

PROLOGUE

When I was three years old, I received an atlas of the world which, years later, led to malaria, about twenty different occasions of food poisoning, and me ending up in life-threatening, hopeless situations that brought me to the edge. My dad bought me that atlas in a local bookstore, and my mom gave him grief for it. I could barely even talk yet, never mind read. I guess her maternal instinct kicked in, telling her that this unusual gift from a loving father would spark an addiction to traveling the world and discovering exotic countries.

Exotic is the keyword here. Even as a kid, I was fascinated by countries that hardly ever fascinated other people. I would talk passionately about Djibouti, Palau, or Suriname, and that's when my friends stopped being my friends. In geography class, I would shout the answer before the teacher even finished his question. I won geography championships in school and bragged about knowing all of the capital cities of the world. It wasn't very cool, though, because back then hip-hop was definitely hotter than geography. Also, girls didn't care that Nicaragua and Dominica are the only two countries with purple on their flags.

There was always one continent that I sort of ignored — I just wasn't interested in learning more about it. Everything there was to know, people had already known, and tons had been written on it. Everyone around me had at least a basic knowledge of the old continent — Europe. I was sure that one day, when I grew up, I would visit Africa, Asia, and America. But there was my mom again with her maternal instinct to protect her little boy, trying her hardest to convince me that “even Greece is an extremely adventurous destination”. She failed, unfortunately.

So, whenever I had the opportunity, the funds, and enough pounds on me that I could then afford to lose, I left my native Europe and went exploring. And as it happens with amateur explorers, I often got burned. We're talking fourth-degree burns here.

For some reason, the roads I took were always paved with misfortune. The minute I left home, I'd find myself doubled over with the shits in some bathroom, in a crumbling hospital, or arrested by soldiers.

I really just wanted to meet new people, hear their life stories, and experience their everyday joys and challenges. But somehow, that always ended with me facing those challenges alone. They say there are idiots everywhere, and I, as it turns out, am an idiot magnet.

My insatiable lust for traveling, paired with my cynicism and my incurable hypochondria, led me to bizarre, impossible, and hard-to-believe scenarios. Friends and family alike didn't believe me. They thought I was just telling tall tales and begged me to stop making stuff up. So, I began writing my stories down, naïvely hoping that someday, somebody would want to hear them.

You're holding in your hands a book of crazy stories, which I lived through on the road over the last five years. Whether it was sun-soaked California, fable-filled Peru, or malaria-infested Togo, every country brought me close to physical and psychological collapse, as I faced situations with no escape, wanting one thing and one thing only: to go home.

I sincerely hope it will be easier for you to read these stories than it was for me to live them.





*To my parents. If they knew
about all the things that happened
to me, they would never have
let me out of the house.*



HICCUP!

HEY! HICCUP!
DO YOU KNOW WHO I AM?



HERE IS THE SOLDIER

HICCUP!



THE CHILDREN HAVE A PLACE TO STAY!

MINIBUS SCHEDULE IN MALAWI:

- MON: ANYTIME
- TUE: WHENEVER WE FEEL LIKE IT
- WED: ANY DAY NOW
- THU: WHENEVER
- FRI: OCCASIONALLY
- SAT: WHENEVER WE FEEL LIKE IT
- SUN: —

MY NAME IS MARK SNITZELFRITZ, I'M A PROTESTANT MINISTER. AMEN.



ME M M M

BUS PLS STOP

< Sophia
Put the camera away!

MALAWI



NO PHOTOGRAPHS

POPULATION: 18 091 575
CAPITAL: LILONGWE
DISTANCE FROM MY HOME: 4.355 MILES
MALAWI IS THE ONLY COUNTRY BESIDES DENMARK WHERE THEY MAKE CARLSBERG BEER.



Amen

GOD BLESS YOU !!!

THE LORD'S PRAYER



We're sitting in the heat on the side of the road watching slow village life unfold. The women selling fish at the market are shooing away legions of flies trying to land on their catch of the day.

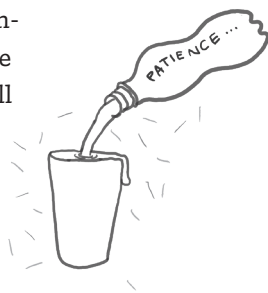
In a rusty shop, an old radio plays while the owner is slumped over on a tiny, wooden stool, sleeping away the heat. Here and there someone passes by, greets us, and continues on their way. Nothing is happening. Here, time and life stand still.



We're waiting for a minibus, which would take us to the Tanzanian border. In Malawi, there's no such thing as a bus schedule. Buses come and go randomly, whenever the driver decides it's time to go. He usually makes that decision when the minibus is packed to the gills or when he gets sick of waiting for hours on end. It's one of these minibuses we're waiting for on the side of the road, at the end of the village of Chitimba.

I decide to kill some time by recording a video. I take my camera and record some shots of the empty village, the market, where besides fish, you can only buy onions and tomatoes, and two small children playing with a bicycle pump. I finally put the camera on a small tripod and film a static shot of this yawning emptiness.

In the distance, you can hear something creaking, someone drilling, something falling. And suddenly, cutting through these sounds, is a nervous "hey, hey, hey!", coming toward us.



Out of nowhere, a staggering man holding a half-empty bottle of brown alcohol appears in front of us. He's the source of the aforementioned "hey, hey, hey". I immediately put my camera away because you never know what people like this might be up to.

"Hey, I saw everything!" he shouted.

At first, Sophia and I just ignored him. We had enough experience in Africa to know that when drunk people approach you, it's best to ignore them, and sooner or later they'll move on. This

guy was completely disheveled, and you could smell him from one-hundred yards away — probably a local homeless person who'd had a little too much whiskey for lunch.

"You're in trouble, I saw that! I saw the whole thing!"

We stared at the ground, trying to avoid his gaze, praying he would soon leave us alone, but he kept pestering us.

"You've got a problem, I'm telling you! A pro... problem!"

My patience was wearing thin. I was tempted to shove him and just punch him in the face. What does this idiot think he's doing?!

"Hey, I'm talking to you! You're just going to make it harder for yourselves if you ignore me!"

"What do you want?! We're not giving you any money, so leave us alone!" I barked at him.

"Don't you dare raise your voice at me again! You have no idea who you're messing with!" he almost lost both his voice and balance as he cut me off.

"Stop bothering us. We're not interested in anything you're offering."

"Come with me now!" he demanded.

I was tired of playing games with this clown, so I continued to look away and ignore him. He kept mumbling something and started rummaging through a torn-up wallet. An old, beat-up badge fell out of it — the kind you buy at the toy store as part of a policeman's outfit.

"I! I'm the sheriff in this town!" he snarled and spat, the pig.

"And I'm the son of your president! The illegitimate one, by a fashion model. That's why I'm so handsome, I take after my mother."

My sarcasm literally threw him off balance and onto the ground. Sophia chuckled.

"You shot some videos here! You caught a member of the army on camera! That's against the law!" he shouted as he heaved himself up off the ground.

Taking videos and photos of members of the police or army is actually illegal in most African countries; it's considered a serious



violation for reasons that are a mystery to me. However, I was not aware of having taken a video of a member of the armed forces in the last ten minutes.

“What are you babbling about? I didn’t take any video of anyone.”

The self-proclaimed sheriff pointed a thin finger to a location behind us. I looked where he was pointing, and at the end of the dirt road, about 200 yards away, I saw someone sitting in front of a large tent. I couldn’t tell who it was, it was too far away. All I saw was a small figure sitting in a chair.

“I’m arresting you! You’re coming with me and I’m confiscating your camera!”

After this remark, I was sure the guy in front of me was no sheriff, but just an ordinary drunk moron who wanted my camera. I’d had the pleasure of meeting more than one on my journey thus far...

“Goodbye,” I replied, considering this episode with the Malawian drunkard closed.

Luckily, the uninvited guest realized that this cheap trick was not going to score him my camera, so he took off at a high-speed stagger toward the tent. We had won the battle.

But not the war.

Soon, I heard his drunken mouth rattling off again. I turned around and couldn’t believe my eyes. That drunk moron was coming toward me with a soldier who had a machine gun slung over his shoulder.

I nudge Sophia. “We’ve got a problem.”

“Hide the camera quick. It’ll be your word against the word of a crazy drunk. Who do you think the soldier will believe? Just stay calm,” Sophia advised.

I didn’t even know why I was so nervous. I was sure I hadn’t captured any soldier or members of the police force on video. On the other hand, we were in Africa. Here, what the authorities say goes, even if it isn’t true.



The soldier and the drunk were standing behind me. Sophia and I get up, put huge smiles on our faces, and greet them politely. First impressions count, after all.

“Come with me, sir,” the soldier commanded without even saying *hello*.

“Why? What did I do?” I said, desperately seeking an answer.

“I SAID; COME WITH ME!”

“I’m not going anywhere, you don’t have the right to arrest me without cause.”

In Africa, a soldier has the right to take you away, and in some countries, even kill you, without a reason. The reality of the situation set in as he grabbed me, and aggressively ordered me to cooperate, otherwise it would end badly, he threatened. His firm grasp reminded me what continent I was on, and so I followed him, like a lamb to the slaughterhouse. I tried assuring a now very pale Sophia that everything would be okay, but at this point, those were just empty words.

Anything could happen — I could go to prison, pay fat bribes, or get beaten to a pulp. I could even be murdered.

The drunk was hopping up and down, laughing in my face. What could he have said to the soldier to make him grab me and drag me to... who knows where?

We went into the tent, which I’d seen from the road, but it had seemed much smaller then. From up close, I could see that this was a giant camouflage military tent. Inside, the décor was modest — two fans, a few chairs, and a large, wooden table where another soldier was sitting. I wouldn’t have pegged him for a Malawian — he was fat with a very nasty look on his face. I hadn’t met anybody like that in Malawi before.

They pushed me into a chair. The soldiers exchanged a few words in their native tongue, and the trial of the Eastern-European criminal was ready to begin.

“Do you know why you’re here?” the fat soldier asked.

“I don’t, sir. If I’ve done something wrong, I apologize.”



YOU
OFFENDED
THE SHERIFF
!!!



The realization of what continent I was on fully set in. The time had come for some serious ass-kissing. African authorities love that crap.

“You’ve committed some very serious crimes. You’re in huge trouble.”

“Forgive me, I’m really not aware of what those crimes are, please could you explain?”

“First of all, you disrespected the regional sheriff.”

So, this plastered homeless guy actually was the sheriff? Mouth open, I sat there in disbelief. I kept looking at the sheriff’s bottle of booze, then at the soldier, hoping he would realize that their sheriff is an inebriated swine. The soldier unfortunately didn’t catch on and just sat there, furious. The sheriff proudly muttered something to himself and started guzzling whatever was in the bottle again.

“I sincerely apologize for that. The sheriff didn’t seem like a man of the law. You know, I’m used to uniforms.”

“He claims he showed you his badge.”

“Yes, yes, I did!” the trashed sheriff jumped in.

“I don’t deny that. I don’t know what got into me, I should have shown him more respect. I’m so sorry.”

“You are, however, guilty of another crime! You’ve got a huge problem on your hands!”

“Please, tell me what crime, I have no idea, sir.”

“You allegedly filmed members of the military! Do you have any idea how serious that is? In our country it’s one of the worst crimes you can commit! You’re in hot water now!”

“Forgive me, but I did no such thing. I was recording the market, some kids, and maybe myself for a bit, but nobody from the army passed by as far as I know.”

“Don’t lie! Why are you lying?! You’re just making it worse for yourself; you’re deceiving the military of the Republic of Malawi!” yelled the fat soldier, showering me in droplets of spit.

“I will gladly show you all the footage from today. I don’t know what the sheriff has told you, but he’s wrong about this.”

“Please do!”

I took the camera out of my bag and started showing all three men the footage taken just a few minutes ago. They all huddled around me as if I were showing some friends pictures from our road trip. Except that all three of them wanted to arrest me.

Without a word, we watched all the videos of the market, the boring road, and the slow village life, until the shot with me talking about my impressions of Malawi. These last shots made them perk up.

“That’s what I’m talking about! There, you recorded a military officer!” the sheriff bellowed.

I stopped the video and they all leaned in a little closer.

My big head took up most of the shot, but if you squinted hard enough and really focused on the details, you could make out in the distance a tiny dot near the tent about 200 yards away. Anyone else would say it was just a speck of dirt on the lens, or maybe a fly.

However, we can’t expect three hawk-eyed men of the law to miss such a thing. They know that microscopic speck was, in fact, a soldier.

“That’s it!”

“So, you did film a soldier!”

“You’ve committed a crime!”

I couldn’t believe my ears. A part of me thought they were screwing with me. For sure sitting in a tent from morning till night would bore anyone out of their mind. Sooner or later, a man’s got to vent. But the men’s serious tones and bulging eyes suggested that I was in grave trouble for a few-second video with an unidentifiable black dot in the background, which they claimed was a soldier. I shook my head in disbelief, I couldn’t process their absurd reaction.

“I will delete those videos right away. I’m very sorry.”

“No, that’s the last thing you should do! It’s evidence! Give us the camera,” the fat soldier ordered as he sat back down in his seat opposite me.

So, today's the day I either lose my camera, the camera and some money, or the camera, money, and my freedom. None of those three options really did it for me.

"Did you not hear the General?! We're confiscating your camera!" the other soldier exclaimed and ripped the camera out of my hands.

No number of valid arguments would help here, because this was a different world. A world where the rules were made by these three and those rules were king. The more I tried to defend myself and claim otherwise, the more I came up against their ridiculous arguments and laws. Was there any chance of getting out of this? What would work on them?

"Now we'll write up a report and you will go to the police station."

"Excuse me?"

"I WILL NOT SAY IT AGAIN!"

"I'm sorry."

"First name?"

"Mark."

"Surname?"

"Snickelfritz."

It was the first thing that came to mind. I refused to give them my real name, however, I realized that if they asked for my passport, they'd see something completely different. Actually, why didn't they want my passport or some other form of official identification?

"Nationality?"

"Slovak."

The soldier made two mistakes in the word "Slovak".

"Address?"

"Dostoevsky street, Bratislava, Slovakia."

He didn't even come close with that one, it came out as a bunch of garbage.

Everything was written down on a grimy scrap of paper. This is what an official report looks like? Something smells fishy here. Shouldn't I just hand them a bribe and leave?

"Religion?"

Religion? Is it really necessary to include my religious affiliation on a criminal report?

"Protestant."

The three of them looked at each other for a second, as if they were blindsided by my answer.

"Profession?"

That's when an ingenious plan came to me. It had a few small cracks in it, and it was definitely risky, but it was still better than waiting around for them to take my camera and even throw me in jail.

"I'm a minister," I said with deep humility, looking soulfully into the soldiers' eyes.

"You're a minister?"

"Yes, I'm an Evangelical Protestant minister."

The sheriff whispered something to the other soldier. The fat one opposite me seemed a little rattled but wrote in the report "Profession: Evangelical Protestant minister". I felt I might be on the right path, so I continued.

"I was sent here on a mission by the Evangelical Church of the Slovak Republic. I'm helping local communities and spreading the word of God."

The whole tent went silent. The fat soldier clicked his pen nervously while the other two standing by me mumbled quietly to each other in their native tongue. It looked like my plan might take.

"You're helping communities in Malawi?"

"Yes, I just came back from Nkhata Bay. We organized meetings with local ministers and traveled to nearby villages to bless the masses."

I had never been to Nkhata Bay, but I knew it was a few towns over.

“In fact, that’s why I have a camera,” I continued in a loving tone, “the Evangelical Bishop in the Slovak Republic asked me to document the Malawian way of life, the people’s opinions on religion and, of course, the local worship services as well. The problem is, if you take my camera, our people will never see your culture. I think it would be a shame, but, of course, I won’t argue with men of the law.”

Fat GI Joe’s pen clicked ever more urgently. I decided to deliver the final blow.

“I will respect your decision, but allow me, please, before you throw me in prison, to contact the minister in Mzuzu. We were heading there now, so he would be upset if I didn’t show up. The faithful of the entire parish there are expecting me. I just want to inform him that I was arrested for illegally recording a video for the evangelical community in Europe.”

Naturally, I wasn’t on my way to Mzuzu, I just knew it was a town nearby.

The soldier put his pen down. His face made it clear that he didn’t know what to do.

He was probably protestant.

We were approaching the finish line. I clasped my hands and began reciting the Lord’s Prayer in Slovak.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m praying for all the lost souls of Mzuzu, who I will not be able to help.”

That broke them. The second soldier grabbed the camera, gave it back to me, and started yelling at his fat colleague. The corpulent one sat glued to his chair and after a moment of contemplation, while staring into space, he crumpled up the paper with fake Slovak information on it. The drunk sheriff quietly stared at the ground.

“Please forgive us, a mistake has been made. We were just doing our job, Father,” the fat soldier said repentantly.

“That’s alright. We are only human, we all make mistakes,” I said and smiled kindly. It occurred to me that I would make an excellent minister.

As if nothing had happened, all three men shook my hand and let me out of the tent with words of respect.

“Father!” they shouted to me a few seconds later, “could you give us your blessing before you leave?”

“Of course, my friends.”

I went over to them, made the sign of the cross and began in Slovak: “You just wanted to get your hands on my camera, you corrupt bastards!”

“Thank you, Father.”

“No, I thank you. Farewell.”

