

Hope

(Anna-Marie Ritter, Kl. 10a)

DHPS-Schülerin Anna-Marie Ritter landete mit ihrer Kurzgeschichte „Hope“ beim Wettbewerb des „African Short Story Day“ zum Thema Migration unter den sechs besten Autoren unter 18 Jahren afrikaweit. Und das zu Recht: Ihre Geschichte einer Flucht – in der die junge Nigerianerin Adelola voller Hoffnung nach Italien flieht, so realitätsnah, dass man meint, die Gerüche, Geräusche und Gefühle der Protagonisten selbst wahrnehmen zu können – geht unter die Haut. Erst wollte sie gar nicht am Wettbewerb teilnehmen und war eher wenig begeistert, als ihre damalige Deutschlehrerin Frau Beck ihr den Vorschlag machte eine Geschichte einzureichen. Die zündende Idee kam ihr dann tatsächlich erst einen Tag vor Abgabeschluss. Und das motivierende Gefühl, eine eigene Geschichte erschaffen und zu Papier gebracht zu haben, erfüllte Anna-Marie dann doch etwas mit Stolz. „Es hilft sehr, wenn man sich gut auf dem Papier ausdrücken kann.“

Seagulls were screeching, a cold wind howled and the waves were crashing on the shore. For two weeks my mother and I stayed in a filthy and crowded room, only one window showing us whether it was light or dark. Day in and day out I saw the same fearful eyes staring at me. Some faces were filled with a glimpse of hope, others were emotionless, and others filled with anxiety. It made me sick, knowing that every single one of them was here, because of either poverty, famine or like me, religious persecution. The common denominator of all of us present in the room was simply the hope for a better future.

The door squeaked as it opened. All the heads turned towards two men who stood at the entrance. We never knew whom they were going to pick. “You there,” they shouted, while pointing at a thin woman and her baby. She stood up, hesitant, instinctively protecting her infant. I hated the smugglers although my future depended on them. They were making their profit through human trafficking. My dear mother saved all her money to give me my freedom and now she paid another US\$ 2000, to passage me from Tripoli to Southern Italy. In Kano, Nigeria, I think she already paid US\$ 800. My hand was grasping my concealed cross under my shirt which my mother gave me when I was baptised. Hopefully, they were going to pick me.

“You there,” one of them bellowed.

His bulging finger pointed at me. Freedom here we come, I thought. I could have cried out of joy but that cheerful feeling did not last long. The fear of the unknown was creeping towards me. I heard that many boats had sunk and the people on them drowned. I could not swim. In the rainy season my sister and I sometimes splashed around in small puddles but you could not call that swimming. Oh, my beloved sister. I missed her so much. I was ripped out of my thoughts as I felt my mother’s warm hand clasping mine. Together with plenty of other

migrants we stepped out of the musty and stuffy smelling confined house into the cold and clear night. The fresh scent of the sea filled my nostrils. I inhaled it deeply, letting it cool my mind. It was time to say goodbye to my mother and I could not help it, I cried. The warm tears ran down my cheeks, as my mother wiped them away with her thumb, which made me cry even more.

“Stay strong, Adelola, and always remember who you are,” she whispered.

I nodded. “I love you mother and I will never be able to tell you how thankful I am,” I said, trying to sound confident.

“I love you too, Adelola, and more than you can imagine but I am not doing this out of free will, but for your future. You are my only daughter left whom I can hopefully provide with a better life. I do not want you ending up like your older sister Olukeni,” she replied. When she spoke there was sorrow in her voice. I hugged her and if I could have frozen this moment I would never have let her go.

“Everybody onto the boat,” the fat smuggler commanded.

I let go of my mother, trying to record every facet of her face. She smiled at me and squeezed my hand. No words were needed to say “goodbye”. And off I went, with only one small backpack, which consisted of a blanket, my bible, a portable bucket of homemade millet porridge and a big bottle of fresh water. The plump smuggler showed a young man how to use the engine of the boat and gave him a compass. I hardly found a place on the boat. Everywhere were young men and women. I was squeezed between two men. One of them had a scar crossing his face and with his black beard he looked fearsome. I did not examine the other one. The boat was crammed with people and now I understood what the person in the filthy room meant about boats sinking because of being overcrowded. I tried to turn and wave my mom goodbye but I could not see her anymore. The sound of the engine boomed in my ears. I tried to sit back and stretch my legs but I could not. There was no space. Wrapped in my blanket I waited for sleep to come but it was impossible to rest. All the different smells were mixed together into one disgusting stink. Sweat, dirt, smelly shoes, engine oil and petrol scent blended, making me nauseous. The boat pitched and tossed uncomfortably but I tried to imagine that it swung me into a sweet sleep. And finally, that worked. Waves of exhaustion swept over me and soon I was thrown into the world of dreams, where nightmares, visions and fantasies ruled. I was wandering through a place where the flowers blossomed and the grass had a juicy green colour. The sky was baby blue and on a hill stood our small clay hut. My mother and Olukeni stood there. Both were beaming at me and we ran towards each other. We were smiling at one another and in the background one could see the other huts, which made up my birthplace

Damaturu. The landscape looked so fake but it made me feel safe. Butterflies were flying around and bees were buzzing.

Suddenly, the surroundings changed. I was on the edge of a gigantic meadow. The sky was pallid and sickly grey. The grass looked colourless and bleached out, and in my hand I held a rose, bright and brilliant in colour. The colour of blood. I wanted to scream but Olukeni, who stood next to me, calmed me. She was so beautiful. Olukeni, my sister, mature and most probably the prettiest young lady in the Yobe State. She watched after me when my mother had no time and my father, a herdsman, was out in the field.

I heard them coming before I saw them. They attacked the Christians, killed the men, sent bombs, burned down churches and schools and took girls hostage. There was nothing we feared more than the Boko Haram. In my sleep I tossed and turned.

With their Land Cruisers they drove over the meadow towards Damaturu. The inhabitants were panicking. Women grabbed their children, men tried to hide their families, others were running aimlessly around. With all my energy I sprinted towards our hut, Olukeni was close on my heels. My blood was pumping through my veins and I was gasping for air. In my fear and desperation I yelled for my parents. My mother was already at the hiding place. I dropped the red rose and hid. Where was Olukeni? Everything happened so quickly. A shot pierced the air. They shot my father. He was dead on the ground. Lifeless. My beloved father. I wanted to scream but my mother pressed her hand over my mouth. From one moment to another everything fell silent. There were only the voices of the terrorists; cold and filled with blood thirst. I heard heavy footsteps coming closer to our hiding place. My heart was beating so fast, I was afraid they would hear it. I felt death creeping closer. All of a sudden there was a scream and I immediately knew it was my sister's voice. She must have been too slow. Through a tiny hole I saw her standing there, facing the Boko Haram group. She was sacrificing herself to protect my mother and me. With her lips she was silently forming the words "I love you" and then they took her. I looked up into the pale sky and a red curtain of roses closed in front of my eyes. I woke up.

It must have been early in the morning. The sun was rising from the horizon and her rays tickled my nose. I felt no warmth just a horrible nothingness. I hated this nightmare of my past. Ever since Damaturu was attacked, the dream haunted me.

The man next to me was grunting, saying something about being thirsty. I was thirsty too and so I got out my bottle of water. The water tasted sweet and moistened my dried out mouth and throat. Without asking, the man next to me grabbed my bottle and gulped it down. Anger burnt within my heart. I snatched the bottle back and he said, "Are you looking for trouble girl?"

His yellowish teeth were grinning at me.

"No, but this is my bottle," I replied.

"You better sit somewhere else or I shall throw you overboard," he said in return with a snarl.

Then he started to laugh scornfully. To avoid any trouble I moved away. Somebody grabbed my wrist and pulled me down. I was confused and shocked. As I looked up I saw a pair of inquisitive eyes staring at me. The girl must have been my age. She had full lips and her eyes perfectly matched her strong jawline.

"Hello, I am Fatima," she said in a gentle voice.

"Do not let those men mock you. I noticed how that one with the scar treated you."

I said nothing.

"You have a name, right?" she asked raising her voice slightly.

"Adelola," I mumbled.

"Mmmh, nice name, you must be from Nigeria, because that is a typically Nigerian name."

I nodded. How could she sound so optimistic? As the day passed we played rock, paper, scissor and I started to trust Fatima. And then came the question.

"Tell me Adelola, why are you fleeing?"

"Tell me your story first," I replied.

"I come from Mali, where I was living with my seven brothers and sisters and my parents. My father is a fisherman and my mother looked after us children. Father decided to send me over to Europe so I could secure a job and repatriate my earnings back to my family, to improve their standard of living. Now I am here, an economic migrant. And you, what is your life story?"

I did not want to tell her, what did it matter anyway whether I told someone or not?

"I was born and raised in the small town of Damaturu, which lies in the Yobe State, Nigeria. I am from the Karai. My father was a herdsman and my mother is a hardworking and strong woman. And then there was my elder sister, Olukeni. Our small family was happy, until the day when the Boko Haram attacked our town. Those men shot around with their assault rifles and killed my father. One of them was walking towards our mother's and my hiding place and that is when Olukeni sacrificed herself for us. She stood up to the men so they did not find us. That day, she was abducted by Boko Haram."

My eyes drifted away, stung with tears. I wished it had been me instead of her.

"That was the point where my mother and I decided to flee. She wanted me to have a better future. Unfortunately, we did not have enough money to ship her across the Mediterranean Sea. We fled from Damaturu to Kano by bus. In Kano we met a smuggler whom we paid US\$ 800 to get a reference to another one in the town Agadez in neighbouring Mali. In Agadez, we stayed in a room for two nights until we met the contact person who smuggles migrants through the Sahara desert to Libya. The desert is hot and has no mercy.

It was tough, dangerous and at times we had no hope. We entered Libya after travelling at the back of a truck for two days. At the border control I just prayed we could get through. The smugglers bribed the officials. The first stop in the Libyan Desert was in the town Sabha. Our accommodation was so miserable and dirty that I had the feeling that it was a living blood bag for flees, ticks and other insects. From Sabha we drove to Tripoli harbour. And now I am here."

My voice was shaking. Fatima looked at me and then she took me in her arms. That night, I was glad to have somebody I could trust, a friend – and for the first time I did not dream of my past.

It was dawn when it happened. Someone on the boat yelled. Then I saw it. There was a hole torn into the rubber of the boat. Water was filling the dinghy. Fatima and I were wide-awake. This could not be happening.

"Can you swim?" Fatima asked me. I could hear the fear in her voice.

"No," I said, terrified.

After all this. After all I had been through. The whole agonising journey, it was all for nothing, my future was drowning with it. People were jumping off the boat; others clinging to it. I had to jump. Fatima reached for my hand. Thank heavens she did. I did not want to die alone. I said a quick prayer and thought of my mother and then I jumped. Water. Water everywhere. I needed air. I was drowning. Bubbles of air were swirling from my mouth. Water was flooding my lungs. It hurt. The pain was unbelievable. Salt water was burning in my eyes. Suddenly the agony stopped and I felt so light. There was only darkness around me. Pitch black.

I was out in the field with my father, herding the cattle. I was six years old around that time. It was the rainy season. We sat at a dam and he said, "Adelola, would you like to hear a story?"

I nodded.

"You know what your ancestors always said?"

I shook my head.

"Our world is ruled by powers we cannot control. For everything there is a reason. Why the trees turn dry and grey in winter or why flowers blossom in the summer. Why ants carry leaves that are heavier than themselves or why bats only come out at night. It all has a purpose, the purpose of living. It is the circle of life. Sometimes one door must close so that another one can open and if you think you are at the end there will always be a light in the darkness."

I did not understand what he meant with this but I understood that I should never stop fighting. For we live to survive; that is our destiny. My eyes opened. I could not see properly, it was so blurred and dim. Was I in heaven? Someone was pressing on my chest. I spat out water and coughed. My lungs tightened. And then I fell again. Fell into the nothingness.

"Hello my silly sister," Olukeni was smiling at me. "How many times have I told you how to lift up the box properly? You are weak, Adelola, and you must grow strong. If you are strong you have power and with power you can lift up this box."

I was eight at that time. Those were boxes of food I was supposed to carry but they were too heavy for me. "Let me help you, sister," Olukeni said. Together we carried them to our hut. I felt so proud and strong.

Slowly I opened my eyes. A white man was leaning over me, another man next to him. Both looked kind and wore shocking orange vests.

"Lei è sveglio," the first one said in a deep foreign voice.

Slowly I turned my head.

"You are alright, girl. We saved you. Are you strong enough to answer some questions?" the second man asked; surprisingly he spoke my language. "Yes," I replied in a hoarse voice. Fatima! Where was she?

"What's your name girl?" "Adelola." "How old are you?"

"I'm fourteen." "Where are you from?" "Nigeria."

"Thank you. Now rest. You shall soon be safe ashore in Lampedusa, Italy."

There was silence.

"Where's she?" I asked. "Who?" "Fatima, the girl from Mali, she's the same age as I am."

The man's eyes turned sad. "I am sorry, Adelola, but we could only save twenty people and there was no other fourteen year old girl amongst the survivors."

He turned around and walked away. That was too much for me. My father – dead. My sister – abducted by the Boko Haram, and my friend Fatima – drowned. She, why she? Fatima was so optimistic and she had such a painful death. She deserved better.

Next to me I could see a body covered with a cloth. Was it hers? I doubt I will ever know. I was holding onto my cross. A kind woman stopped by and led me into a cabin where the other survivors sat. I could see land through one of the circular port holes.

As I disembarked, it took me a while to realise I was safe. I was at the end of my journey or perhaps it had only really begun. I had hope and I saw a future for me. And that future I saw lying there in every grain of sand which made up the beach. Behind me the waves were gently dashing against my ankles. Behind me lay the past, the sorrow of what happened. But I had to look forward. I had to see the light and open the door. I had to stay strong to survive, to conquer. For the first time in forever I felt what hope was. It was a burning desire, a flame that could never be blown out. Hope was life itself, and it had made me.