

## Letters from Rome



Generalate of the Missionaries of Mariannahill, Rome.

When someone asks me to describe what it feels like to be a young African missioned to Europe, I often think about that evening spent waiting in the dimness of the novitiate corridor, the off-white walls replete with frames depicting the novitiate's history. Outside, the daylight was fading into streaks of blue and gold, on the verge of dusk. It was January, within the first vestiges of summer. And we had spent almost one year in this monastery wearing black grosgrain sashes about our waists everyday, with folds of our black cassocks falling about us, filtering through corridors leading to the church, refectory, classroom, then back and forth. If we went too far, it was to the poultry, and, on Saturdays, to the place where I always developed a knot in my stomach – the pigsty. Any moment from now, we would each be invited into an office and we would come out of that office with fates sealed. You were destined for Kenya, Germany, Spain, or to remain in South Africa. Next, one of those countries would remain written across your forehead, and your real nationality would take the backseat, and your unannounced preferences would die a quiet death. It made me think about parcels sorted out and stamped in DHL offices, ready to be carted away to a destination.

In the days leading to this, the atmosphere had been bittersweet, the joys of an ending blending with the fears of another beginning. We flung guesses at one another. For all our instincts and wit, neither of us could change one stark fact: Rome had the final say, and the decisions were already made. We ate little, sang more African songs than European songs during liturgy, did no sports, took longer walks during which we flirted with ideas, dished up gossips, traded jokes while the TV aired unattended in the recreation room, washed dishes of five star hotel quantity, established a camarediere like never before. For all I can remember, it was during those days I dug the biggest hole I ever dug in my life, a hole so deep it swallowed the whole of me when I climbed in. And inside there, I felt small-headed. Another disruption that lasted three days, and yet it had been easy enough for Fr. Kevin to say that it was not a grave, it was for Bannanas. Bannanas! I have laughed every time I have remembered this.

It was during those days, I remember, Thabani went about his chores with more speed like a headless chicken, as if in an effort to banish worry. Willbard wore hangdog looks, and during meals his voice was a deadpan monotone. Only on his way to his beehives did he smile his butternut smile. Gabriel, he remained tall and sassy, irrepressibly bubbly.

Jared's back hunched a little more, carrying the weight of anticipation. Bongani's smiles were nervous and puckish, working extra time at the smithy. Martin had become slower on the walkways, with ears tilting outward you could see he was ready to trap just about any information that came his way. Carlos's face was turning bright pink. Whenever the conversation was about the transfer letters, his English didn't falter. Mzokhona was sometimes lost in thoughts, keeping faraway looks, a widening gap in his teeth. He had recently become soft-spoken in a way he'd never been. With a tightened jaw and yellowing eyes, Kennedy shuffled between the Mission Center and the novitiate. Fr. Kevin's megawatt smile did not dissipate the anxiety. In my eyes, he had become a conduit of sorts, an oracle through whom the gods were about to speak. His smile had never seemed so important and disturbing. It filled us with a panic that carried over into everything else.

We had waited for this day, and here it was, touting nerves and slowing the clock to a crawl. In the corridors, we looked like teenagers who had misplaced mummy's bunch of keys. When my name was called and the door opened, I knew I'd rather be in one of the big holes Father Kevin asked us to dig in the farm a few days ago. In the office, Fr. Patrick sat in a crisp yet informal manner, his demeanour unflappable, with spectacles that suggested low tolerance for nonsense. Fr. Kevin's smile was so big I felt compelled to share it with him, only he didn't know that the portion on my face had become a mad one. I clamped a book between my knees. I was asked to say a prayer, which I did.

*You have been transferred from the Region of Mtatha to the German province* Fr. Kevin announced. We all took a moment's silence, allowing the news to settle. Then I began to sort out my feelings, and there was no sadness at all. Still, I knew from that moment that my horizons were lifted, my possibilities expanded, and I was in soup. I wasn't going to Germany on an excursion to see gothic buildings with ice cream in hand. I wasn't going to Germany to take photos in the face-numbing cold. Or listen to Ludwig Beethoven while eating chicken in a restaurant. Or eat spoonfuls of snow (my childhood dream) and then come back. I was going, like, leaving. I was going to make real-life impacts and not just be there. I was going to get exposed to other people's truths, including truths in which I might not be interested. I was going to become a child again, putting behind my razor-sharp wit in English which I had acquired over the years. I was going to live with people who might not laugh at the same jokes I laugh at. I was going to start watching more DW and less BBC. I was going to speak a language so strong it sounded like a fight. The possibility of failure was clear, I didn't have to go looking for it.

I had never been to Germany before, but the country only began to hold a special place in my imagination after listening to Bishop Khumalo during classes on history of Mariannhill. How those missionaries inspired me! Their selflessness and their love, their doggedness, their faith. I also knew Germany as home to reputable philosophers and theologians, even world intellectual bigwigs. The home to Mercedes Benz, Franz Kafka and Goethe. But I did have one bad scare: racism. A stubborn piece of me would never take it lightly. My worry wasn't so much about racist behaviours as it was about what my reaction could be, even at the slightest manifestations of it. I could literally cause a scene. But then I told myself that if I went to Germany looking out for racism, then I was destined to always find it. Racism, besides, would not qualify as the summary of Germany's complex story as a nation, so I told myself that Germans were generally hospitable.

Any optimism I had about Germans being generally hospitable, was shortlived. In the week after our first profession, Carlos and I went to an office somewhere to make enquiries about our visa application.

The woman behind the counter had a brilliant, sharp face like an eagle ready to swoop at its prey. She hardly allowed us finish any sentence. She looked like she wished Carlos and I were not going to Germany. I think she imagined that somehow, Carlos and I were illegal immigrants in South Africa who wanted to try another gamble with Germany. Her eye brows were furrowed, there was paranoia in her left eye, wrath in her right. Her questions had the suspicious and irreverent quality that I immediately recognized as a someone who had been in and out of South Africa for the past five years with a Nigerian passport. And Carlos being from Colombia, we were a good combo to get her adrenaline working. We represented the headquarters of the world's most skillfull drug lords, the finest cathedrals of prayerful criminals.

She harumphed that Germany was already Christian enough, that she didn't see any need of us going there as missionaries, that we could remain in South Africa and preach for Jesus. Then she said Carlos and I needed to come next time with our passports before we made any further inquiries. My mouth was so full of words I couldn't speak. Carlos and I left the office feeling like the eagle of a woman had eaten us for lunch. I wanted to tell her that such behaviour reflected poorly on Germany as a nation. I wanted to tell her that she misrepresented a big swath of German people who did not know how to bite. How I left without saying it, I still do not know. That behaviour, if it wasn't exactly racist, then it wasn't exactly anything else. I felt scornful of her for many days.

Only few weeks later, my classmates were all gone, and it was the end of normal times. My first private German lesson was on a Tuesday, in that Library where the air was thick with the musty smell of old books. I didn't believe anything my teacher said. There was a falseness about the words, the sounds, it was like somebody was confidently telling me the wrong things, turning my mind upside down. I think I was dumfounded for the first one week, even though I did my best to look interested. Yes I could tell myself that the language would come, that it would take time, but that was not how it felt. It felt like I was having a hangover, I couldn't see straight.

My teacher, a beautiful South African lady who was a mother of two, had the air of a nerd. A very brilliant mind, she professionally taught English language and also worked as a tour guide, coupled with good knowledge of geography and history. Which intensified my fears. A part of me was convinced I could never match up. I watched her, processing the shock of *buchstabieren* and *Hausaufgabe* and *fünfundfünfzig*. Whenever she made a full sentence it was if a torpedo had blown through the room. It was only after the classes that I had time to go to my room and observe my frustration reflected on my face in the mirror.

Once, a six-syllabled German word flashed across my bedroom at midnight, jolting me from sleep. I rose from the bed, whispered something into the darkness about me being in hot soup, then went back to sleep. Sometimes, during the day, I sat in my room and stared at the blank walls, eating caramel popcorn, the clock ticking by, unable to get past a page of my homework. My eyes kept scanning one line over and over again. And I would slam the book shut. Soon, a deep and suffocating sketicism took hold of me, so much so that in the following weeks, I went around tamping down people's expectation. It was important to me that nobody saw me as a genius, that nobody waited for Anthony to prove himself.

I went back and forth like this for several weeks until I became clear-eyed about the stakes involved. My German was finally picking up steam. I would stay up at night trying to squeeze stubborn vocabularies into my head, battling with grammar as well as spellings.

I would go knocking at Brother Konrad's door at night, asking him to help me. I had a good teacher in Ms. Razina who was both very thorough and very kind. The days leading to my first German exam were pervaded with a sense of disquiet. I had not failed an exam for many years, and Ms. Razina had always had students who were successful in the A1 exam, so I feared I was going to break the record. But that didn't happen. My language course was successful, for by April, Ms. Razina had begun to acquaint me with the kind of things to expect in the exam.

I did not consider it an exciting prospect, applying for a German visa with a Nigerian passport. It took more than three months during which I gained more than three pounds. Maybe I was stress eating. After many hassles, sorting documents in German language whose alphabets were jarring to my eyes, doing correspondences with Fr. Mario Muschik who was at the forefront of the entire process, I was granted a visa in November. Six days to get everything in order before departure. I had too much to break with, an accumulation of books and clothes, wastes, even conflicts.

The day I was to leave, it was an awkward moment for me, one which I awaited in part with joy, in part with anxiety. At 3pm, the monastery bells pealed the hour. I watched the monastery's landscape for the last time as a strong wind whipped left and right, causing trees to clash: leafs with leafs, branches with branches, leafs with branches. In front of the reception, a white car awaited me with doors hanging open, and South Africa in my mind's eye was starting to become a fading photograph. We drove past the rosy-cheeked Virgin Mary statue into whose face the sculptor had moulded piety, past the gates, past the road leading to the convent. I turned back to look at the bell tower stabbing the sky, knowing that this was the picture of Mariannahill I would preserve forever in my mind.

As the vehicle eased into the major road my eyes became itchy from not letting tears out. Memories of my five years in South Africa flashed through my mind, especially memories of robbery and hunger during my stay in Scottsville, people in St. Mary's hospital who died under my watch, friends and enemies I made. The Memory of Father Patrick McGiven paying part of my school fees after a debtor disappeared with my money, and Fr. Kevin and Br. Tendai ensuring my last debt in Cedara was cleared so that my certificate could be released. In the car, Brother Konrad repeatedly gave me the omniscient look that knowledge and experience provides you when you are above sixty. I didn't tell him that although I had waited for this moment, it was hard to leave. In the backseat, Thabani carried the biggest of my bags, and I didn't like that I was going without him.

We arrived at the parking lot, the sun setting over the airport. The thin woman at the Qatar Airways counter had a hawk nose, with small eyes like asterisks. She did what people normally do when the visa of a *relevant* country is breathing inside a Nigerian passport: verify the life out of it. I flung her a smile after checking in, then boarded the flight a few hours later. As the aircraft reeved and moved, and the floor started to drop slowly under me, I thought about the letters from Rome. I thought about Gabriel and Mzokhona in Kenya, Jared and Bongani in Spain, Wilbard and Martin in South Africa, Kennedy who would be travelling from Uganda days later to join me in Germany. The letters from Rome were each less than two hundred words but we were travelling more than two thousands miles. With the stroke of the Vicar General's pen, an entire class was divided, the trajectory of many lives redirected, chronicles of various CMM communities updated.

We touched down first in Johannesburg and were held up thirty minutes, waiting for some other passengers to board. The man sitting next to me had a sad smile, that fake smile that many people in Europe fling at you on the street as a matter of courtesy. It made me think of Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa. I didn't smile back, instead I turned to my side and watched the tarmac swept by wind, lined by purple flowering weeds. A quadrille of planes jockeyed for space on the runway, delaying us from getting off the ground. Then, with the taking off of the aircraft, I picked up my rosary and began to pray. By now the man next to me was asleep, he nearly fell away from his chair as if he were sinking in water and drowning. His hair was a dirty white like an old mop. Hours later, when we stood above a sea of dark clouds and the aircraft was becoming stable, I had the chance to remind myself that I had been sent. Whenever there was turbulence and I feared the plane might at any moment be pulled out of its course and crash, I had been sent. The letters from Rome were suddenly a consolation, that if anything happened to me, I would have died on a journey of mission, a journey of faith.

23rd November, the plane touched down in Frankfurt. And I thought the airport didn't live up to the hype. Fr. Mario was waiting at the arrivals with a kind face and a ready smile. For the next one year, that drive from Würzburg to Frankfurt would frame my memory of my arrival. Spiffy in my new jacket and unapologetically conversing in English, I was green in the best possible sense.

On reading Barack Obama's *A Promised Land* recently, I came across a sentence he often tells his daughters: *enthusiasm makes up for a host of deficiencies*, and at least that is true for me in the German province for the past one year. It is part and parcel of learning German for plenty of rubbish to come out of your mouth, only to realize much later while in your room that you had been speaking rubbish, in public. Sometimes it causes a lot of awkwardness. At best it feels plainly puerile, at worst it feels daunting. But then I wasn't supposed to be correct, I wasn't sent here to be correct. I was supposed to be, first, enthusiastic. Another thing that became a consolation for me, I think, was my later resolution not to see myself as someone who has merely come, but as someone who has been asked to come. I think there is a difference. The difference is that your body doesn't absorb all the awkward moments, and you do not flog yourself on a daily basis. Once, I confidently entered into a female public toilet instead of a male one, and I came out feeling like an idiot. But I forgave myself easily, because I had been sent. Somehow in my head the word for male in German had been exchanged with the word for female, and after that day I knew it would never happen again. The two naughty vocabularies saw my rage and started to behave themselves.

Another day, I kicked a man's chihuahua to the other side of the road, fearing his unleashed dog was about to have a taste of my leg. After unpleasant words were exchanged, he in German and I in English, and I continued my walk home, I told myself again that I had been sent. Had I not been sent, that scene would never have happened. That man would never have seen me, including that small, ugly dog that looked like a backpack. I realize now that the letters from Rome were not just letters, they were openers of new worlds and new stories. Isn't it what missionaries are sent to do? To be the custodians of so many stories, stories that have God's unadulterated insignia between the lines? Stories that are more about how God is in control than they are about how we are resilient? The letters from Rome were, in fact, a gentle reprimand to all of us: *Go and try. You'd never be able to do enough, but try anyway, bearing in mind that it is all Jesus's business and not yours.*