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Roman Ehrlich
Malé

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All attempts to save the Maldives from the rising sea level have failed. Package tours have moved on to new destinations, and the majority of the island's inhabitants have been forced to leave. At the same time, the seedy capital of Malé has become a mecca for all the people searching for alternatives to life in the gentrified cities of the west. And so, for the short while before it is submerged, the island becomes a space for the visions of drop-outs, adventurers and utopians, a place suspended between euphoria and nightmares where new forms of solidarity are tested and people vanish without a trace. In Malé, Roman Ehrlich captures the complex moods of our time and weaves the stories of his characters' yearnings and failures into a tapestry of all the contradictions that make up life at the start of the 21st century.

Roman Ehrlich, born in 1983, studied at the German Literature Institute in Leipzig and the Free University in Berlin. Literary awards include the Alfred Döblin Medal, the Robert Walser Prize and the Ernst Toller Prize. He has previously published the books *Das kalte Jahr* (2013), *Urwaldgäste* (2014) and *Das Theater des Krieges* (2016, with Michael Disqué). His last novel published with S. Fischer was *Die fürchterlichen Tage des schrecklichen Grauens*.

Translation by Isabel Cole

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In the spot where Frances Ford is standing by the murky wall of windows, in the light of the grimy panes struck by the afternoon sun – glaring through the clouds, all the dust, the salt and the filth on the glass flaring golden – the dark-blue carpeting has faded with the years. Even when the sun vanishes behind the heavy drift of the clouds, when the shine of the filthy panes dims away, Frances Ford is left standing in a light, pale-blue rectangle in the deserted breakfast room of the Royal Ramaan Residence Hotels on what is now known as Daisy Street, in a district called *Stearson Patch* by the city's new inhabitants, probably harking back to one of the early pioneers who first settled here after the total collapse of the island republic and for whom the existing place names were meaningless or just too complicated to say on a regular basis.

A thick layer of dust has settled on the furniture. Even the air, which hasn't stirred in years, is coated with dust, old and dead, thinks Frances Ford, and each breath of that dusty air stings the nose and fills the lungs with a heavy feeling that makes the heart all dark with shadow. In the whole vast room, plunged in permanent darkness farther inside the building, there was nowhere the two of them felt like sitting down.

For the past several days the water has stood nearly knee-deep in the streets. Through the grime on the windows Frances Ford can detect the shape of a vehicle moving away from the hotel and turning onto a narrow side street. An amphibious vehicle with big tires and a ship's hull – she's already seen several of them in the city. Maybe it's just the same one each time that she keeps seeing because there's such a limited space to move in here. Though she can't really see it through the dirty glass, already Frances Ford can easily fill in the image from memory: the vehicle drawing its track through the dark, oily water, little waves forming wedge-shaped at its stern and surging out toward the sides of

the street, sloshing against the walls of the buildings, where they roil the plastic bottles and other trash that's collected there.

Frances Ford arranged to meet the father of the deceased actress Mona Bauch in the breakfast room of the Royal Ramaan Residence Hotel because the hotel – like the actress Mona Bauch – is mentioned often in the writings of the poet Judy Frank, the man she's come searching for in vain, whose journals, letters and poems have sunk under her skin and into her soul just as the moisture has sunk into the walls of this lost city.

Frances Ford arrived in Malé about a week and a half before the father of the actress Mona Bauch. She senses that in terms of knowing the conditions on the ground, she has a head start over the distraught man. At the same time, she feels that she has less time left before her drive, strength and will are utterly consumed by the all-encompassing inertia, the humid weather that hangs heavy overhead, the rain, the gnawing waves and the spring tides that the pale moon drags across the island.

The distraught father has just started his search. And he has information that Frances Ford lacks: two months ago, somewhere in this former capital of the republic, the actress Mona Bauch appears to have taken her own life; her dead body has been found, witnesses have given detailed accounts of thereof, and two different, highly unappetizing photographs of a grossly disfigured drowned body were circulating in the internet for a time. Presumably it was cremated on one of the nearby atolls or buried in a mass grave. The poet Judy Frank, however, has vanished without a trace. His (possibly simultaneous) suicide is a mere speculation. They are presumed to have left together.

Back home in Germany, the father of the actress Mona Bauch is on a last-name basis with his employees, while his friends, back in their schooldays, made the last name into a nickname with the mild mockery of affection: *Belly*. Yesterday in the bar, when asked for his name, he didn't know how to introduce himself. Bauch seemed too formal, Belly too private, and his actual first name seemed as strange as though it belonged to someone else. Elmar Bauch realized how long it had been

since he'd met anyone new or had to introduce himself to a stranger outside the workplace. He decided to introduce himself in the function that had brought him to the island – as the father of the deceased actress Mona Bauch – to make it clear from the outset what sort of information he hoped to obtain from the locals: clarification, a background against which something like mourning would be possible, hopefully relieving the dull numbness that has swathed him ever since a *Celebrity Check* push notification on his device informed him of the death of his own daughter.

In the bar where the distraught father went yesterday to start getting his bearings on the island, he was told that his daughter had left a sort of farewell letter. And that there might be a willingness to give him access to that letter – something could be contrived, a meeting arranged for mutual benefit. Frances Ford overheard the conversation at the bar counter between the newcomer and the muscular, strict and uncompromising Dutch woman Hedi Peck. Frances Ford offered to meet the helpless-seeming father at the Royal Ramaan Residence Hotel on Daisy Street the next day, saying that she had no deal to offer him, nor perhaps could she really help him, but her search and his overlapped in a way that might interest him.

Frances Ford explains to the father, who is standing a bit farther behind her in the room, not in the pale rectangle of carpet, but still in the light of the windows:

"I come from a pretty part of the US, where we still get properly cold winters and very green and vibrant springs, and I majored in German at the university in my home town and did my Ph.D. on contemporary German literature. I was most interested in the poets born after the turn of the millennium, amid the turmoil after 9/11, the major financial crises and all the contradictions of the time, and – putting it very broadly – how they tried to capture that in their poems from their perspective in Europe, with Germany's unique history, where I focused on the motif of the blue blossom, which was such an important symbol for the Romantics, and played a role in East Germany too, and often got

used later on as a code for the politics of the far right. I don't know if you're interested in contemporary German poetry, but the symbol of the blue flower is quite pervasive. The whole body of Romantic symbolism has had a renaissance in German poetry over the past several decades. My thesis supervisor, who I was working for at the university, wanted me to advance my academic career and publish papers, and he kept trying to nudge me toward new topics. But I didn't want to advance my career. Actually, I didn't even want a university job anymore. A few months ago my thesis advisor went to a conference in Germany and brought me back the entire posthumous papers of the German poet Judy Frank, which at the time we didn't know were posthumous, but meanwhile I believe that Judy Frank is no longer living, and that's connected in part with your daughter."

While the literary scholar Frances Ford holds forth, the father of the actress Mona Bauch listens with a patience he's never known before. He registers every detail with hyperclarity and total vividness, feeling that at last someone is setting out to explain all the things that have been so incomprehensible, unreal and nightmarish. The father of the actress Mona Bauch has never taken any interest in contemporary German poetry.

"The poet Judy Frank," Frances Ford continues, holding up her hands between herself and the highly attentive father as she counts off on her fingers, "brought out nine books of poetry with his German publisher – *Lingering under a Floating Load*, *Motorized Maids*, *World without End*, *The Rascals from the Third Reich*, *My Life as a Child*, *A Twig and a Twin*, *Eclipses*, *The Vibe of Wittenberg* and *Salmon, My Bunny* – before announcing to his publisher that he was heading for Malé because he didn't like it on the mainland anymore. Frank hoped that here in Malé, with the émigrés, he could find a milieu like the 1980s West Berlin he'd always pictured – West Berlin was an island surrounded by East Germany, a bit lost, a place where people only wanted to go if they were already a bit crazy and couldn't cope with regular society."

The father of the deceased actress tells Frances Ford – still staring at her fingers, which, after counting off Judy Frank's poetry collections,

have interlaced in a shape that makes him think the words *Indian teepee* – that Mona was also fascinated by the history of divided Berlin, and he recalled her once saying that the only Berlin she'd like to live in was that West Berlin of the old days. "I don't think she ever really warmed to the real Berlin of today. And pretty soon after that she went to France, and then California. I would have rather she'd stayed in California or come back to Germany, but of course she didn't ask me, she was a grown woman by then. I had no conception of this whole situation here, but I thought it might be dangerous."

Frances Ford nods without looking him in the face. She is trying to keep her distance from the distraught father's grief. She senses that this man is beginning to see her as someone or something who or which might be able to relieve him of a very painful, very frustrating job by fitting together jumbled puzzle pieces to make a whole, comprehensible picture.

"Frank came here three years ago. And he kept sending e-mails and manuscripts and journals to his publisher in Germany. He probably figured that in Germany the publisher would sort everything out and publish it and wire him some money, but the publisher became seriously ill and died, and his wife had no interest in keeping the business going. She sorted out all their correspondence and the archives, set up various hard drives, printed e-mails, deleted accounts, and then divvied it all up among the first takers. And so the things ended up with me by way of my thesis advisor. I knew Judy Frank's poetry books already. But his island diaries, poems, sketches and letters from Malé fascinated me far more than the published books. First I tried to contact him through his publisher's widow, then I tried to write to him directly, and then, when none of that worked out, I asked my thesis advisor for a leave of absence and came here looking for this German poet, which is kind of crazy, because he probably isn't even alive anymore and I can't say what would happen if I did find him. I mean, what I think ought to happen. Maybe I wouldn't even have come here if I hadn't already known there's no hope."

"I'm afraid I can't help you there. I didn't get many e-mails from my daughter while she was living here. But if you think it would help you out, we can take another look at them together."

"I'm pretty sure that your daughter and Judy Frank were a couple, or at least romantically involved. My hunch is that Frank had a pet name for your daughter. If so, he called her *Luna,* and she actually turns up quite a bit in his writing."

"Luna." Elmar Bauch says his daughter's pet name several times out loud, and he doesn't like it one bit, the way the word inexorably spreads, covering his brain and the memory of his child. "I can't even tell you how awful that is. Luna."

"It's hard to say what to make of the whole affair with your daughter's farewell letter. But my advice is, be careful not to get taken advantage of."

In her mind, Frances Ford adds the words *in the hour of your greatest weakness*.

After the Royal Ramaan Residence Hotel shut down, its rooms never ended up being rented or squatted on a long-term basis. Here and there bed frames still hold moldy mattresses, but most of the rooms have been cleaned out, everything of value has been unscrewed and pried off, there's no electricity, and the water pipes have been rusty and defunct for ages. Judy Frank tried to describe the hotel over and over. He wanted to find a language that would transcend the usual disaster tourism and the fascination of ruins, expressing the nature of this place that human beings have ceded to fungi and mites to build their microscopic societies.

Frances Ford and Elmar Bauch climb up through the stories of the abandoned hotel building to the very top, the rooftop terrace, which Ford claims was a romantic rendezvous for the two missing people. From the stairwell they can never see more than a few yards down the dark corridors, which emanate a silence that they counter with excessive panting and sighing as they climb, to keep it from swallowing them up. Elmar Bauch recalls his daughter writing in an e-mail from

Malé that the city is filled with places that urge silence on you. At the landing below the last floor they can already hear the breaking of the waves through the open door to the terrace, the eternal unrest of the Indian Ocean that hardly ever lies peaceful, flat and turquoise as in the tourist brochures from the old days; instead it's in constant motion, wild and foamy and roaring, churning darkly and utterly infested with the trash of humanity. Even before they step out onto the terrace the sea penetrates their noses too. Each breath is saturated with the salty taste of all the organic matter that ever perished and slowly dissolved in that salt water. Oily and caustic, the taste trickles from the nose down to the throat, filling the oral cavity and coating the tongue with a greasy film.

The rooftop terrace of the Royal Ramaan Residence Hotel is floored with weathered wooden planks that rise to flat platforms surrounding a large swimming pool, once crowded with deck chairs and sunshades. Someone turned the rectangular planters at the edge of the platforms into raised beds for various plants – marihuana, carrots, sage, parsley – before apparently losing interest some time ago and leaving the plants to fend for themselves. In the large, white-tiled cavity of the swimming pool a swampy biotope has formed in the years of abandonment: green stalks moving in the wind, interspersed with duckweed and ferns and rotting leaves.

The hotel is not the tallest building on the island. But the shores can be seen in all directions, every spare yard built up with houses and streets. Down at the end of each street the image is the same: mountainous waves rolling up, veined with white foam, collapsing with a crash, sucked back into the next breaker. The flood walls erected on the edge of the coral reef to counter the constant work of the sea have already crumbled and collapsed in numerous places. The shallow layer of water in the streets, left over from the last rainfalls, is traversed by calm, even swells. Nowhere in the city are the ground floors still occupied or commercially used. All of life takes place on the upper floors. Frances Ford sees several pigs on a roof across the way, crowding together as they eat from a trough. She thinks: All that

happens in this place is time passing. The sea and its tireless work of erasure are the apotheosis of the passage of time. It's been a long while since anything else happened in this city. People seem to have forgotten that they once had a future. Frances Ford looks around the terrace of the Royal Ramaan Residence Hotel, trying to disregard the wind-tousled father of the actress Mona Bauch and recall how full of yearning the place seemed in Judy Frank's descriptions. She thinks: The beauty of the description can't lie in the things that are described, it must reflect the yearning that another person feels and describes in your stead. Sie thinks what a sad thing it is when human habitations no longer harbor human life. And then, in her head, clear and vivid as though in a closed room, she hears her own voice say a sequence of words that seem both familiar and primordially strange, like the first beings that once crawled on land to become our forebears – *eli, eli, lama sabachthani*, says the voice. Frances Ford can't help giving a very brief laugh, before turning to the distraught father, who is looking at her with questioning eyes.