on the tempting offer and swam on their way.

“The mast isn’t in great shape either; it can splinter easily,” the old man told me, having already found a replacement. He also installed a crossbar to hold the

two sides of the boat together so the prahu wouldn't break apart in strong winds or under heavy load.

"Is it actually far to Siberut?" I asked over dinner, as if I weren't really interested in the answer.

"It takes a day and a night," said the old man, "but there are only two favorable months, October and January; otherwise, the waves are too high and the winds are unfavorable."

"You're not planning on going to Siberut, are you?" asked the mother, who by now treated me like her fourth son and seemed to have caught on to something.

"Jahu⁴⁴!" I talked my way out of it.

"Ya, jahu sekali! Kamu tidak boleh pergi ke Siberut⁴⁵!" the mother said firmly.

Communication was getting easier and easier, because I had a dictionary with me and had been studying for some time. Since Indonesian is one of the easiest languages in the world due to its almost non-existent grammar, and I was dependent on it here, I made rapid progress. And Alwin and I soon became close friends.

"Isn't there some kind of setup to secure the paddle so I can work at the front of the boat while we're moving?" I asked the old man the following morning.

"Ada⁴⁶," said the kind old man, and immediately gathered the necessary wood. I had actually expected a

⁴⁴ Indonesian: Far!

⁴⁵ Indonesian: Yes, very far! You mustn't go to Siberut!

⁴⁶ Indonesian: There is!

simple contraption, but the old man spent half the day carving away at his masterpiece until I truly had a proper oar. And then, on top of that, I got a new paddle because, in the old man's opinion, the other one was too short for me. When I looked at my refurbished prahu, I was certain: this wasn't meant just for sailing from one island to the next. It wasn't called Vairocana for nothing!

As a farewell gift, I gave the old man my gold-plated watch, a Christmas present from my parents, with Aachen Cathedral depicted on the dial.

"It's as big as three palm trees stacked on top of each other," I explained to the amazed family, thinking to myself that they probably appreciated the watch more, since I already felt more Muslim than Christian. The brothers picked some kelapa muda from the trees for me to drink on the way, and Mom made rice dishes instead of sandwiches, which she wrapped in banana leaves. "Jangan pergi ke Siberut!" she warned me once more.

I had to paddle for a good hour before I reached the strait separating the two largest islands of the archipelago. At first I could use the sail, but later the wind shifted, and I had to reach for the paddle. A dolphin surfaced and swam slowly ahead of me, but if I was hoping that, like Flipper, it would take the boat's rope in its mouth and pull me along a bit, I was disappointed. The morning dragged on, and paddling against the wind was worse than riding a bike against the wind!

So I struggled on. The banks on both sides were lined with mangroves that offered me no shade, because their spiky, widely spreading roots left no room to slip through. It wasn't until evening that the channel widened, and the mangroves gave way to a sandy beach lined with palm trees. I immediately rowed ashore and, exhausted, set about finding a place to sleep. But no sooner had night fallen than I was swarmed by countless tiny mosquitoes that paid no heed to my coarse-meshed mosquito net and made my life a living hell. I put on my jeans and sweater, which the mosquitoes couldn't bite through, but in which I sweated like I was in a sauna. I put a towel over my head, but the little pests relentlessly found even the tiniest gap.

The next morning I was completely frazzled, and the wind was still blowing from the south. Since I didn't have the slightest desire to paddle, I tried to tack, but that proved a hopeless endeavor because the drift was too strong. Finally, I reached an island so small that you could walk around it in three minutes. There was an empty hut there, and I was fairly certain there were no mosquitoes here. I vowed not to move on until the wind was blowing from a favorable direction.

During the night, my food bags were attacked by hermit crabs, which tore holes in the plastic, causing the rice and flour to spill out. I took my revenge the next day by smashing the shells of several of them and using them as fish bait, since the fish liked crab meat. Once I found the right spot on the reef, a fish bit immediately, because there were plenty of them here. But I always drifted away from the good spot quickly, because

I hadn't found anything yet that I could use as an anchor. When someone in Tello had asked me if there were stones in Germany, I hadn't understood the question at all at first. Until it dawned on me while searching for an anchor: There really aren't any stones here! Not a single one! Because these are coral islands, after all!

In the meantime, minor wounds had become infected, and I suspected that the pathogen was already in my bloodstream. I'd also developed eczema on Samaleke, probably due to my high consumption of coffee, sugar, and kretek cigarettes. And perhaps also because of the psychological stress, since my visa was set to expire in two days.

On an island across the way, I practiced climbing coconut palms because there weren't any on my little island. It was quite difficult, but at least I made it the nearly four meters up to the crown. Only now I didn't have enough strength left to pull myself higher up one of the palm branches, and besides, my knees were shaking and I was afraid it might snap under my weight. At least I'd managed to get a few new scrapes, which had nothing better to do than get infected. But I didn't want to give up and go without coconuts, so I set off paddling again the next day. I was so eager to get my hands on a nut that I didn't realize until halfway there that the wind was blowing from the northeast. In a mad rush, I rowed back to my island, set up the mast, threw my stuff into the prahu, and set off. However, I had to turn back three times because, among other things, I'd forgotten my hat, my money, and the oar. But then I was off on a fantastically fast ride along the coast of the

big island and further and further south. I was surprised when I had already reached the end of the archipelago by late afternoon. On the last of the islands stood a lighthouse, and further islands could be seen on the horizon in the distance. That had to be Siberut! It was even within sight! I had to be able to make it!

At that point, I didn't yet know that what I thought were islands were actually the mountains of Siberut rising above the horizon, and that over sixty kilometers of open sea separated me from the coast. So I decided confidently to take advantage of the favorable wind right away and sail through the night.

As the sun sank into the sea, I lit my passport in the usual way. Before crossing the abyss, I wanted to get rid of my identity. In Siberut, no one would be able to determine where I had come from. No one would suspect that I had sailed across the sea in a dugout canoe from Tello!

Siberut

Alas! When wandering in the sangsara — because of great obscuration of the mind. On the radiant path of light of the Dharmadatu of Wisdom may Bhagavan Vairocana guide me. May the divine Mother of Infinite Space be my rearguard. May I be safely guided across the terrifying abyss of the bardo and be placed in the state of Perfect Buddhahood.

Bardo Thodol

The favorable wind died down as night fell, and the sea became as smooth as glass; except for the gigantic waves that rolled across the sea like hills, creating valleys a hundred meters wide, but which were thus completely harmless to the small boat. I didn't mind that at all. Better no wind at all than too much or a headwind. Then we'd just paddle all the way to Siberut!

In the distance, beacons flashed across the sky, and I suspected they were the lighthouses of Sibolga and Padang. It was a clear night, and I had never seen so many stars at once. There were almost more bright spots in the sky than dark ones! Shooting stars constantly streaked across the firmament, and when I dipped my paddle into the dark water, thousands of tiny green neon-colored dots lit up. Even where my prahu glided through the water, a glowing trail was left

behind. Was that phosphorescent plankton? How magical! What a night!

After three hours of paddling, a gentle breeze finally picked up, and I was lucky because it was coming from the northwest, so I could hoist my sail again. I made myself comfortable on my stern bench, locked the rudder in place, and dozed off, but didn't dare fall asleep. The lighthouse behind me gradually grew smaller, and the beacon that supposedly shone over from Padang served as my guide. I also used various star constellations to orient myself and tried to calculate their approximate circular path.

Then the wind gradually shifted, and I finally had no choice but to take down the sail and start paddling again. Here and there, lightning could be seen over the sea, especially where I suspected Siberut and Sumatra to be. The wind became more gusty, and I now also had to battle against growing waves. The thundercloud over Siberut seemed to be moving toward me, as the lightning kept getting closer. My hands grew clammy. The thought of being caught in a thunderstorm out here on the open sea made me shudder. I paddled with all my might, but felt as though I was barely making any headway against the wind and the waves. This went on for a long time, and gradually my nerves were frayed. At some point, I slumped back into the boat, discouraged and exhausted, but allowed myself only a five-minute break because I knew that by then I had already drifted far back. I grabbed the paddle again, even though I wondered what good paddling would do me here on the open sea in this nutshell. I was on the verge of giving up.

In my desperation, I thought of how Jesus had commanded the sea and the wind to be still, and wondered how he would have behaved in such a situation: He would have stayed completely cool at first! Then he would have done what was in his power, left everything else to God, and not gotten any more worked up!

So I rowed for a long time at the limit of my strength, hoping for dawn to come soon. The crescent moon and the morning star had risen in the meantime, but the moon didn't have enough light to illuminate Siberut, and I was still heading into the darkness. Thankfully, though, the storm had cleared up by then, and the wind was already dying down.

Finally, finally, dawn crept over the horizon. There was no wind now, so I allowed myself an hour's sleep. When I awoke, completely stiff, I was greeted by the most beautiful panorama I had ever seen in my life: before me, only about three kilometers away, lay the palm-fringed coast of Siberut. A dark forest covered the land, which rose gently toward the jagged, shimmering blue mountains of the hinterland. To my right, a rocky coastline stretched southward, and mighty breakers crashed against the shore there. To my left, the sandy beach stretched endlessly until the coast made a bend a few kilometers away and disappeared from view. The sky glowed in the most fantastic colors—pale pink, lilac, dark blue—and was dotted with wisps of white cloud. The morning sun was still hidden behind the clouds, but it was already shining through a gap in the clouds and casting an orange-violet glow on the other clouds from below.

But as beautiful as the view was, I had only one desire: to reach the shore and sleep. I couldn't give up now, just before the finish line. The sun would soon come out, and then it would get hot! Slowly, I dragged myself forward.

When I finally got within a few hundred meters of the beach, I was disappointed to find that the waves were crashing so relentlessly here that I would have had a hard time making it ashore safely. Disappointed, I lay down on my little stern bench and thought to myself that, if necessary, I could still make it ashore, but for now I just wanted to rest. But the sun had other ideas! I took the last sip of water and realized I had to keep going along the coast, even though my hands could barely hold the paddle anymore. I had no choice! There was only one way forward!

I paddled around the bend: another endless sandy beach stretching to the next bend. Eventually, I spotted a hut on the beach and decided to attempt a landing. I paddled as close as possible to the surf zone, studied the water for a long time, and when I thought no major wave was coming, I paddled like a madman. It worked out more or less. A wave lifted me up, and when it broke, I instinctively did exactly the right thing: I steered against it with my paddle and rode the spray toward the beach, without letting too much water splash into the boat.

No one was in sight. But chickens were running around the hut, and the embers of a fire were still smoldering. I dragged my things ashore, pulled the boat onto the beach, and then collapsed onto a few mats under the

hut's awning. The chickens clucked at me excitedly and indignantly, but nothing could bother me now.

In the afternoon, a surprised Indonesian man appeared, and I apologized for my uninvited intrusion. But judging by the man's expression that seemed to be okay. I tried to explain to him that I'd like to use the fire pit. The man nodded, and while I gathered wood and put water on to boil, he fetched two kelapa muda, chopped them open, and offered them to me. Gratefully, I sipped the cool, delicious milk and used the soft flesh for my pudding, which I cooked from flour and sugar. The man watched with interest, but decided he'd rather not try any of the food; he then said goodbye and mentioned he had to get back to work. And so I polished off the whole pot by myself, rolled onto my side, stuffed to the gills, and dozed off again.

A young guy came by at some point and tried to strike up a conversation, showing off his few words of English. Then he invited me to come along to his family's hut, but I wanted to stay put as much as possible. Until night slowly fell and it turned out that the area was so infested with those little blood-sucking pests that any kind of relaxation became absolutely impossible. So I accompanied the young man, who called himself John, to his brother-in-law's hut, which stood on 1-meter-high stilts and had only one wall, but a large, low-hanging, and neatly crafted thatched roof. The area around the hut had been cleared by fire, and all sorts of plants—like cassava, bananas, and coconut palms—were already sprouting from the black earth. In one spot, a large pile of wood was still smoldering, keeping the pesky bloodsuckers away from the hut. The family

consisted of John's sister and her husband, six children, and the toothless grandmother, who was tattooed from head to toe. Only the husband and the rather pretty wife could speak Indonesian; the children and the grandmother chatted in Mentawai⁴⁷.

The family treated me very kindly, served me a rice meal, and was even able to lend me a fine-mesh mosquito net for the night. I returned the favor by frying coconut macaroons in oil for the whole crew in the morning.

After three days, John, having seen that the white man was quite generous, asked if I wouldn't buy him a pair of pants, since he had none to change. So we set off for a small town about ten kilometers away. I had a hard time keeping up with the nimble John on the slippery and muddy path. Sometimes the path led through swampy terrain, and we had to balance our way over tree trunks or slippery bamboo stalks. We encountered three native Mentawais who wore only loincloths, were adorned with colorful feathers, and, like the grandmother, had their entire bodies tattooed.

As we entered the village, I pulled my hat down over my face so as not to be recognized as a European right away, though given my height, that probably didn't help much. And sure enough, shortly thereafter an older man with a white crew cut called out to us from his front

⁴⁷ Over 450 different languages and dialects are spoken across the more than 17,500 islands of the Indonesian archipelago. Indonesian is merely a constructed language made up of Malay, Arabic, Indian, English, and Dutch elements, designed to unify the vast country—which spans three time zones—linguistically.

yard, telling us to come over. He looked stern and ordered us into his house. Since John remained calm and followed the instruction without objection, I went along as well. We were led into a room where several pictures of people in uniform hung on the walls, including a photo of the man from his younger years in a parade uniform with several medals and badges. The faces in the photos reminded me uncomfortably of the Moroccan police chief, and a sense of unease welled up inside me. The man looked me in the eyes with a stern, military gaze and demanded to know what I was doing there.

“I’m a tourist and I’m here to do some shopping.”

“Do you have a permit? You need one to travel through this area.”

“I’m not aware that you need a permit here.”

“Show me your passport.”

“I’m sorry, but all my luggage is at my friend’s cabin.”

“Then write down your personal details,” said the man, and I frantically wondered whether I should play the same game as in Morocco, but then took the pen he offered. As soon as the name was on the paper, the old man immediately became friendlier and had coffee brought in while he continued chatting with John. “So, defined again!” I thought resignedly.

Once the coffee was finished, John and I went to a neighboring house that the old man had recommended to us because there was a small shop there that offered fresh fruit salad with pudding as a refreshment. John wanted to move on right after the snack, but because

I'd developed a sweet tooth—probably due to the excitement—I wanted to order a second one, even though an inner voice was telling me to leave now. While I was eating my second fruit salad, a man walked by and spoke with the old officer. Then they both waved at me, signaling that I should come over again. The other man was the kepala desa⁴⁸, and he greeted me warmly but made it unmistakably clear that I had to come see him tomorrow with my passport.

We then bought all sorts of things at another shop, and John got the pants he'd been longing for.

The next morning, I pretended to be desperately searching for my passport, but then finally gave up the search, seemingly resigned. The family had also become agitated by now and was wondering where the document could be. We went to the spot where I had landed by boat, but of course searched there in vain as well.

“Well, it's not that bad,” I reassured the family, “I can go to the embassy and get a new one. But it's probably better if I go there myself and don't stop by the mayor's office first. That would only delay things and create unnecessary problems.” Then I loaded my prahu and said goodbye to the family, while John talked me out of giving him my machete. I made it through the surf just fine, but the wind was against me, so I had to grab my paddle.

I paddled all day to get far enough away from the kepala desa, but I figured the news would probably spread

⁴⁸ Indonesian: Village Head = District Chief, Mayor

quickly, and I'd actually be wise to leave the island fast. The whole incident kept spinning around in my head, and one thing became clear to me: If I were interrogated or even tortured, I'd keep saying that my passport had that German name on it. Because it was the truth! Why should I hide it and get beaten up for it? Sure, I'd have to give up that identity and let go of the false self, and that was certainly a painful process. But to what extent could a person even live without an identity? God surely didn't expect me to make demands on myself that I couldn't fulfill anyway!

In the evening, I reached the northeast side of the island and found a small, uninhabited hut there. A few boys came by and kept me company during my supper, during which I learned that coconut shells burn very well and keep the mosquitoes away. The nice, lively boys later went to a nearby village to get me some cookies so I'd have provisions for the rest of the journey. They also gathered a few nuts from the trees and prepared them for me to eat, so I could easily open them with my knife.

When I set sail the next morning, the weather was beautiful and there was a steady north wind. As I hoisted the sail, I pondered which course to take: continue along the coast, or take a chance and cross over to Sumatra? This time there was no land in sight, which meant truly giving up any point of reference!

"Well, if I need an identity," I said to the wind, "I'll call myself Muslim⁴⁹ as soon as I reach Sumatra!"

⁴⁹ Those who submit to God.

Water Desert

So believe in Allah and His Messenger and in the light that We have sent down. And Allah knows what you do. And whoever believes in Allah and does what is right, He will cover his misdeeds and bring him into gardens through which rivers flow, to dwell therein forever... No misfortune befalls anyone without Allah's permission; and whoever believes in Allah, He guides his heart...

Quran, Mutual Deception 8,9,11

The boat raced across the water at nearly top speed, and I had to lean far to one side to keep my balance. I was quickly soaked by the spray, but I knew I had to hurry, even though I had no idea that Sumatra was over 140 kilometers away!

White foam was already covering the waves, and I prayed to God that the wind would stay this way and not pick up any further. Flying fish darted across the water, and I was amazed that they could make such turns and adjust to the rise and fall of the waves as they shot just above the water's surface.

By evening, Siberut was still visible along its entire length. There was no sign of Sumatra, except for the massive anvil clouds that were likely forming over the mainland. The delicate crescent of the new moon and Venus were now visible, and the sky was playing with an intoxicating display of colors on the horizon. The

waves had grown higher in the meantime, and there was no other option but to sail as close to the wind as possible and cut across them at the steepest angle to prevent too much water from sloshing into the boat. Nevertheless, I was busy bailing out the prahu every ten minutes, and I cursed quite a bit, as I felt I was drifting too far north. It went on like this for three hours until finally the wind and waves calmed down. Three lighter spots were visible on the horizon: Sibolga, Padang, and perhaps Bengkulu, I thought in my naivety and ignorance of the true scale of things. Behind me shone the light of the lighthouse, which I had previously associated with Padang, but which stood on the northeast side of Siberut.

Now there was a complete lull. I dozed for an hour, but couldn't fall asleep due to the uncomfortable position and my damp clothes, so I finally reached for the paddle again. After a while, the wind picked up after all, and this time from the favorable western direction. For three to four hours, the boat glided calmly through the night. There were hardly any waves, and although the wind blew only gently, the boat seemed to be making good progress.

Unfortunately, it didn't stay that way. After a brief lull, the wind suddenly shifted and became gusty. Various thunderclouds appeared here and there. Slowly, one of them moved toward me from the north. When it flashed, you could see its immense size and the wall of rain it was dragging beneath it. I sailed on undeterred. The wind was still relatively favorable and the sea calm.

But then it became clear: This time, it was going to hit me! The wall of rain was only half a kilometer away and

was heading straight for me! I took in the sail and grabbed the paddle. After a few minutes, the gusts caught up with me, and a few moments later, the raindrops were hitting my face. It soon became impossible to paddle against the storm. The waves and the wind turned the bow around as soon as I stopped paddling to bail water out of the boat.

I was now facing weather similar to that on my sailing trip from Gomera to Tenerife, except that it was night, it was pouring rain, lightning was striking all around me, and I wasn't in a modern yacht but in a prahu! Helpless, I drifted with the wind and rode the waves, drifting further and further away from Sumatra. I had the incredible luck that I had forgotten to bring the paddle into the boat while paddling, which I normally did to avoid being hindered. As a result, the prahu now rode with the waves and didn't turn across them. If I had had to maneuver with the paddle, the boat would already have been full of water. But this way, I had my hands free and bailed as if my life depended on it. And it probably did! Although there were dugout canoes so light that you could empty them in the sea, my boat was too heavy for that. It wouldn't have sunk, but it would have become unmanoeuvrable, and it would then have been impossible to get it afloat again.

Eventually—it felt like an eternity—the rain stopped, and the storm had passed over me. But the wind and waves had barely calmed down, and I was still drifting away from Sumatra. A voice inside me said I'd have to set sail and steer against the current now if I didn't want to drift back to Siberut.

“But I'll never manage that in this weather!” I cried.

But the inner voice seemed convinced that I could do it and was obviously amused by this helpless klutz. “Come on, come on,” it urged, “let’s go!”

I pulled the jib up, staying crouched to keep my balance, but I was too tentative, so the boom vang was blown into the water along with the rest of the sail. I tried to keep pulling the sail up anyway, but the boom vang had caught on the outriggers at the front.

“Damn it all!” I shouted desperately into the night, yanking at the sail like a madman. But I soon realized that all I was doing was tearing the plastic. It was no use; I had to get past the mast to the front of the prahu, where the luggage was stowed, and free the boom head. It was a precarious balancing act, and as I squeezed past the mast, the boat tilted dangerously. Due to the shift in weight, it also slowly turned broadside to the waves, and panic gradually seized me. But while I was cursing and wailing, it suddenly dawned on me: This was a game! A training exercise! The real thing didn’t start until after death! In this world, one was supposed to train one’s ego just as one trained a horse. It was not allowed to disobey the rider’s command, neither at the sight of a tasty tuft of green grass nor in the face of danger!

I suddenly became very calm. With focused movements, I released the boom cleat, balanced my way back to the stern, bailed out the water that had come in, and tried again. This time I managed to hoist the sail all the way up, but the yard hung crookedly on the mast because it hadn’t slid properly through the ropes connecting the mast to the crossbars of the outriggers. I lowered the sail once more and then

hoisted it again, but the yard got caught once more. The whining and cursing threatened to break out again, but this time I was alert and pulled back in time. The instructions came clear and distinct, and I followed them without hesitation, even though I had to stand up straight in the wobbly boat and was on the verge of losing my balance. I inserted the boom clew into the loop on the mast, turned the rudder to windward, and slowly pulled in the mainsheet. The sail flapped and crashed so violently that I thought it would tear at any moment. For a fearful moment, the boat lay across the waves until I managed to bear away hard into the wind and cut sharply through the waves. Hard to believe that the material was even up to the task! My own eyes often closed from exhaustion, even as the wind shook the sail and the spray from higher waves sloshed over the gunwale. The long wait for morning had begun once again...

When dawn finally broke, the wind stopped blowing as if on cue, and the waves slowly calmed down as well. And once again, as a reward for enduring the night, I was treated to one of the most magnificent sights of my life: Sumatra, with its chain of three-thousand-meter-high volcanoes, lay promisingly before me in the clear morning light!

Ravenous, I pounced on the cookies and chewed on the sugarcane, a few stalks of which I had taken along as provisions. Then I tried to make myself comfortable on my little bench, but my butt was so sore that I hardly knew which cheek to sit on. So I dozed off and was about to fall asleep when suddenly a gust hit the sail and the prahu immediately listed to one side—despite

the outriggers, so much so that a lot of water poured into the boat. After that experience, it was clear: as long as the sail was up, I had to stay awake!

But by noon, I no longer needed the sail. The sea had become as smooth as glass, and I was baking under my straw hat. Strangely enough, Sumatra was barely visible anymore and now seemed much farther away than it had that morning. A larger fishing boat chugged along, and when it spotted the prahu, it set course for me. The Indonesians seemed unable to believe their eyes when they discovered that a white man was sitting out here on a prahu. I waved to them, and when they saw that I was obviously not in distress, they sailed away, shaking their heads.

A little further north, land was now visible—apparently an island—and I thought I could paddle there in a few hours. But after two hours of hard paddling, the supposed island had barely grown any larger. Sumatra, too, remained in the farthest distance. It's hard to believe how easily one can be deceived by distances out here at sea, I realized, having learned my lesson, and could barely suppress my cursing. Slowly, evening drew nearer, and the hope of finding a landing spot before dusk faded. At least the wind had picked up again and, as night fell, strengthened into a fresh breeze, so that the prahu glided swiftly across the calm sea while I leaned back contentedly and enjoyed the starry night. On such a journey, all fatigue vanished!

After a few hours, lights appeared, which I initially mistook for very bright streetlamps, as they lay in a straight line ahead of me. But after another hour, it looked as though they were illuminated platforms

drifting on the sea. Finally, the mystery was solved: they were large fishing boats with huge outriggers, forming a long chain with other boats and equipped with very bright lamps all around the deck, which they likely used to attract the fish. No sooner had I passed the first row than the next chain of lights appeared over the horizon. I could also see a lighthouse now, which I was heading toward. I had actually wanted to go ashore a bit farther from the lighthouse, because I was afraid people might live nearby who would ask me stupid questions, but I realized in time that the tower stood on a small coconut island, which I'd probably be better off heading for.

Logically, the reef should have been on the side I was now reaching, but I couldn't see anything but a sandy beach. Suddenly, the wind died down, as if it had been tasked with dropping me off here and was now saying goodbye, so I had to paddle the last few meters. Before I knew it, though, I was stuck on the reef. And the water was so shallow here that I got stuck between the corals! I cursed under my breath and tried to drag the boat over the reef, cutting my feet on the corals and sharp-edged shells. Halfway to the beach, however, I had to give up, because otherwise I would have damaged the bottom of the boat. I staggered ashore and was happy to have solid ground beneath me once again. But the fear that the tide might come in and carry my boat away kept me from falling asleep, despite my leaden fatigue. After two hours, the water had risen enough that I could pull the prahu up to the beach. I hauled most of my luggage ashore and tied the boat to a palm tree before falling into a deep sleep.

Something woke me. Higher waves were crashing onto the beach and into my boat. The tin plates and fishing gear were just floating away, and to my horror I realized the oar was already gone. Frantic, I ran along the beach, but then, to my immense relief, found the oar nearly three hundred meters further on.

Two men lived on the island; they harvested copra there, and I met them the next day. I stayed with them for two days to recover from my exhaustion, but the island was so infested with bloodsuckers that I soon wanted to move on. Besides, I needed food. The coast of Sumatra was a kilometer away, and across from the island was a small town. Off its coast lay dozens of the colorful fishing boats I had already seen on the night of my arrival, seeking shelter from the swell here behind the island. The large fleet seemed almost a bit menacing, and I preferred to sail southward, as the small town with so many people seemed too dangerous to me. After half a day, I passed a village where I bought provisions and reached, by evening, other islands off the coast, facing the port city of Padang.

Shalat⁵⁰

He is successful who growth. And remembereth the name of his Lord, so prayeth,

Al-A'la 14-15

The following night the wind was favorable, and by morning I was already well past Padang. The coast here was rocky, and in the hinterland stood mountains reminiscent of Rio de Janeiro's Sugarloaf Mountain. Clouds hung between them, and steaming jungle covered the slopes. On an island I found a dilapidated hut, set myself up there provisionally, and then went fishing along the reef. At the spot where the reef dropped off steeply, I quickly caught a variety of colorful fish, especially reddish-brown triggerfish, whose skin was extremely leathery but which, when filleted and fried in coconut oil, were a delicacy. I had rice with them—what else?

Over the next few days, I had favorable winds and sailed further south until I once again reached a small coconut island, where I sought shelter from an approaching storm. It was about 300 meters in diameter and had a small hut, in front of which a man was pottering about; he glanced over at me briefly, but otherwise paid no

⁵⁰ Arabic: Prayer, specifically the prayer in which certain sequences of standing, bowing, and prostration are prescribed, and which is recited in Arabic, as opposed to the Du'a, the personal supplication that can be recited in any language.

further attention to this white stranger. I had to haul the heavy boat and my luggage ashore by myself. When I reached the hut, I saw the man gathering the copra that had been laid out to dry and hauling it into the hut. He looked quite friendly and gave a brief greeting, but continued to hurry to put the stuff into baskets, for the first drops were already falling. I helped him without hesitation, though this seemed to embarrass the man a bit. When the rain really let loose, we retreated into the hut. The man introduced himself as Adj, made coffee, and offered me Kretek cigarettes. I sprawled out on the bast mats and felt right at home, especially as I watched the storm and imagined being out on the sea right then!

I learned that the island's name was Kosong and that there wasn't a single mosquito here. I immediately felt like staying here for a while and recovering from my three-week Prah tour. No mosquitoes!

I asked Adj if that would be possible, and he had no objection: "It's not my island anyway. The man who owns it won't be here for another three days."

I helped Adj with the copra harvest. First, the coconuts were split open with a large machete; the two halves were left in the sun until the copra had loosened slightly and taken on an unappetizing blue-moldy color, then scraped out with a special knife and laid out on nets to dry. Nice place to work here under the palm trees! The sea roared all around us and a cooling breeze ruffled our hair. At night, giant turtles sometimes came ashore to lay their eggs, which Adj collected because they later fetched 250 rupiah apiece. And a single turtle laid up to a hundred eggs! I did feel a brief surge of environmental awareness, but what right did I have to say anything—

as a European who had just flown halfway around the world, pumping exhaust fumes into the upper atmosphere?

A fishing boat from Padang dropped anchor off the island. Two lobster fishermen and a retired officer on a fishing trip were also seeking shelter from an approaching storm, so that suddenly the little island was bustling with activity. The officer and two of the fishermen dutifully performed their five prescribed daily prayers, while I just looked for a quiet spot every now and then. When people found out that I was pretending to be a Muslim, they asked me why I prayed so strangely, to which I explained that it wasn't that important to me to face Mecca, bow a certain number of times, or speak Arabic—God would understand me anyway. For me, a good heart was what mattered most. Everyone immediately agreed with me, especially those who didn't pray anyway.

The owner of the island, named Dadang, appeared and was quite taken with me. He had no objection to hosting me on the island; on the contrary, I absolutely had to visit his family. So I set sail to buy new provisions, but Dadang had warned me beforehand about the surf along the coast. And if I wanted to sail further south, I would have a hard time, because there were no more islands there on whose sheltered side I could land, and there were only beaches with high waves.

When I reached the belt of waves off the village, I was horrified. It thundered and crashed in front of me, so that I wondered how I was supposed to get through there safely. But this time I had no luggage with me that could float away, and so I rowed like the devil when I

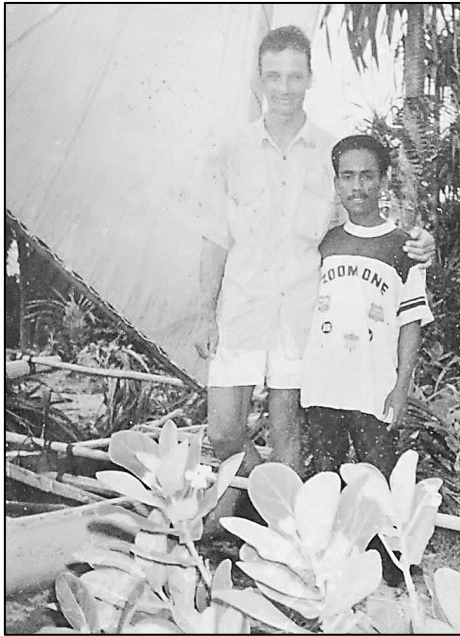
thought a favorable moment had come. I was just past the surf line when suddenly a wave nearly three meters high broke behind me with a loud roar. The surging spray drove me toward the beach, but in the process also filled my prahu almost completely with water, so that I no longer knew how I was supposed to get it to shore. Fortunately, a few fishermen rushed over and helped me. One thing was certain: I wasn't going to sail any further down the coast! What couldn't be done, couldn't be done! And the big waves were still to come! Maybe I could sell the boat somewhere.

A young man accompanied me across the dunes to a warung, where I recovered over coffee and pastries. More and more people gathered around me until I was being stared at by at least thirty people, and I felt like a five-legged calf.

The young man's brother later invited me to stay the night at his house, gave me dry clothes, and, when he learned I had recently converted to Islam, a little book explaining the practice of prayer, with illustrations of the individual postures and the Arabic texts. I looked at it with interest, but thought to myself that this wasn't for me, but rather something for Pharisees and scribes. I hadn't read anything about such practices in the Quran either and believed these prayers were an invention of some priests or imams and unsuitable for me. I couldn't imagine saying "Allahu akbar" with devotion without laughing, because it sounded too funny to my European ears. In short, I simply couldn't identify with the whole ritual.

When my host finally learned that I wanted to sell my prahu, he negotiated a price with me and then took me

to Pulau Kosong the next day, where Dadang had already been waiting for me anxiously.



I would have loved to spend some time on this lovely island and enjoy the peace and quiet, but Dadang invited me to stay with his family again, and I didn't want to seem rude or go against the flow of things. When, in conversations with various people in Dadang's village, the mountains were frequently mentioned, and finally a boy told of a lake near Bukittinggi—one I had also heard of before in Germany—I set off, leaving all my belongings on Pulau Kosong with Dadang, grabbed my small backpack, and headed to Padang.

From Padang, I traveled via Bukittinggi to Lake Maninjau, which offered a wonderful panorama and

was a major attraction for foreign tourists in West Sumatra. I walked around the large body of water and eventually ended up in a small village.



When I asked for tea in a shop and struck up a conversation with the people there, I was promptly invited to stay the night, and when they learned that I wanted to learn how to pray, they took me to the village mosque the next morning. I had, in fact, come to understand that prayer was not some invention of imams, but had been taught in this way by the Prophet Muhammad himself.

Next to the mosque on the lakeshore stood a building under construction; on its first floor, there was a single room with four walls and a door, sparsely furnished with mats and a narrow bed. This was the home of Ustad⁵¹, a man in his late twenties named Akmal, who

⁵¹ Indonesian: Religious teacher

was also the imam⁵² of the mosque. He spoke a little “broken English” and immediately agreed to take me in for a while.

Now a good time began for me, because Akmal was a nice guy and took wonderful care of me. I tried my best not to disappoint him and now always attended the five daily prayers at the mosque. Soon I was the village favorite. People brought me food, gave me sarongs and shirts, and one girl even proposed to me, though I turned her down, much to her disappointment.

A few teenagers would often come by and hang around, offering to sell me water. One of them said I needed a new name now that I had become a Muslim. Akmal suggested Habib, Habiburrahman: “Habib means ‘the Beloved,’ and Rahman is ‘the Merciful.’ That means you are the Beloved of God, but it also means that you are loved by everyone,” he explained.

“Yes, I like the name!” I said contentedly.

Only gradually did it dawn on me that I had taken a decisive leap by becoming a Muslim. I had truly received a new identity. You didn’t just become a Muslim on a whim! You might start Hatha yoga or Zen meditation on a whim, but Islam encompassed your entire life, your entire personality. I hadn’t chosen this religion for myself; it had come to me!

⁵² There is no priestly caste in Islam, as there is in the Catholic Church, for example, even though there are special scholars and schools. The prayer leader in the mosque is usually the person who knows the most about the Quran and recites it best.

Only now did the long journey make sense—the long road to Andalusia, Morocco, and Algeria! I had already recited the creed back then! What had Umar told me in Morocco? “Sometimes it’s a long road before God lets you become a Muslim!”

Several banquets took place. Once for a wedding, where the bride and groom, lavishly adorned, had to stand in a room for hours greeting the numerous guests, while outside the house the village youth made a tremendous racket with large drums, and I, too, swung the drumstick to everyone’s delight. Another time, on the occasion of the circumcision of several eleven-year-olds, the guests were invited from house to house until even I could no longer eat any more of the delicacies. I was asked several times if I had already been circumcised, a question that apparently embarrassed no one here.

“Sudah⁵³?” they asked, mimicking scissors with their fingers, pointing the tips at their genitals.

“Sudah!” I replied in the affirmative, mimicking the gesture, for as fate would have it, I had already been circumcised as a baby.

Akmal wanted to visit his parents near Bukittinggi and would have liked to take me along. So at dawn, the two of us took a motorboat to the other side of the lake and caught a bus there. I was given a nice room above Akmal’s father’s shop, which offered a magnificent view of the surrounding rice fields, from which small hills jutted out like islands, planted with palm trees, banana

⁵³ Indonesian: already

plants, or cassava. A small mosque stood less than a hundred meters away, and all around were ponds with large-leaved, pink-blooming water lilies. God took good care of me once again!

Neighbors who had met me at the mosque gave me a sarong and an envelope containing 15,000 rupiah, which I didn't want to accept at first because, to me, that was barely an hour's wages, but for the people here it meant three hard days of work in the rice fields. However, when I realized that the people would have been offended if I hadn't accepted it, I put it away.

I gained quite a bit of weight because I was passed from one feast to the next and, out of politeness, always had to show that I was enjoying the food. And, of course, because I really did enjoy it!

I learned that a pilgrimage to Mecca cost around 7,000,000 rupiah, a sum that many people saved up for their entire lives! The pilgrimage⁵⁴ was a corresponding highlight of their lives, and people who had already made it were held in high regard.

When I said goodbye to the Kheir family after ten days, I didn't even know how to thank them. "Take and give," Akmal said to me, "you must pass on what you've learned here to the people back home!" Mom gave me

⁵⁴ The pilgrimage, which every Muslim must undertake once in a lifetime, provided they can afford it, is intended to prepare the faithful for the afterlife. Much of what happens there is believed to occur in a different form after death. For example, the gathering of pilgrims on the plain of Arafat, where three million people meet every year on a specific day of the pilgrimage month, symbolizes the gathering of humanity on the Day of Judgment.

a big food package to take with me, and Akmal, who accompanied me to the minibus, quickly pressed 10,000 rupiah into my hand as we departed—a tenth of his monthly salary! Ashamed, I once again had that awful feeling of not deserving so much love, because I couldn't possibly return it to that extent!



After a few days on the road, the thought began to take root in my mind that I should leave Indonesia as a stowaway, because I was thinking about what Akmal had told me: “What you’ve learned here, you must pass on to the people in your homeland!” The idea wouldn’t leave me, and I hoped to find a suitable ship in Jakarta. My money was now running low, but the bus company where I bought the ticket was called Liberty and had a soaring eagle as its logo, which gave me courage. I still had 9,000 rupiah left, just under 7 DM.

But the next morning I found 18,000 rupiah under my seat, which I first showed to the conductor, but he didn’t want it and told me to keep it. Then the bus crew

even invited me to eat, and despite the stressful ride on the Trans-Sumatra Highway, which was full of curves and potholes, I was in pretty good spirits, because it had always been that way: Whenever I ran out of money or found myself in need, I had grown closer to God!

Jakarta was sweltering and bustling. The port of Tanjung Priok was huge, with dozens of ships at the dock and anchored offshore. But I searched unsuccessfully for three hours, during which I was approached twice by security guards, though I managed to talk my way out of it both times. I saw ships from Egypt, Turkey, Korea, and other Asian countries, and two ships from Copenhagen, the sight of which made my heart race. It turned out, however, that they were chartered and only sailed within Indonesia.

A man on a moped rode by and asked where I was headed. I told him I was looking for a ship bound for Europe. The man pointed to one: the Anangel Victory, a Greek vessel. Warehouse workers were loitering in front of the massive ship, and I asked one of them when the ship was scheduled to depart. A small, bespectacled foreman intervened and started speaking rapidly to me in broken English: "You'd better go to the consulate if you don't have money for the return flight; the ship is too dangerous! There are high waves along the way, and the crew isn't very nice either."

He looked at me intently and then asked suspiciously where I was even going to sleep. I replied truthfully that I didn't know yet.

"And what's your name?"

"Habib!"

“Are you Muslim?”

The man gave me the address of a mosque where I could sleep, but later took me there himself.

“Tell the people the truth,” he said, because he had obviously already noticed that I was hiding something from him, “maybe they can help you.”

The mosque was called Raya al-Husna and was located right next to the stuffy, noisy main road that ran past Tanjung Priok. The mosque itself, however, seemed to be a place of peace; it had white-tiled floors and struck me as a lotus flower growing out of mud, yet whose petals remained pure and white. When I arrived, evening prayers were just taking place. I told the curious brothers that I was looking for a ship to Europe. I slept in the mosque’s vestibule with two other men. The next morning, these two accompanied me to a house where I could take a mandi and wash my clothes. Next to the house ran one of those stinking, garbage-filled canals that crisscrossed all of North Jakarta like a web. Swarms of mosquitoes were blown across, but strangely enough, the most beautiful plants with purple flowers thrived on the blackish water.

I went to the harbor again the next day, but returned in the afternoon without success. The Turkish ship I had planned to stow away on had already set sail during the night. But a man told me he would let me know if a suitable general cargo ship were to depart. However, I would have to be patient, because there weren’t that many of them, since most goods these days were loaded into containers. Container ships, however, would be unfavorable for me, because the transit port

for containers would be Singapore, where the goods would be transferred to huge ships, meaning I would have to change ships again.

That evening, a naval officer invited me to dinner. It turned out he wanted to collect money for me, but I finally came clean and told him that my problem wasn't money, but a missing passport and visa. I was spared having to explain why I didn't have a passport. Who would have understood that anyway? While the officer's wife served fried chicken, subtitles appeared on the TV reminding viewers that it was now time for prayer, and when I said goodbye, the officer wanted to at least slip a 10,000-rupiah bill into my hand. But I declined, so the officer gave the bill to the man who had accompanied me.

I was now being slipped money more and more often and was constantly invited to eat. I felt embarrassed that I was receiving such special treatment when there were still plenty of other needy people here, but the only response I got was that I shouldn't be so shy. People who had recently converted to Islam were often in need and particularly deserving of support. An old man, who had been grinning at me all day from his face crinkled with laugh lines, gave me a watch so that I would always know when it was time for prayer.

I had made many friends in the meantime, including the mosque's muezzin named Khomeini, who could recite the most beautiful adhan⁵⁵ I had ever heard.

⁵⁵ Arabic: Call to prayer

Just as I was returning from my daily mandi at the stinking canal, Khomeini was talking to a man in uniform and waved me over, insisting I come right over. I was already trembling with fear, but it was just an officer who had his office in the harbor, and he wanted me to accompany him to Friday prayers at the large harbor mosque because he wanted to collect money for me there. I thanked him, but tried to make it clear to him that the problem wasn't the money, but the passport. But the soldier didn't really respond to that, muttered something about how money could always be useful, and dragged me and Khomeini along to the officers' mess in the harbor, where we were then given a proper meal. When we returned from there, a donation had just been made for me—this time, half of an average Indonesian's monthly wage! I tried to tell them they should give the money to poor people instead, but I didn't stand a chance and had to accept it.

Yuska, the soldier, took me to play soccer on a large field surrounded by greenery, and I took another deep breath, because the heat and stench of Jakarta were really getting to me. I hadn't played in a long time and only had my heavy army boots with me, so I was quickly out of breath, and my right ankle ached from the unfamiliar exertion. On the way back, we drove along a major road lined for miles with smoldering, stinking mountains of trash. The smoke from these garbage dumps and the exhaust fumes from poorly tuned engines thickened into a suffocating haze, and I could hardly believe my eyes when I spotted shacks in this inferno where people lived, apparently still sifting through the trash for anything usable.

And then things got really crazy: It started with me being handed a 10,000-rupiah bill the next morning, then an envelope with 240,000 rupiah, followed by one with 50,000 rupiah, and then another 20,000-rupiah bill! The average daily wage of a manual laborer in Jakarta: just under 10,000 rupiah! My attempts to turn down the money failed. Then Yuska told me that a collection had been held for me at another mosque—an envelope containing 350,000 rupiah was waiting for me! I desperately tried to explain that, as a stowaway, the money was of no use to me, and that it would be worthless in Germany; they should rather give it to poor people. Which was finally understood. The envelope stayed at the mosque, and Yuska took the bulk of my cash so it wouldn't get stolen while I slept in front of the mosque. And at first, I was actually quite happy not to have to carry so much money around with me.

Yuska invited me to go to a village where a wedding was taking place. But first, we quickly bought a new front tire for 40,000 rupiah. Would it be okay to pay for it from the money I'd entrusted to him? I just nodded—why not? Then Yuska said I needed a new shirt, and he was right; I really could use a new one. I just shrugged when Yuska immediately picked one out for himself, too. Later, we happened to run into Yuska's sister-in-law, who invited us to dinner, and Yuska quickly slipped her 20,000 rupiah as a parting gift. Although I didn't necessarily feel like it was my money—but rather that it belonged to God—I gradually began to wonder about the steward who was managing it so generously.

A few days later, someone took me to the Kebun Jeruk Mosque, a center of Jamaat Tabligh, an organization

that promotes Islam—a practice known as da’wah. They travel in small groups from mosque to mosque for a set period of time (usually three or 40 days, or four months), inviting local residents to the mosque and giving talks in which they explain the way of life of the Prophet s.a.w. and his companions, in the hope that someone among those present will join the group. For me, as a new Muslim, this was a good opportunity to learn and practice, so I followed a group to Lombok. One of them spoke passable English. His name was Edy, and he soon became my close friend.

We moved from village to village, staying three days in each. I often called the adhan and was even asked to deliver the sermon on occasion. I usually gave it in English while Edy translated. It was clear that I was an attraction here in the villages, and the amir—the group’s leader—was very pleased that the mosques were filling up so nicely.



A friend of Edy’s showed up the next day and told us that the police in Mataram had gotten wind that a European was hanging around here and might also know that I didn’t have a passport.

“We should go to a friend of mine,” said Edy, “he’s a judge and might be able to give us some advice on what

to do. Let's stay here tonight and drive to see him tomorrow; he lives twenty kilometers from here."

The judge was still quite young and incredibly nice. He laughed out loud at the story of how I'd burned my passport and said it reminded him of how the Muslims had conquered Andalusia long ago. They'd burned their ships so there was no turning back, and I'd chosen the more modern version. But I could be in big trouble now. The immigration authorities were not to be trifled with: "You'd best go to the nearest police station and report your passport stolen, because that happens to a lot of foreigners."

Actually, I wanted to stick to the truth and not lie. I pondered back and forth, and we went to midday prayer first, where I asked for inspiration. The inspiration told me that with a passport, I could do much more for others than just sit around in jail as a martyr.

Edy and the judge were happy with my decision. The judge patted me on the shoulder and said, "If you want, I'll go look for a pretty woman for you. There's already a German Muslim living nearby who's married to an Indonesian woman. He has such cute kids! He also likes to call out the adhan, just like you!"

It was already night when we reached the harbor, but we were lucky and caught the last ferry to Bali. Edy dragged me to a friend named Harry, where we settled in.

"I don't think you need to go to Jakarta at all," Harry said, "isn't there a German consulate in Bali?"

“Maybe! Good idea!” I said happily, because I hadn’t even known yet how I would have gotten to Jakarta in the first place.

Finally, Edy said goodbye: “I have to get back to my da’wa now. I’m sure Harry doesn’t mind if you stay here until you’re ready to travel, right, Harry?”

Harry shook his head, and Edy and I hugged each other.

“Take care, brother. Assalamu alaikum!”

Harry borrowed a moped from a friend and drove me to the consulate in Sanur, where a friendly lady explained that to get a new passport, I would need photos and a police report confirming that my ID had been stolen. So we headed to the Sanur police station, and I told an officer that my ID had been stolen on the beach.

“And where are you staying right now?” the officer asked me.

“With a friend,” I said, showing the officer one of Harry’s business cards, which he examined closely.

“I’ll just call this number and check it out,” said the officer, already getting up, when I interjected that the friend was outside and I could go get him right away. I hurried outside and briefly explained to Harry what I had told the officer: “You need to come inside for a minute!”

The police officer questioned Harry about the matter, and he stated that he had met me at a mosque in Denpasar and then taken me back to his place.

“Oh no! I told him, I met him on the beach!” the thought raced through my mind.

“You’re required to report it if a foreigner is staying with you,” the police officer said unkindly, though he didn’t seem to notice the contradiction.

“That’s exactly what I’m doing now!” Harry replied meekly.

The police officer asked a few more questions, and I realized I hadn’t prepared well for the interrogation. But eventually, we were given a photocopy of the police report and drove back to the consulate with it.

“All my money was stolen too,” I claimed, “and my return ticket!”

“You can’t prove when you entered the country anymore?” the woman asked me, and I shook my head. “Then you could get into trouble. The immigration authorities will want to verify that.”

I kept a straight face, even though my stomach was churning a bit.

“The best thing to do is to get the ticket first and then go to the authorities just one day before you need the new stamp. Then they usually won’t have enough time to check it.”

Why on earth was this kind woman giving me such divine advice? She didn’t suspect anything, did she?

“Do you have any relatives who could send you the money for the flight?”

“Yes, I do!”

“Then I’ll connect you now, but keep it short—otherwise it’ll get expensive.”

“Hi, Dad! It’s me... In Bali... yeah, I’m fine! Listen, I have good news and bad news; the good news: we’ll probably see each other again soon; the bad news: you’ll have to send me the money for the flight...let’s say 1,500 DM...Deutsche Bank, Surabaya...great...in about a week...okay, thank you very much!”

The next day, I took a minibus to the consulate and picked up my temporary passport and the money. Then I went to a travel agency and booked a flight for Thursday afternoon that went to Paris. The next day was a Wednesday, and with a pounding heart I went to the Kantor Imigrasi. I entered a large office with several computers on the desks and was ushered in to see a mustachioed inspector, to whom I handed the police report, the plane ticket, and a letter from the consulate briefly describing the case and requesting that it be handled without complications.

“Yes,” said the inspector, tugging at his mustache, “we’ll have to check that. We can’t just give you the visa that easily. When and where did you enter Indonesia?”

“On August 15 in Medan,” I lied, “though it could have been the 14th or the 16th—I don’t remember exactly.”

“And you have absolutely nothing to prove that?” the inspector asked skeptically.

“No, everything was stolen from me!”

“Then we’ll have to call Medan now. You’ll need to buy a phone card for that; you can get them at the post office.”

“I can just give you the money directly,” I said, hoping to settle the matter with a little “money under the table.”

“No, no!” said the inspector, beckoning over another uniformed officer. “You’ll go with this gentleman now and then come back with the card.”

So I rode in the back of the moped to the post office and bought the card. When I returned with it, I was told to take a seat on a bench and wait. After an hour, someone came by and said it was impossible to get a line at the moment; I should wait a little longer. So I sat anxiously on my bench all afternoon, only going to a nearby mosque for prayer.

“Lord, please don’t let them get a connection...” I prayed.

It wasn’t until evening that I was told to come back again tomorrow morning; there was nothing that could be done at the moment.

The next morning, they tried again, and this time it worked—the connection was established: “Medan will let us know in an hour.” I hurried to the mosque and prayed two sets of two raka’at⁵⁶: “I know it doesn’t look good, but if You will it, I’ll still get my stamp.”

This time I was introduced to a different inspector, because the man from yesterday was apparently off duty today.

⁵⁶ A rakaat is a prayer cycle consisting of recitation while standing, bowing, and prostration.

“Medan has informed us that no German with your name arrived there on August 15,” he said, staring intently into my eyes.

I didn’t let on, though, and immediately said, “But I explicitly told your colleague that I didn’t remember if it had been on the 15th. It could just as easily have been the 14th or the 16th!”

The inspector leaned back in his chair, looking displeased, and said nothing at first.

“I don’t understand the problem at all,” I said cheekily, “if someone doesn’t have a visa in Germany, they’re deported. I don’t want to stay in Indonesia, I want to leave.”

“We’re not concerned with the Europeans; I know they can get a visa; we’re concerned with the bigger picture,” the inspector admitted. “I’ll ask my boss what we should do with you,” he said.

When I returned from midday prayers, the paper was already stamped and waiting for me. Relieved, I left the building, thanked God, and hurried to pick up my things from Harry. He was already waiting for me, excited, and was incredibly glad that everything had gone well.

“I sat in the mosque the whole time and prayed,” he exaggerated a little and drove me to the airport on his moped.

Epilogue

This is a blessed Book which We have sent down to you, so that they may ponder its signs and so that those of understanding may reflect.

Sad 29

During my travels, I found to be true what the Bible says:

And whoever leaves homes or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for My sake will receive a hundredfold and inherit eternal life. [Matthew 19:29]

During my journey, I truly found countless people who welcomed me as their son or brother. In the Quran, God makes a similar promise:

And to those who emigrated for the sake of Allah after they had been oppressed, We will surely give them a beautiful abode in this world. But the reward of the Hereafter is truly greater, if only they knew! (They) who are steadfast and put their trust in their Lord. [An-Nahl 41, 42]

Ultimately, my spiritual path—and above all, Islam—answered the questions of what is truly wrong with globalized society⁵⁷ and what I myself should expect

⁵⁷ There is another book on this subject: *The Fitnah of the Dajjal*.

from this life. It brought my emotions and my intellectual reflections into harmony.

Islam means both “devotion” (to the one God), “surrender” (to His will), and “peace” (through reconciliation with oneself and God). A Muslim is therefore someone who strives to devote himself to God, submits to His will, and thereby finds (inner) peace. This is precisely what I sought to achieve on my journey, and it consequently led me to Islam.

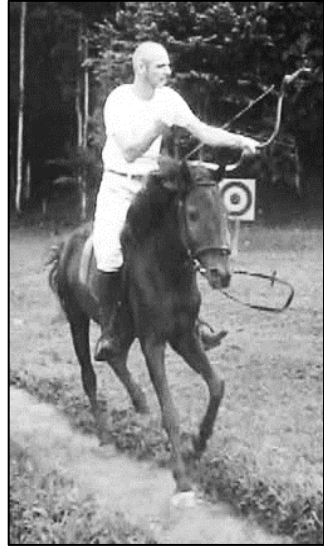
Although my conversion was primarily based on inspiration, intellectually as well there is no longer any doubt in my mind that Islam is founded on divine revelation, for no human being could conceive of a book like the Quran, nor the complex system of Islam, including its prophecies, which are clearly being fulfilled or have been fulfilled.

In my personal life and on my journey, I have seen time and again how my life changed depending on which perspective I was currently following. Since I began trying to follow God and inspiration rather than rational thought and globalized norms, my life has been transformed, just as God says in His Holy Book:

Allah is the Protector of those who believe. He brings them out of darkness into light. [al-Baqarah 257]

I have been given everything in this life that I ever wished for and much more. For example, He gave me a loving wife and a “little surfer,” just as I had wished for when I fell in love with Moni. Now I already have three children and two grandchildren. He also gave me sailboats and instead of one horse, He gave me two and let me practice horseback archery for ten years.

Looking back now on the nearly 40 years since I began my spiritual journey, I can say that the experiences are enough for three lifetimes. I desire or hope for nothing more from life. I have lived my life. My only wish is to return to my Creator while He is pleased with me, and until then to do as many good deeds as possible.



Now one might think that I am no longer a stranger, but have found my faith and thus also my “family.” And that is true to a certain extent. I can go into almost any mosque in the world and will always be welcomed as a brother. But my views on Islam often differ considerably from the “mainstream” of today’s Muslims.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said:

Islam began as something strange and will return as a strange thing, just as it began. Therefore, good news to the strangers.

A time will come when nothing will remain of Islam but its name, and nothing will remain of the Holy Qur’an but its letters. The mosques will be magnificent buildings and full of worshippers; but as for guidance, they will be empty and deserted.

The Palestinian conflict today clearly demonstrates how lifeless and powerless Islam is practiced today. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said:

People will soon invite one another to attack you, just as people invite others to share their food when eating. Someone asked: Will this be because we are few in number at that time? He replied: "No, you will be numerous at that time: but you will be scum and refuse, swept away by a raging torrent, and Allah will remove the fear of you from the hearts of your enemies and instill 'wahn' into your hearts." Someone asked, "What is 'wahn'?" The Messenger of Allah replied, "Love of the world and aversion to death."

The Prophet (peace be upon him) recommended for the present time that we leave the cities, move to the countryside, and withdraw from society as much as possible.



We are trying to put this into practice. We live relatively secluded, have a large garden and a few animals, and

maintain a certain safe distance from the local population and, inwardly, from other people as well.

In other words: We have accepted being strangers. It must be so. We could go wherever we wanted; we are strangers everywhere. That is the nature of this world for believers. The world is merely a place of passage. What could be more fitting than living in a hotel?

Despite the desolate state of Muslims as such, I would still like to emphasize at the end that I changed my mind during my journey. At first, I believed that all major religions are essentially the same. They might have different packaging, but the essence would be more or less alike. And it is, of course, true that one finds a great deal of truth and parallels in all main religions. But only Islam still has an original, unadulterated book, and I would not be a Muslim if I did not believe that people who reject Islam will suffer eternal torment beyond what one can imagine in the worst nightmares. I would therefore ask the esteemed reader, however far-fetched it may seem to the average Central European, to engage with Islam without reservation. The question one should ask oneself is quite simple: Is it possible that the Quran originates from a human being or not?

Instinctively, many people will want to avoid this question, for if one answers it with “No!” this would entail consequences that many are likely unwilling to accept. It would turn one’s own life upside down and make one a stranger.

It is not for any soul to believe save by the permission of Allah. And He sends His wrath upon those who refuse to use their reason for it.

[Yunus 100]

Remind [men], for of use is the reminder. He will heed who feareth. But the most hapless will flout it. He who will be flung to the great Fire. Wherein he will neither die nor live.

[Al-A'la 9-13]

Whoever among the Christians and Jews hears of me but does not believe in my message and dies in this state of disbelief, will be an inhabitant of Hell.

[Sahih Muslim]

Other titles by the author:

The Fitnah of the Dajjal

With the help of modern technologies, a new, all-encompassing, and all-controlling superorganism is emerging, fulfilling the promise Satan made to humanity at the dawn of time: apotheosis—becoming god. Meanwhile, the conformist, globalized people—who are led to believe they are living in the best and most progressive era in human history—are becoming increasingly enslaved by a diabolical political and economic system, and by a certain perception of reality. As creation perishes and the world hurtles toward the climax of Armageddon, the individual has but a single chance: surrender to God!

Ruqyah – Islamic Exorcism

There is hardly a better opportunity to observe the power of the Qur'an firsthand than through Ruqyah. Simply by reciting the Qur'an, demons can be expelled or killed. What sounds like an old wives' tale to the average person is a recognized practice in Islam. This book explains the causes of possession by jinn and offers guidance on protection, diagnosis, and treatment. A useful reference for those who wish to practice Ruqyah and essential knowledge for every Muslim.

Christianity from the Perspective of Islam

When viewed from a distance and observed with detachment, things often appear quite different. This is also true of Christianity when viewed from the perspective of Islam. This book invites reflection. It offers new perspectives and inspiration for those who do not wish to cling rigidly to their dogmas, but for whom one thing matters above all else: the truth.

