

TAKE A FICTION BREAK

Editor's Note: In the spirit of summer escapes and the joy of engrossing oneself in a captive narrative, ABODE presents a short story by Qatar native Matthias Krug.

The Case of the Rotting Bananas Fiction by Matthias Krug

The fruit shop was just off the main street. It was hidden around a little corner.

Inside the fruit shop there was a tropical kind of smell. There was a part rotting and part sweetness to the smell. Probably it was brought about by the rotting bananas in one corner. There were some new ones on display, though. It was just that the fruit shop man had not been bothered to throw the rotting bananas away. Perhaps it was out of some silly hope that someone might still want to buy the old ones when there were new, shiny, unspoiled bananas available. He had no idea for what rotting bananas could be useful, but you never knew with people. It was some kind of forlorn sentimentality on his part.

Outside it was cold and windy and it spitted rain. Pit-pit-pat. The street was full of people cowering under their umbrellas. You could see they were all afraid of something. Of the sky falling down on their heads, maybe (financially speaking). There was a seemingly endless row of egg crates sitting on one side of the road. They looked like a man lying down. They were all empty.

A big white man had just checked his balance at a cash machine. It made him frown. But he was of the lucky ones. He still had a place to call home. And the purple trolley he was pulling behind was filled nicely with food from

the supermarket. But they didn't have any nice fruits there. The supermarket fruits were always rotten, or too green.

He walked past the bakery, where they always got their guns. It was funny, but in Spanish the bread which he and his girlfriend liked was called a "pistola." Two guns please. It sounded like America. The Wild West. Or just America now, the country that glorified the manly, deadly gun. They made tuna sandwiches with it.

Now he needed some strawberries, though. Bananas, too. He turned the corner at the electric shop, where they had bought the heater for the winter. The hooded jumper he was wearing was getting well wet. He walked quickly for the few remaining steps and then turned and faded gratefully into the fruit shop. It smelt of sweet, rotting bananas.

"Hello," he said, in Spanish.

"Uh," the fruit shop man said dryly. He had been to the shop just a few times, but every time he did go, the fruit shop man was as dry as the skin of a coconut.

"You have bananas?" the big white man asked. He smiled. There was something he liked about the dark-skinned man behind the counter. He had cheek. Somehow he had it. You looked at him and you saw the cheek coming out of his rounded face. He wasn't very old, middle-aged or maybe even a bit younger.

The dark-skinned man pointed at the new bananas. He was thinking about pointing at the old bananas, the rotting ones in the corner. But then he thought, this customer could be important if he comes regularly. The last time the big white man with the broad shoulders had come to the shop with his girlfriend, they had been picky about the strawberries. They did not want any old strawberries. So he pointed him to the new bananas.

Suddenly a man entered the fruit shop. It was the gum man. He carried in his arms, as if it were a gun, a small box of gums. No bigger than a book. He was a smallish man, local, with a moustache overtaking his face. He acted like he owned the entire fruit shop, rotting bananas and all.

"Here, here is the shipment," he said, importantly, to the fruit shop man.

The big white man looked up from his bananas. He talked as if his shipment were made of gold. Shipment? How can gum be a shipment? Is he a captain? His moustache looks like a ship, but he can hardly sail on that. He smiled inwardly.

"And you have to place it here, just exactly here," the gum man was saying. His moustache twitched as he said this. He said things in an ugly manner to the fruit shop man. He moved the box of gums, upright, to a part of the counter.

"Uh," the fruit shop man said. He looked at

the gum man as though he was crazy, but he didn't say a thing. But he looked well and long and hard, as if he were tempted to do something which might cost him the fruit shop in the end. And then, was it really worth it, in these financial times?

"No, no, wait." The gum man moved his silly gum box to the other side of the counter. "Put it here. It has to be here, you understand? Now it has to be here. Certainly."

Now it had to be there. He said it in Spanish but the fruit shop man understood. So did the big white man. Why doesn't he go and shut up, he thought, unrolling a plastic bag with long slender fingers. Who gives a damn where a box of gum stands? In fact, it isn't even a box of gum. He saw now what they were. Those mints that you pop into your mouth if your breath smells. The big white man had no sympathy for those mints. Chewing gums maybe. He liked chewing gums. But those mints? Who on earth cared where they stood on the counter?

He was just finishing with the bananas. They looked very well and shiny and new. He packed two big bunches in the plastic bag and wondered how much they would cost compared to the price in the supermarket. If it was cheaper in the supermarket he would have to stop coming here. He went over to the counter. The mints stood now on one side of the counter. The fruit shop man was signing a receipt that he had received the mints.

"This," he said, and gave the bananas to be weighed. He pushed the gum man out of the way a little. Not physically, but by means of his presence.

"Are the clementines good?" he asked.

"Good, very good," the fruit shop man said, his face dead earnest. "Try them."

"They are very big, for clementines," the big white man said in passable Spanish. They were as big as a fist. Very shiny and orange, too.

The gum man looked him over. His demeanour changed.

"Big, big, like you, sir, big," he said, and he smiled for the first time since he had entered the fruit shop.

The big man did not say anything. He picked out four big clementines. The gum man took the signed receipt and left the shop. He did not own the shop any longer now. He was only finished bringing in a silly box of mints. The big man handed the clementines to the fruit shop man.

"What a man," he said emphatically, pointing to the box of mints for comprehension purposes. But maybe his Spanish was not so understandable yet.

"No, mints are for women too," the fruit shop man said. "They also have bad breath sometimes. Not only men."

"No, I meant the man who brought them," he said, pointing again at the mints.

"No, I think women also like it," the fruit shop man said, this time in English.

Never mind, the big man thought.

"How much is it?" he asked.

"Let me see," the fruit shop man said. He weighed the bananas first, and then the clementines. "That will be 3.50."

"It's cheaper in the supermarket, right?" the big man said. He was just joking around.

"No, no, I am cheaper," the fruit shop man

said, and he smiled for the first time. He knew the other was just joking around.

The big man gave him the money. Then he took his change and looked at the strawberries which were on the counter too, on the other end to the new mints. They were rotting. There was the smell of rotting strawberries floating between them.

"You don't have nice strawberries today," he said.

"You want; I have fresh ones, outside," the fruit shop man said.

"Yes, let me take a look."

The man went outside into the spitting rain and brought in a box. It was filled to the brim with fresh, ripe, red strawberries. They had droplets of water on them, from the spitting rain. But they looked wonderfully full.

"You want the whole box?" the fruit shop man asked. He was always trying to sell him the whole box. The previous time too, he had tried. He had stated 5 Euros as the asking price then.

"How much – 3 Euros?" the big man said now.

"OK, I give it to you for 3.50, you want?"

"Come on, 3 is good."

"No, I buy it for 4 Euros," the fruit shop man said, with a slight smile.

You didn't buy it for 4 Euros. Like anything you did, the big white man thought. But he liked the man. He had cheek. Not everyone implied that they made a 50 cent loss on selling their strawberries. You had to have cheek to do that.

"OK." He bought the whole box. It just fit on top of his purple trolley, above the rest of the food. He said bye. "And next time you give it to me for 3 Euros."

The fruit shop man laughed and the big man headed out of the fruit shop into the rain. It was no longer spitting now. As he looked up the clouds cleared slightly into one of those magnificent Madrid skies which he had become fond of since arriving in the country. There was nothing like a Madrid sky to raise your spirits.

He cut around the corner and pulled the trolley up towards the bakery. He went in and ordered two guns. Then he thought; the strawberries came at a good price. Shoot, they really did. And they look delicious. My girlfriend will be happy.

He would make a strawberry cake, he thought. She liked strawberry cakes.

PART II

The next time the man went to the fruit shop the weather was clear and the strawberries had all been eaten with much love and enjoyment. It was a blustery day with a whole lot of sun and a wide array of blooming trees which spoke a great deal of the arrival of summer. He turned the corner, this time without the purple trolley, and walked inside the fruit shop. The fruit shop man was smiling when he entered. It smelt still of rotting bananas. The big man needed tomatoes on this day.

"What is your name?" he asked the fruit shop man as he selected from the overblown tomatoes.

The fruit shop man thought about this for a while, as though there was more to the question than the mere mentioning of a name.

"Janghir," he said finally. "What is yours?"

"Pip," he said. "Pepe you might say in Spanish."

"Pip," Janghir said, tasting the name in his mouth. "A great name."

"How's business going?" Pip asked, in order to make some further conversation.

"Very bad," Janghir said, "muy mal. At least it's not my business. I'm only doing it for a friend."

This shook Pip somewhat. He had pictured Janghir as the owner of the small fruit shop. He did not know why this shook him.

"I get 600 Euros a month to run the shop," Janghir continued.

"I see," Pip said, handing him the overblown tomatoes in the plastic bag. That's not much at all, he thought. That's hardly enough to live.

"It is the crisis. But for rich men like you there is no crisis."

"I'm no rich man," Pip said, "There is a crisis for everyone."

Pip bought the tomatoes, waved goodbye and then walked out into the emerging sunshine. It sprayed golden rays all around in the swaying wind. The rays played with the white blooms of the trees. This was a beautiful day. He thought about the fruit shop man, that it was not really his shop. Strange that, he thought. Only now I know. Not that it makes any difference. Just the smell of the rotting bananas remained unsolved to him then. It was as though it hovered continuously throughout the fruit shop. Pip walked with firm steps upwards in the direction of the bread shop. He still needed two guns for dinner.

