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Rules of Engagement

Novel

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I didn't hear any more from Milan after our meeting at the Beau-Rivage. In Geneva, we all dashed from one important meeting to another more important one, passing the time in between with paperwork. Those days, I knew less than ever what I was doing in the city. By the time I left the office after seven the shops were already closed, only the Migros at the station still open, the only scrap of big-city life that existed in the whole place.

The block I lived in possessed all the elegance of a socialist commuter town and I tried not to get there before dusk, walking through the old part of town, sometimes along the banks of the lake, even though I can't stand cold or wet weather. On the streets, I felt surrounded by passing travellers, the feeling so strong by now, as if not only the people but the very city were a stranger to itself. All of us were only living here for a while, none of us were really at home, it was not worth settling down for the few years of our stay, less worth it in Geneva than in the missions where we had to keep our impromptu communities together, which was a kind of settling. In a narrow shop on Boulevard Georges-Favon, model trains shunted in circles and left passers-by alone with the question of who in Geneva bought so many model railways, miniature cows and tiny mountain landscapes that it paid the rent in this area appointed with luxurious apartments. On the quay, tourists photographed the fountains beneath grey skies, the lake pushing its way into the middle of the city. It might have been beautiful but to me, everything seemed to be growing mould. Too long in the water.

Only when I took the tram to work early in the morning, past the station, could I understand again, between two stops, the charm of the morbid residential buildings weighed down by caryatids and the stained functional constructions, and also the lure of the elite that I sensed behind the windows of the lakeside Grand Hotel, where I could imagine heads of state playing billiards with globes.

Some of my colleagues liked to say the United Nations was a big family, but if it was and the cold, elegant corridors of the Palais des Nations were our home, then it was one of those families

where neither fights nor cravings for revenge ruled the day but instead a generous sense of indifference, which was worse, in a way, because there was nothing left to indicate that anyone had once loved the others. Those of us who worked at the United Nations couldn't afford to enter into false dependencies, couldn't expect that a colleague deployed at the other end of the world or preparing for a deployment would ever think of them, and hadn't Milan only got more familiar at the bar, as we all do with a little alcohol? There was nothing to indicate that anything would follow up our reunion, and yet I still waited for a message from him, a brief subject line that might sound more personal than my usual correspondence. But there was no mail in my inbox reminding me of an evening at the Beau-Rivage, and all I heard on the telephone was Monsieur Boucheron's nasal instructions.

I'm sure you'll get it done, Mira, two states, one island, the situation is looking positive, they've already exchanged maps, all we have to do is adjust them a little. He told me my job was to dispel concerns and doubts, reservations, the wrongly marked strips of land, the extraneous commas, it was looking positive, he repeated, even though we both knew the president of the Republic of Cyprus clung to power like other people cling to their loved ones and there was not enough for him to gain from an agreement. I had read the secretary general's reports, the resolutions, dossiers and newspaper columns, over and over as though to learn them by rote, though it would hardly change a thing about my negotiations. I preferred to entice my dialogue partners with mute waiting; they'd soon crack and move their king to a square beyond the chessboard.

The politicians and generals only came to Geneva once there was no other place in the world they could agree on, because one side played too much into the hands of one party and the other vice versa; Geneva was tabula rasa, neutral territory, and if all went fortuitously – it was looking good, as Boucheron said, historically good – if I did my job to everyone's satisfaction, we'd be welcoming representatives of Northern Cyprus and the Republic of Cyprus in July, two parties prepared to set aside a decades-long conflict that we long since considered unalterable fact like the melting glaciers and the Rocky Mountains, a few dozen people who had fired accusations, lies and bullets at each other or got others to do so on their behalf, when I saw on the left-hand margin of my window blue feathers shimmering against green.

I lowered my documents, a pile of statistics on the blue berets in deployment, 887 soldiers (84 female), 67 police officers (19 female), and pressed my forehead to the glass. The feathers glistened in the foggy brightness swathing Geneva for days now. Its head jerked back and forth as the peacock stalked along the gravel; it almost seemed to be trembling. It dragged its train behind it like beautiful but too heavy luggage. All it took was for a passing stroller to cross its path and it would fan out its tail; I threw the files on my desk and left the office.

At the Cirque, I pushed open the glass door of Café Remor. The air here was always slightly overheated, smelled not of the big wide world like the air-conditioned spaces of the United Nations but of coffee and damp coats, and the moment the door fell closed behind me the hustle and bustle would dissolve like the noise of a distant building site.

I picked up a newspaper and sat down among the people, all of whom looked like they still made a habit of wearing hats as soon as they left the house. For a brief moment, I thought I could simply disappear in a time that didn't belong to me. An unmanned Chinese space shuttle had docked at the Celestial Palace spacelab, I read, where one day rice would be cultivated. The waiter put my coffee down in front of me with a choicely polite expression; two self-engrossed gentlemen walked past the window, and it was as if a Calvinist rigour crept close to me, that superstition that made the future feel more like bearing than hoping and that mistrusted any form of beauty on principle. Calvin himself was buried a few minutes' walk away in the Cimetière des Rois; a small grave fenced in by cast iron with a box hedge growing on it. The cemetery was established for all the plague victims at the Hôpital des Pestiférés, at a time when people still died in their masses even here and they welcomed not only the gentlemen, very rarely also ladies, who negotiated on their thrones and lodges over their destroyed swathes of land. I didn't know where exactly the beyond was; I only hoped it wasn't in the minds of the Calvinists.

I was just about to get up, put the newspaper back in its place and return to the United Nations, when a gawky woman entered the café. She looked around the room and responded to my confusion with a nod, shook the drips from her coat collar and beat a path to my table. I hadn't seen Sarah since I'd left Burundi. Her face looked sallow, as if her skin tone had adapted to the permanent cloud cover, but there was something more iridescent about her than I remembered, and we hugged quickly, presumably both uncertain how close we had actually been back then.

How's things? I asked.

Well, how d'you think? Lost in the world, she said. You too?

We all are.

We laughed and I reached for her hand; she looked at me in surprise. It's nice to see you, I said, apologizing.

Didn't seem like it last time, she commented. UNHCR?

I shook my head. I'm just here... Presumably be gone again soon. Nairobi or why not Teheran.

Congrats, they're really into our gang. But who is, anyway? Sarah said and waved over the waiter, ordering freshly squeezed orange juice like in Bujumbura, where we'd subsisted almost entirely on juice squeezed out of all kinds of fruit in Jenny's Café, a hip enclave populated by journalists and expats.

But those boys you taught, I said. You told me about them, remember?

Of course, Sarah said. We collected up their rifles in the morning, and in the afternoon they sat at school desks so they could grow up to be something other than mercenaries.

They liked you.

Sure. They liked me so much they broke open the storage room at night and took the weapons away again. What they liked best was my naivety.

The waiter put the glass of juice down in front of Sarah. I watched her fingers swirling around the glass, now even thinner than in Bujumbura, fragile without being graceful, and no one would have thought of wanting to protect them. They came across like everything about Sarah, her straw-like hair, her misshapen handbag, her faded jacket, like something you've forgotten even though you always have it with you.

Sometimes I can't imagine any more that I once worked with real people and not just with statistics, she said, and pointed at the window. Unreal city out there. That's cynical of me, sorry. First African solutions for African problems, because no one wanted to get their hands dirty on the continent. Because it wasn't economically viable to get our own soldiers killed over there. And no one was a reformed character after Rwanda, they just came along with new buzzwords: perspectives, future. Like from an advert for a better world. And it worked wonders. Now the streets are on fire in Bujumbura again. The president's violating the constitution to stay in power, and anyone who goes against him disappears or is lucky enough to make it into exile. Great, those lessons didn't change a thing. When did you leave?

A couple of weeks before the putsch attempt.

I stayed until the end, until they threw us out. No, wrong: until they ended the dialogue with us, that's how they put it. And now everything's like we were never even there. Or worse, even. But what did we expect? To just turn up from Switzerland, wrap a bit of barbed wire around a plot of land and determine the development of a country no one outside the mission is interested in?

We tried, at least. It went wrong, yes, but we did try.

You weren't there for the putsch, Sarah said. It's like bringing up a kid and then watching it fall in the river and drown.

It's not your child, it was just a mission.

You didn't see what happened at the end. Everything collapsing again. It was so pointless, all those years were pointless, she said. Of course, you can say there was a chance it might have worked. That things moved on. Civil society existed. The middle class had a bit of money again. The streets were jammed in the mornings because more people could afford cars than the city ever planned for. The cars, she said, swiping a finger across her phone, at least they came in useful for escaping.

You used to talk very differently.

I guess I poisoned myself, she said, and stared at her phone, tense. An overdose of idealism. And my boss is having another tantrum. Sorry, I've got to go and minimize the collateral damage. See you soon.

As Sarah stood up she leaned over to me, awkward and yet deft, as if to kiss me, then wrapped her scarf around her neck and turned away.

She was already at the door when she turned to me once more, hesitated and came back over to my table.

Did I just talk too much? she asked.

We haven't seen each other for a long time.

She looked at me for a moment, gauging something, then ran a deliberately hasty hand through her hair. Is that what they're always talking about?

Who talks about what?

That you make people speak.

I laughed. No, what? Who said that?

Several people. All sorts of people. Was it like that even in Burundi? Did I just not notice?

I've no idea what you mean.

Bujumbura. September 2012

They call us expats and we call ourselves it too, a curt abbreviation, a word lounging around a swimming pool, a status from frequent-flyer programmes and exclusive clubs, and of course it also means that we don't belong, not where we are right now, and also not where we once came from, that area or community we sentimentally call *Heimat* that really is something more than just kitsch, something you notice at the latest when your memories of the place grow vague. Some, quite a few of us, the diplomats' kids, encountered their home country from the very beginning as a luxurious temporary solution, as a network spanning the globe, with no idea that home can be a small town on the Rhine or a village in Kirundo Province on the border to Rwanda.

The expats are an international class that consists not only of United Nations staff, but also includes envoys of globally operating businesses, diplomatic corps and the many NGOs. The word, or rather its full form, expatriates, always makes me think of pariahs, of stateless and homeless people, which would be pure cynicism in a world of camps full of refugees and busses full of displaced persons, of repatriation programmes gone wrong, of the actually stateless and homeless. It seems absurd to me that, even in regions robbed of any possibility of being a home by war, natural disaster and famine, or that have robbed themselves of that possibility, it's us who have access even there to a passably functioning infrastructure, rooms in brick houses, electricity, internet, return flights, and we're the ones referred to as expatriates – it's not that we have no home, it's that we have too many, and only the fact that some of those who stayed behind disdain us for it, if not despise us, gives us the slightest right to the word pariah.

We were on bad terms with each other now, too, by this point; there were subtle hierarchical differences but each of us saw them a little differently. The NGO staff, the independent journalists and travelling actors liked to deny us UN workers any actual knowledge of the region and considered us overprivileged global bureaucrats with our armoured vehicles, career paths and administrative procedures, who from their point of view had lost touch with reality. We UN workers meanwhile gaffed in amusement, sometimes amazement, at the non-commercial world-rescuers marked out by

their bright adventure anoraks, stomping around the refugee camps and disrupting our well-organized work with their overenthusiasm, handing out the wrong medications, or the right ones, but overlooking the fact that some ICRC or UN or other uniformed individual had handed out other medications before them, which triggered a dangerous chain reaction of side effects in conjunction with their donated drugs, for which more antibiotics would have been required than existed in the entire camp; or when they were eager to register the misery they experienced on their forms, the third or fourth, even fifth group in one refugee camp to ask the inhabitants for their origins, their names, dates of birth, the reason for their displacement, and the refugees merely stared at them with empty eyes because they'd reported exactly that three or four times before.

Though we were on bad terms by day, after work we held joint parties around turquoise swimming pools, united in our wish to make the world a better place. I sat with my Heineken on the edge of the pool, studied the snaking lines my foot drew in the water, the rippling surface, and looked back at my colleagues stretched out on the wicker furniture and at the bar in their shorts and summer dresses. Gunnar, the German attaché, clinked glasses with a young Swiss woman who was collecting water samples for her PhD at the University of Basel and had asked me where she could spend her last two weekends. Gitega, why not in Gitega? Or maybe a trip to Kenya, a safari with rhinos and giraffes, which they didn't have in Burundi?

But I got a better degree! someone exclaimed. I looked around; Gunnar's wife had sat up on her lounge. Diplomatic spouse! she panted. I understood Hamsun, at least in a few texts, or alright, I thought I understood him, and all *he* did was read an introduction to his work. And now I'm sitting here as a diplomatic spouse.

I look at her pretty face, frowning, ground down by doing nothing. The European press wasn't interested in what happened here, who even knew where the country was, and it was no use to her that she'd once been a teacher; no one wanted to learn Norwegian here and nobody was interested in Knut Hamsun either.

If I still haven't found a job in a month's time, I'm leaving. I'm leaving. I can't stand any more. I'm going crazy in this town.

But you do know it gets lonely as soon as things go differently? Sarah asked, raising her chin, and it occurred to me that her medications were still in a doctor's bag in the boot of my car, the cooling units presumably little more than lukewarm plates of plastic by now, and had I been a responsible person I would have had to get up and go to the car, but the evening, the beer, the hypnotizing turquoise of the pool made all obligations fall away. I breathed the mild evening air, refused to think about Sarah having to drive across the border again tomorrow to a bare hospital to protect raped women from HIV infection with emergency medications, refused to think about there being anything like that on the other side of the garden wall protecting us in our banal, argumentative paradise. I wanted so much to believe this country was exactly the way it showed itself when we sat by the lake, at Geny's Beach with the wide raffia loungers like an armada of four-poster beds with

their light chiffon canopies, us playing beach volleyball and drinking freshly squeezed juice, the waiters standing hesitantly at the bar, which encouraged an Austrian colleague's conviction that the country was one big retarding moment. All I knew was that this paradise here was located strangely close to the genocide monuments, and unlike in Germany, there had been no Marshall Plan.

You can always try to nab one of the actors, said Pietro, looking at Sarah but presumably thinking of Angelina Jolie, or at least of the diplomatic spouse. You know they like a nice visit to a refugee camp.

They want women standing around the camps in espadrilles and white evening dresses, Sarah commented, and she was right of course, and of course she realized Pietro didn't mean her. None of us expats was loved for handing out medications particularly well, for sorting forms better or faster; people like us were loved because beauty, grace and secrecy existed, even here at the end of the world. The M23 militia were gathering not far from us on the Congolese border, the country had been through massacres that had been declared genocide only late in their course, international law systematized what happened with less regard for formalities in reality, and the rule that not everyone had a chance, that you might fade past your prime, die, be forgotten, that rule applied here just like it did in every dump of a German town, only its effect was more brutal.

And sure, Sarah said, irritated, sure you can say we're not much better than the women in espadrilles and evening dresses, we only get the roads built so our military convoys make better speed, what do the people in the countryside need a motorway for if hardly any of them have as much as a bicycle? But without the motorways, the medications don't get to the remote hospitals on time and nor does the food when another famine breaks out and...

And why are you defending yourself so hard? Pietro asked. Because you know very well that you want to palm people off with your life, your medications, your idea of security.

What do you want me to do? You want me to forge my passport so no one can accuse me of Western hegemony? Or should I be sitting at home peeling organic veggies and celebrating the peace in my front garden?

Better to be a heroine, bravo! Here where it's tough and you can build the opposite of everything you find on the ground. But the opposite of tough is still far from good, Pietro said.

If you see yourself as the opposite of this country, you haven't understood a thing. You just go on writing your reports to Rome so they keep the administration going.

We can be anything, it doesn't matter what the people here are. It's unjust but you know, it doesn't get any fairer if we persuade ourselves it's any different. I can't understand the whole romanticism thing any more.

It's not romanticism. We're building something up. Look at the Truth Commission.

That's what I'm saying, romanticism, Pietro exclaimed, and I put my beer bottle down on the edge of the pool, pushed myself off with my hands and slipped into the water. I didn't want to think about it any more, the stalled negotiations, all the entreaties and invocations they gave us and we gave

them, I didn't know if anyone at this party still thought it was a good idea to have used the prospect of amnesties as bait, but how to get a country working again if hardly anyone with any vital skills, or purported skills, was innocent?

My dress soaked up the water, I felt it getting heavier and heavier and my movements slackening, but at last the heat was rinsed away that I hadn't got rid of since that morning when I'd waited in the car to be let through to the parliament grounds, to the fat polished leather armchairs against the ochre-coloured wall. A ventilator had been stuttering away since presumably before the republic was founded, a carved cat squatting, frozen, on a side table.

I dived under, opened my eyes in the chlorinated water, drifted across the pool with weak strokes, and as my head came up above the surface again I heard glass breaking. I swam to the edge and looked around; Sarah was leaving in a hurry, a Heineken bottle had smashed on the edge of the swimming pool, and Gunnar returned my look with a shake of his head.

She's been here too long, he called over to me. She needs a man.

He clearly had no idea yet of his wife's plans to leave him in a few months or weeks or days if she didn't find a job here, and that she wouldn't find anything here was as predictable as the president's next automobile convoy as soon as his football team next played. There'd be goals, there'd be deaths, and in the end we'd all go up to join the fallen angels.

And you, Pietro Mazzani, you leave the Truth Commission out of it, I've finished work for the day, said Gunnar, taking a running jump. Water splashed me in the face and he surfaced next to me at the edge of the pool a moment later. Pietro drank a mouthful of beer.

What's truth anyway? he said, and jumped in after us.