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## **The Humming Underneath the Skin**

Novel

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Axel is back. My right side is an antenna again; my thoughts start to buzz beneath my skin. I hardly notice the Tanzanian nickel deposits that I marked on the map in the north of the country. Mr Becher speaks of the brutal rule of the German colonial power, against which the population desperately fought back. The rebels rubbed themselves with water and maize to be invincible but, despite their bravery, their defeat was devastating.

"Cornflakes," Claudia says. No-one knows why.

Axel puts his hand up. He gets picked and after a short pause says: "Zanzibar." A few people laugh. Mr Becher asks for more details, and Axel lists: Zanzibar, an archipelago in the Indian Ocean, formerly a sultanate and central trading post for slaves, itself never part of German East Africa, although mistakenly believed to have been annexed to the British Empire as a protectorate in exchange for the North Sea island of Heligoland through the Heligoland-Zanzibar Treaty. After independence, it was declared a province of the Republic of Tanzania. Cloves are grown on the main island and are used to flavour meat and fish dishes, but they are also a popular ingredient in baking and have pain-relieving properties. And the singer of his favourite group Queen was born there. Everyone has turned and is staring at Axel. His voice vibrates in my right side like the future. Mr Becher is speechless. It is only when Claudia burst into unrestrained laughter that I realise he has accidentally unrolled the map of South America and he is now having to search for the one of East Africa before hanging it on the blackboard.

"Miss Piel has a sense of humour," says Mr Becher, and Claudia gets an entry in his black notebook. The gap has closed.

During the break, I still avoid Axel. I know what would happen otherwise. My voice would sound strange, like the voice of someone else, someone younger, and I wouldn't be able to find the right words. So I would say inappropriate words, stammer and, as I did so, feel the sensation that the light hitting my body was extremely bright, casting no shadows. Everything would be visible and I would start sweating, convinced that my smell was repulsive and my body a disgusting mass. I would hate myself.

A few of us are standing in front of the gym, trying to shoot a flattened milk carton into a bin. Axel is not there. Andi is just saying that Scharbeutz, for example, is not a colony, but pure West Germany, but Rüdiger dismisses it, saying: "Beach ist beach" and asks whether Andi might want to go to the toilet. Last year, our class went to Scharbeutz for a week. I only remember that the cliffs seemed rather small and that the Big Book of Natural Wonders, which is on Mrs Walther's bookshelf, shows quite different cliffs. Matthias from the other class, the fat one with diabetes, puts Andi in a headlock from which no-one could escape, and Andi says he really has to go to the toilet. I join them and say that Freddie Mercury is probably gay. My voice sounds exactly like my voice. I'm afraid of what's coming, but I can't stop. That's what my sister says, and because of the moustache it's probably true: gay men often have moustaches to look like real men, and Freddie Mercury can sing really high, which gay men are often good at, because, my sister says, they never really grow up; they look like men, but they remain boys all their lives and are simply incapable of becoming real men, which is why they still wear trainers and suspicious moustaches even when they are pensioners, hiding behind them.

"What did you say?" says Rüdiger and Guido asks who Freddie Mercury is.

"The lead singer of Axel's favourite band," I say.

"Queen," says Rüdiger.

Guido puts the milk carton on the tip of his shoe.

"No hands," says Matthias. "Otherwise, it doesn't count."

"But they're good," says Guido.

"Of course they're good," Rüdiger says, and I notice that Andi doesn't have to go to the toilet after all. "You really are strange, Julle." Rüdiger shakes his head, and then the bell rings.

After school, my bike has a flat tyre. The back tyre, of all things. I can't find anything in the tread. No nail, no broken glass, no sharp stone. On the other side of the bike stand, Andi gets

on his bike. "Why don't you help me when the others are being stupid to me?" The pennant on the rear rack of his bike is frayed. Only half of the HSV diamond is left. The threads twitch in the wind as Andi rides off. Maybe I have a flat tyre because of him.

I've been pushing my bike for a while when Axel catches up with me. He accelerates, then brakes, skids a bit and gets off. "What's wrong?"

"I've got a flat."

"Really?"

"The back."

"The back is bad."

"I know."

We don't say anything for a while. We look at the rear wheel of my bike as if we could fix it with our gazes.

"Maybe there's just not enough air in it."

"You still have to take the wheel off."

"Or you can just pump it up and wait."

"But I don't have a pump."

"Me neither," Axel says.

We are silent as we push our bikes, Axel to my right, so that my right side heats up and the rest of my body goes numb, and we stare at the path, at cracks in the tarmac, at the moss between the kerb stones, at a dirty drain, and finally, at a meadow. A sprinkler combs the air. I don't dare look up and say anything, because my voice sounds like I imagined it during the break, like the voice of a younger boy who doesn't have the right words. Axel suggests using a compressor, the thing at the petrol station that pumps up car tyres.

"You are not supposed to do that, are you?" I ask.

"No," Axel says.

At least I know where the nearest petrol station is.

A short time later we are standing at the forecourt. Axel gives me a signal, and we crouch down and run over to the petrol pumps. My flat rear wheel skips over the tarmac. At the diesel pump, the compressor is hanging from a pillar. We squat down next to a narrow tool cabinet. Axel searches his trouser pockets and pulls out a coin. "You get us something and distract the attendant. I'll take care of the air. I know how it works."

"And what do you want?" I ask.

"Doesn't matter," Axel says. "We just need to buy some time."

I walk, bent over, to the petrol station. A bell rings as I open the door. The petrol station attendant does not react; he is reading the newspaper. I approach the counter and put the coin down. "Do you sell motor oil?"

"This is a petrol station," says the attendant.

"And is it good?" The attendant is silent. Maybe motor oil wasn't such a good idea. I ask how much a Bounty costs. I hate Bounties. I only like coconut in the form of whole coconuts.

"Sixty," says the attendant.

"And a Nuts?"

"Sixty "

"And a Mars?"

"It's labelled."

"And a Milky Way ?"

"Thirty." The petrol station attendant's voice suddenly lowers.

"Then two Milky Way cost - "

"Are you trying to - " The attendant looks up and into my eyes for the first time. "Are you in school?"

"Yes, of course."

"And what school do you go to?"

"Wenckebach."

"And they don't teach arithmetic there?"

"Yes, they do."

"Well? How much are two Milky Way?"

"I see," I say.

"And?"

"Sixty, of course." I make my answer sound like a question to buy a little more time. For a brief moment, I even consider telling the petrol station attendant that I'm gay. "Then I'll have a Nuts."

I count the change by sliding the coins into a row, moving my mouth as if I were counting them silently. Then I ask how much the most expensive motor oil is, but the attendant thinks I should leave. "By the way, at school we call arithmetic mathematics," I say and run back to the petrol pumps without bending down.

"That took a while," Axel says.

"Yes," I say. My voice finally sounds normal.

It worked, my tyre is full again. We get on our bikes, race past the petrol pumps and bend down under the window of the petrol station. We stop at the next crossroads, gasp for air and eat half a Nuts each.

"I questioned all the prices. But he didn't want to sell motor oil. He was so stupid."

"How stupid?"

"As stupid as a piece of furniture."

"What kind of furniture?"

"A wall unit."

"Or like a carpet."

"Like a sofa."

"Like a sofa on a carpet in front of a wall unit."

"Like two sofas on three carpets in front of a thousand wall units."

"Like a fish."

"Like his newspaper."

"Like a squeaking hamster."

"Like a stupid rabbit."

"Like the whole stupid petrol station."

"Like a deposit bottle."

"I have a rabbit too," says Axel.

"Is it stupid?" Some snot flies out of my nose from laughing.

"Yes," says Axel. "Extremely stupid. Furniture stupid."

We take a breath at the same time. We laugh at the same time. We hit our foreheads at the same time. We collapse over our saddles at the same time and let our arms hang down at the same time. And then it's over.

"What was wrong with you?", I ask.

"Nothing serious," Axel says.

By the time I realise that this is not an answer to my question, it's too late. We have reached the canal, where we push the bikes along the narrow path, and Axel suggests we split the change from the Nuts. I thank him, again in a much too young voice. Axel should turn off at the weir, but he accompanies me as if the road towards the slope were his normal way home. Maybe he doesn't want me to know that he lives on a street that ends in "Ring", in a high-rise building with balconies made of corrugated iron. The sun is reflected in the water of the canal. Gleaming spots that twist on the surface like molten light. After thinking for quite a while, I ask Axel if Queen really is his favourite band.

"Yes", he says.

"Which song?"

"Somebody To Love." He explains that the song is a prayer in which Freddie Mercury asks God to find someone for him to love because he cries at home every night and has a lot of water in his brain. "Freddie Mercury probably believes that tears are made of water from the brain. What's your favourite group?"

Because I don't have one and I don't want to say Schubert or Brahms, I choose my sister's. "Supertramp. "

"They're good too."

"Yes," I say, and after a while, I add that they all sing pretty high. I ask Axel if he knows so much about Zanzibar because of Freddie Mercury. No, he says, it's a coincidence. He only looked it up in the dictionary because of the nickel in Tanzania. He can easily remember things like that and doesn't forget them again. It makes it easier for him, knowing things like that.

"Do you know what a speculum is ?"

"A biscuit?"

"No," I say. "It's a thing that gynaecologists use for women when they have something. When they ... it's for looking inside."

"Oh," says Axel.

"Yes," I say. "For things down there."

Even though we're walking slowly and I'm pulling the brake lever, we've arrived at my place. "Sven has already told me twice that his father is a gynaecologist."

"Sven is bit of a jerk." I point to our garden gate, say that I live here, open the gate and push my bike into the front garden. The tyre is still firm.

Axel looks at the house. He blinks into the light and asks what my father does for a living.

"Something with lists and sales. But we don't have any pets at all. Not even a hamster. And yours? "

Axel hesitates for a moment. "I'll tell you another time." He carefully closes our garden gate, then gets on his bike and waves to me. He looks pretty cool. He bent forward, extra low, and rides in the direction we came from. A short time later, my mother opens the front door. "Well? How was it?"

"It was all right," I say and think: nickel. Cloves. Nuts. Axel is just a speck racing along the canal. And turning at the weir.