

Him and Me

Bert Vandecasteele - 24th of November, 2010

I am sitting at their coffee table, an empty soup plate in front of me. He is sitting next to me, playing Mario on his Nintendo DS. He is stuck on the first boss. „You have to grab him by the tail and swing him into a bomb“, I say. „I know this, I've played this as a kid.“ And that's when it hits me. That's when I understand. Sorry. Let's take a step back. Me – that's me, yours truly, and him, that's Yussuf, my seven year old „god child“. I got hooked up with him through the HANA project – his mother was looking for someone to help him with his reading. As a foreigner, I see this as the only thing I can help him with. My German simply isn't good enough for anything else. He's seven years old and in the second grade. He's already sporting the tiniest of mustaches. He's Kurdish. And every Monday and Thursday evening, as I sit next to him, he loudly prays that Allah will come and turn me into a frog.

His mother is scared he'll have to repeat second grade. And to be honest: I am too. He still can't tell a “b” from a “d”. He still can't do easy sums up to a hundred. Whenever there's two consonants next to each other, he puts an a in between. “Where's the a”, I ask. He then gives me a patented frown that spells out: „I have no idea. I don't know anything about anything.“

Today, he's reading fine, though. He's improved - just by a bit, but every bit matters. “Baurufrisch”, he now reads, though, in stead of Bauernfrau. Hm. “Read this again”, I say. I circle the mistake. Because I'm a teacher, and I have to do *something*.

He sighs, then lays his head on the table. “This is unfair”, he says. A ritual that always makes me think. Is it unfair? It *is* unfair that this kid missed about three months of first grade because his teacher was sick and they didn't find a substitute. But, on the other hand, it's not unfair that *I'm* here to help him out. It's unpleasant, yes. Not unfair. I never tell him this, though. Tomatoes-tomatoes.

“We're almost done”, I tell him. It's true - an hour really does fly by. For me, at least. For him, it's a whole different story. We're proving Einstein, right here, right now. Time is relative. He looks at the sheet and then back at me. “No, we're not almost done”, he says. “Look. Just two more sentences on this page and then we quit for today“, I respond.

Reluctantly, he reads the sentences, slowly and with more mistakes than he usually makes. Then, he looks up at me, wiggling in his seat. “Is something wrong?” I jokingly ask him. “I need to go to the toilet”, he replies nervously. I nod my head and tell him to hurry, thinking whether there are actually teachers out there who deny a seven year old the right to go to the toilet without worrying about the consequences.

I sit alone in his room for a while. It looks like it came straight out of a Domäne-kaufhaus flyer. He has a bed shaped like a race car and Pixar Cars on his rug. He has a desk (which is a godsent luxury for a tutor). The drawers have little wheels for knobs. He once asked me whether I liked cars. I told him I did not. Like a mirror, I projected the question back at him. He just shrugged. I then asked him what he did like. He shrugged again.

I look at a picture of him and his mother, standing on his desk. I think it's the only photograph I've seen in the entire flat. In it, he's one year old and is giving the camera his patented frown. His mother is holding him. She doesn't really look younger as much as she looks more awake. Happier. I wonder if this was taken before or after they became this thing called "immigrants". It looks like before. But I obviously don't know.

He runs back inside the room, a look of glee in his eyes. This is where the fun bit starts. He sits down expectantly as I pull an old, battered book out of my bag. It's "Der Räuber Hotzenplotz" by Otfried Preußler. In today's episode, Hotzenplotz, who is a cunning thief, is going to take the two kids, Kasperl und Seppel, prisoner using his trusty pepper pistol. Yussuf reminds me that Hotzenplotz is the stupid one. I try to convince him that, in this episode, Hotzenplotz is actually the smart one - seeing how he foiled the kids' plans to get him captured - but to no avail. He's a robber. He simply *has* to be stupid.

I read. He's on the edge of his seat as Seppel gets captured. Then, the villain threatens our poor hero: if Seppel lies one more time, Hotzenplotz will hit him with a „Schürhaken“. „A what?“ my little buddy asks. Later, in my room, I would look it up on Beolingus and it would spit out that „Schürhaken“ means „fire place poker“. But in his room, I shrug. I don't know either. I don't know many things. But I'm good at improvising, I say, so I tell him I think it's some sort of hook – like a meat hook, on which they hang dead animals. Immediately, every muscle on the little kid's face is contracted as his imagination goes hog wild. „We can look it up later“, I try to reassure him. „In what dictionary?“, I ask myself.

I read more Preußler, my head still with the Schürhaken. Somehow, for reasons unknown to me, it's got me in my grip. I mechanically drag myself through the remaining pages.

I close the book, dazed and confused. As I'm on my way out, his mother says she has made soup. In a non-questioning tone, I am asked whether I want some. It's impolite to refuse. And that soup looks damn great. So I have some – before we know it, we're sitting on the floor around the coffee table eating, Turkish television playing from the huge plasma in the background. The soup is hot, so Yussuf needs a bit of motherly help. I try to convince him that he doesn't need his mom for that, that he's old enough. No avail. He enjoys being served. And he wants to finish his meal so he can show me his new video game.

Mario on Nintendo DS. As he shows me the game and I comment on it (not sure whether I should tell him that he's got good taste in video games and that I've played this one to death as a kid), I notice his mother smiling at us. So this is what it must be like, huh, I tell myself. This is what an atomic family could be. Only his dad is never there. And nothing of this is actually mine. But, sitting there, in the strangeness of that moment, of that smile, I can't help but feel happy.

And that's when I say it: „You have to grab him by the tail and swing him into a bomb. I know this, I've played this as a kid.“ And it hits me.

This kid is just like me. He's lazy. He feels victimized way too fast. He feels that he'll never be as good at being a German as a German kid, and can't quite accept that. So he's paralyzed. But he's full of energy, and

he should be trying his best at being *him*. Which is “Yussuf”: a seven year old Kurdish kid, creative, talkative and witty. Different and awesomely so.

And what am I doing? What is this? I'm teaching this kid German. I'm reading him a German book. I'm showing him German culture. In two years, he might be reading *Krabat* and I might teach him how it is an analogy for Preußler's experience with Fascism. And when his testosterone levels hit, I'll be showing him Schlink's *The Reader* and explaining him about the Eichmann trial. About Hannah Arendt, Art Spiegelman and Anne Frank. About the burning of the Reichstag. *Kristallnacht*. I'll teach him what it's like to be a German, to be responsible for both Volkswagen and the holocaust.

And it's all stuff I don't want to know. It's all stuff I think I don't *have* to know. Or is it? How can I teach this kid how to be a German, when I don't want to be a German myself? I can't show him Goethe. Or Schiller. Or Brecht. I don't know anything about them, nor do I want to.

I thank his mother again for the great food. As I put on my shoes and he stands in the doorway, his mother's hands on his shoulders, he's still playing Mario. Suddenly, he shrieks and shows me the game. An exploding bomb is blowing up the boss. „Congratulations“, I say, and „See you Thursday?“

He grins at me. „See you Thursday!“