

Miha Mazzini: *Funny*

Original Title (Slovene): *Funny*

Author: Miha Mazzini

Title in Translation: *Funny*

Translator (English): Gregor Timothy Čeh

Literary agent: Katja Urbanija (rights@goga.si)

First Published: 2019

Pages: 334

Word count: 58,800



*A couple in the middle of a marriage crisis goes on a trip to Africa. Do they have a chance of saving their marriage?
Of course they are in for a surprise...*

The father, once a successful journalist, is hopelessly unemployed, the mother is in danger of losing her otherwise menial job, and their ingenious thirty-year-old son, incapable and unwilling to take any step towards becoming independent. This, in many ways typical Slovene family, is being bombarded by the media with empty, trivial phrases that simply make them even more desperate; conversations with former friends are also desperately empty.

There is little hope of a solution, then the mother suddenly decides to go on a trip to Africa on her own. The father insists on going with her but it turns out his wife is not only looking for new paths but also for love and the cards are reshuffled... Perhaps it is really possible to find a new meaning in life in an impoverished African village? Maybe it is quite simple: care for fellow men, living in a community? Although the novel looks at sensitive and difficult topics, this is one of Mazzini's brighter and funnier books, defying the notion that, writing about sad things, you very easily end up with a sad book.

About the Author

Miha Mazzini (1961) is an author, screenwriter and film director. He has completed his MA in Creative Writing for Film and Television at the University of Sheffield (UK) and his PhD in Anthropology of Everyday Life at the Institutum Studiorum Humanitatis (Slovenia). Mazzini has written more than 30 books, among them novels, short story collections, computer manuals and four scripts that were turned into films, two of which he directed himself. His work has been translated into 10 different languages and was selected for many anthologies including Pushcart prize 2012 and Best European Fiction 2018.

SYNOPSIS

KARIN (50) begins feeling like a tourist in her own life. She observes everyday routines as if they are some exotic customs and her husband LEON (50) only notices that something is wrong when Karin starts counting all the objects they have in their home. Leon is not sure what to do. He is concerned that Karin is losing her mind, or if not, that her feelings towards him have changed; he is worried that their life is going to stay the way it is and afraid of change. Karin, swaying between being distant and trying to establish a connection with Leon, obsessively watches news on TV about immigrants arriving on boats from Africa. Leon notices that she is gradually becoming more distant, yet at times she seems focused; he follows her and finds out she is meeting up with a woman who is just a vague acquaintance. Karin announces that she is going to Africa, wanting to see different lives, different people. With difficulty Leon manages to persuade her that they should go on the trip together.

They stay at a small hotel called Greater Britain ran by JOHN and JOAN. John mostly sits at the bar, pouring out drinks for himself as well as the guests, Joan devotes herself to the female guests who confide in her. Leon is the only man among the guests. The women come to the hotel, stay a few days, then one morning they are gone. Leon finds out that a nearby village organizes dances at which the female guests sooner or later fall in love with one of the local men and move in with their new lovers.

When Karin too does not return from one such dance, Leon does not want to travel back home but decides to stay at Greater Britain and fight for her love.

There he meets DANIEL, a skinny boy who is trying to raise the money needed to enrol in the second year of high school. Leon finds out that the man Karin has fallen in love with is married and has a number of children – he happily rushes off to inform his wife of his discovery – she of course already knows all this and Leon finds himself in the middle of relationships he understands less and less about.

He runs out of money and causes a scandal at Greater Britain from where he is thrown out. Desperate, he goes to the village where he finds Daniel and asks him whether his parents might find him somewhere to stay. He falls ill and after he gets well again a week later, he finds out that Daniel is actually 27 years old and the father of two children. Convincing tourists that he needs money to enrol into school is just the job with which he supports himself and his family.

Leon and Daniel become friends and Leon discovers the local culture, so different to what he is used to. He starts making friends and begins to give regular performances in the tent of a local preacher. Karin and her lover start building a grand tourist resort.

Leon's sermons become so popular that he establishes his own mission.

Daniel's wife gives birth and the child is white. The local villagers accuse Leon of being the father. He tries to point out to them that the child is an albino. Locals however believe that albinos have magical powers and the child's life is thus in danger. In order to save the baby, Leon confirms that she is his, but loses Daniel, his best friend.

He is left alone with the baby girl who he calls Fanny after his mother, but the official misspells the name and she ends up being called Funny. Leon takes Funny to the airport, intending to return home, but moments before boarding the plane he realizes that his own country has become foreign to him, that he would be on his own, raising a child that everyone would make fun of.

He turns round and decides to stay in Africa. Africa has opportunities, he has his mission, his sermons and he is determined to build a new religion around his Funny's magical powers.

SAMPLE TRANSLATION

30

“Hey, kid, come, dinner is ready!”

Karin put down the phone and quickly straightened the cutlery set out on the napkins. I opened a bottle of wine and placed it in the middle of the table. She brought the glasses and a carton of orange juice for our son.

There was something safe and homely in the sound of slippers descending the stairs and briefly pausing in front of the door as he turned the handle.

“Hurry,” said Karin. “The lasagne is on the table.”

I put the laptop on the window shelf. I carried it everywhere with me like a mother kangaroo its young, and had recently also written about as much as a kangaroo.

We finished our meal in silence, meaning that our son wanted something from us.

Indeed;

“I have a small favour to ask,” he spoke after we placed the cutlery on our plates. “I know that you were inviting friends for dinner, but I wanted to organise a party that day and I would need both flats.”

“Perhaps we can arrange something,” Karin looked at me.

“OK,” I nodded. “But since when are you a party person?”

“I need to be, for my audience, I will do a live event on my video blog. Your flat is bigger than mine.”

Karin looked around in panic, planning improvements and assessing the costs.

“I'm approaching thirty and need to look after my image,” he added and poured himself a glass of wine. He looked at the ceiling,

“Could we not make a hole through here and fit a spiral staircase so I wouldn't have to walk out of the flat and down the corridor when I come for dinner?”

Karin stared at me.

“Son,” I said, “that’s expensive, and, to be honest, a few extra steps won’t do you any harm.”

I deliberately stared at his navel which was in recent years slowly riding higher and higher.

“Especially since Daddy was made redundant . . .” Karin added.

“Became self-employed.”

“Well, that,” she concurred.

He slowly took a sip of his wine and nodded,

“I understand.”

I took a toothpick from the stand and broke it into the tiniest of pieces. Karin gave me an accusing look as I fidgeted with my hands and the splinters fell onto the placemat.

“Unless you wanted to finance it?” I said.

He looked at me calmly, “Is this an introduction to accusations about finding a job?”

“Stop it, please,” Karin sighed and stood up suddenly. “This is so predictable. If this was a film I was watching when I was eighteen, I’d yawn and think, what a bore. What shit. Can’t they think of anything more realistic, more fateful to argue about? Leon lost his job, and you kid, really do ask for too much. Just calm down, both of you!”

We sat sipping on the wine.

“Still, I want to explain something,” he began.

We remained silent, which he interpreted as approval.

“This is the generation gap. You two still live in the formula job = work = earnings. But that’s not how it is any more. You know yourself, when you look at adverts, there is work galore, but it’s all voluntary, without pay, and you don’t get offered a job anywhere. The *equals* have disappeared and are no more. Job, work, and earnings are no longer connected. Whoever’s inherited wealth is rich without a job or work. Whoever hasn’t, can have a job and work, but will languish on a minimal wage.”

“I know,” I said. “You haven’t told me anything I don’t know. I wrote about this . . .”

He nodded, “But you never saw through the Calvinistic myth according to which work builds character. You slog away and every day progress within, you become

someone. That's why in American films people always introduce themselves with their name and profession, because only both together make their personality.

Now you tell me how I'm building character if I get up early every morning, carry out the same tasks at the same time and go off to work where I sit among the same people, do the same things, especially what I'm told to do by my boss. How can my character grow if all I'm doing is carrying out orders? That's training, not personal growth. All that I get from listening and obeying the same idiots in the same job for forty years is a shrivelled brain and a tough skin. The mould is ready and I go and lie inside it, where in this scenario is the free will?

Try to put yourselves in my shoes, I get up and I don't know what I'll be doing today. No boss, no plan, no mould. The broadness of the day opens up before me in all its emptiness. Now this is a real test of personality and character building. Someone who can endure spare time without buying themselves toys to distract them, and without going crazy, has a tough character and, most important of all, has not succumbed to cheap propaganda."

He drank the last sip of wine. The orange juice remained untouched.

He stared at me, "Tell me honestly. When you were pushed into becoming self-employed, was it terrible *not* going to work each morning? I could hear you walking around the flat, going out on pointless walks . . . admit it. Was it not a shock?"

"Yes."

"And then you somehow once again established your rituals, as well as your rhythms and work?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's what I'm talking about."

He stood up. "My days are an expression of free will, every day from scratch, while you two just cling onto your routine," he said, and left.

Karin stared at the closed door,

"The kid's a visionary!"

"In a flat we pay for, including food and pocket money."

She turned to me,

"You don't even understand him."

“I probably don’t.”

“Basically, you don’t even understand yourself.”

“True.”

“Is there anyone at all you understand?” she said.

“Not that I know of.”

She hit her hand against the table,

“Then how can I reproach you for not even understanding me?”

[...]

She went running more and more often; she even began getting up in the middle of the night to go for a walk. I lived in fear that she would not return.

I invited her for dinner. She did not reject me or say anything about having to save money which struck me as odd. Selling off all these things had boosted the funds in the common account and at least lessened my sense of shame that I was a man living off a working wife, one of the major pressures everyone had been warning me about but I never took seriously until it grabbed me hard and rough, even though Karin had never reproached me for it.

I reserved well in advance so we could get a table in the corner, far away from the terrace and thus beyond the reach of suicidal drivers, in recent years so frequent that even newsreaders begin with “once again . . .”

Her body ate and nodded at me, but only allowed me to observe the automatic moves of winding spaghetti onto her fork, opening her mouth and chewing. Her attention remained introverted. I had not felt this lonely since childhood.

I began staring at her, piercing her with my gaze, I would have shaken her if I had dared to, I wanted to probe through her brow which she furrowed so often lately, to melt into her head and finally find out what we were thinking about.

When I asked her about her night walks she just said, “I’m having trouble sleeping,” which I took as an accusation since she had to wake me up a number of times during the

night because I was clinging onto her too hard. I found myself stifling her with my embrace. I rarely got an erection and only once did she leap onto me and ride me until exhaustion so my body bounced up and down on the mattress and in the morning I had to put ice on the bruise on the back of my neck.

Two nights later she jumped onto me again but this time she was gasping for help. She was short of breath and felt pain in her chest, I was about to call an ambulance but she stopped me. I made her chamomile tea and held her tight until she fell asleep.

When I joked in the morning that we were lucky because things were never boring in bed even at our age, she didn't smile.

At dinner the kid told us to buy Christmas decorations for him as well. We found four sets in the basement. We had bought them because we had forgotten every time about the ones we already had. We gave him one set and immediately sold the others.

December hadn't even begun but fake Father Christmases were already pacing up and down outside shops, smiling emptily. A huge digital display announced,

“Exclusive for you today: how to avoid karmic ailments?”

Shopping bags were becoming fuller, people had difficulty carrying them home with the determined faces of those who know that life is trying them but they will hold out till the triumphant end. Loudspeakers blasted Christmas songs, each shop playing its own record, creating a cacophony. I considered writing about a chicken I had read about on Wikipedia; it had survived for eighteen months without a head, but I gave up. I was sick of articles with political allusions.

“Experts Warn: You're Holding Your Coffee Cup Wrong!” the Internet informed me. I switched off the computer and finally said, “Karin, please, talk to me, I'm going crazy! I can't go on like this!”

She gave me a strange look, as if she had only just realised that she was not alone in the kitchen. She slightly adjusted the angle of the lid on her laptop.

We stared at each other.

“What’s going on? Please tell me.”

“I was thinking of going to Africa.”

“The two of us? For Christmas? Wouldn’t you rather go and visit your parents in Thailand? It would be cheaper also.”

“I wasn’t thinking about tourism.”

“What then?”

“And I wasn’t thinking about the two of us.”

I had the feeling that my gaze was slipping away. It could no longer hold on to the eyes, or cheeks, or nose, or lips, it just fell into an abyss.

“Alone?”

She nodded.

“Why?”

She looked at the switched-off TV screen.

“These migrants . . . I want to see where they’re coming from.”

“From war. What is there for you to see in war? Every war is the same.”

“And every peace is different,” she interrupted me. “I don’t want to go into a war. I want to see how they live in places where there isn’t war. I want to come into contact with a different culture. What is it like, what kind of society are they? What are their relationships like, what kind of people are they? I want to understand why they want to come here, to us. What is there in Western culture that is worth risking your life for? If we have it so well, why do we feel so bad? I need to go on the outside to see inside.”

“They want better jobs and more money.”

“More objects?”

“Yes.”

“You’re talking off the top of your head. Have you ever been there? Have you ever spoken to any of these people?”

“No. But I read . . .”

“Come on, you know that anyone can write these days. I want the truth, I want to know. Do I not have the right to this?”

“I’m sure you can find reliable accounts . . .”

“I don’t want accounts. I want to use my own senses, get it? If our kid was to go there—I hope he doesn’t—he would serve us with a frightfully clever analysis and we would just nod in astonishment. That’s not what I want. I want to understand myself, I want it to be me and not just someone else’s opinion. Get it?”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no? Of course you understand . . .”

She sighed and continued, “Actually, I don’t either . . . at times it is all so clear, but then . . .”

We stayed silent for a long time.

When I spoke it sounded angrier than I had intended it to, “And what has Emma got to do with this?”

“Are you following me around?”

“I just went to buy something . . .”

“You went to buy something? I thought we said we wouldn’t buy things anymore?”

“I needed something urgently, but I’ve already sold it through the classified ads. Why do you want to travel there alone?”

“Because you’re not interested in this.”

“How do you know? You have a regular job, I’m a freelance journalist—and what kind of a freelance journalist sits at home all day? Why shouldn’t I come along and write an article, one that I’ve wanted to write for a long time, an article for export, one that will get me my profession back and finally bring some inflow into our budget?”

She hesitated.

“I didn’t want to burden you with my worries . . .” she said.

“Why Emma?”

“Because she’s already been there . . . she’s been three times to one of those countries where there is no war and which she claims is the real Africa and not a National Geographic poster.”

“But you always spoke of her with contempt. Now you devote your spare hours to her.”

“She is as she is, but I asked a whole load of people and everyone just gave me media quotes. She’s the only one who was there.”

“Are you going together?”

“No, she doesn’t have any more leave this year. I want to get this clear in my head as soon as possible. I could go over the Christmas holidays.”

“And the kid?”

“He’s going to be thirty!”

“Which you also knew a few months ago but still found excuses for him every time I wanted to . . .”

“Thirty!”

She leaned forward, almost right up to my ear and whispered, “What I’m saying now . . . I didn’t think you’d ever hear it. Do you not sometimes think our son is like a stranger to us?”

I nodded and felt her breath on my cheek.

“I watch him in between his monologues, logically complete and empty of meaning, and the image flashes before me of him happily smiling when he managed to ride the tricycle alone for the first time, the moment he realised that movement depended on what he did, on his own strength. Do you remember?”

I shuddered. Does she know about our attempt at learning how to ride a bike?

It didn’t appear so. She stared at me expectantly.

I nodded.

She smelt of mint tea. I got the feeling that what she was saying were just the leaves covering a path I could not see. The instant I found it, it would all become clear and I would no longer be afraid.

“That’s such a childhood moment,” she said, “probably unique in our lives, when we have that feeling that everything depends on us. Then reality sets in and we realise that the space for manoeuvring is about as much as matchsticks have in a box . . .”

“Unless you have rich parents . . .” I said.

“Which we are not.”

“Right. But we aren’t exactly poor either.”

“Right. But tell me, are we really pedalling the bike instead of him?”

“Karin, we spoke about this already . . .”

“I know. What about his focus? His capability of persisting at what he’s doing until it is finished? Do you remember when he disappeared and we looked for him for three hours, including our neighbours, and eventually found him in the corner behind the cupboard in his room, absorbed in building something with Lego. Remember?”

“Yes.”

“I watch him and try to connect these two people, him then and him now. Where is that joy, that spirit? What went wrong? Why is reason all that is left? Perhaps because we didn’t push him? How many parents try to find a role for their children when they’re five—sports, piano, foreign languages, goodness knows what. We allowed him to grow up and find out for himself. What emerged was a caricature, not an image.”

“Well, I said that . . .”

She placed her hand on my shoulder.

“Don’t say anything. I know, I know everything, but I couldn’t do it differently. Perhaps it’s because my own parents left and I looked after myself that I got drunk on the idea of being able to look after someone else. But is this explanation really that simple? Is childhood like a sunflower, full of seeds waiting for the right conditions to germinate?”

“Karin, we can also teach him how to be less dependent on us even if we stay at home.”

“Probably. But that’s no longer the point. Remember how they tell you in an airplane that in the event of sudden loss of cabin pressure, secure your own oxygen mask before helping others? For years now I’ve known and now I realise more every day that the problem isn’t that the kid doesn’t have enough air, but that he’s also sucking the air from our oxygen cylinders.”

“I agree. Let’s stay at home and . . .”

“Fight a war?”

“It’s not too late, we can win. Let’s stay . . .”

She shook her head and pressed her cheek against mine. I felt a lump in my throat and without pressing my lips together tightly I would have burst into tears.

“Do you remember all the things we planned to do when the kid grew up?”

“Our kid hasn’t grown up, just swelled up,” she said bitterly and continued after a pause. “Perhaps the reason he didn’t grow up is so we wouldn’t start realising our own plans.”

“Yes. We can always . . .”

She shook her head sadly.

“It’s no longer about him, or plans, or even you. It’s about me. Perhaps I’ve had an attack of egoism which I will come to bitterly regret in a few years’ time, but I just have to, I have to do something.”

“What? Karin?”

“I don’t know.”

We looked into each other’s eyes, breathed into each other’s faces. Her eyes filled and the corner of her mouth twitched.

“Please, stay at home!” I sighed.

She moved back and looked at me as if I was an object in a shop.

“There’s a certain passiveness about you, a cult of waiting. Sometimes you seem to me like a stone in a stream, only a strong flash flood could dislodge you.”

“Karin, please.”

“If not now, when then? Are you waiting for the afterlife?”