

Abu Jurgen : The German Ambassador and I. A diary



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Abu Jorgen : The German Ambassador and I. A diary

Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger

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About the writer

- 7 Assaf Alassaf was born in 1976 in Deir ez-Zor, Syria. He studied Dentistry in Damascus and has since been working as a dentist, apart from his journalistic work. Since 2007 he has published his articles in numerous Arabic newspapers, like Alhayat and Almustakbal. In 2013 he moved to Beirut, where he worked at a medical centre for Syrian refugees. He is married to his wife Nibal and has two daughters, Rita and Nay.

Since 2013 Alassaf began to write literary anecdotes about the revolution and the war in his country, his trip to Mauretania, his daily life in Lebanon and the dental office on Facebook. His posts and stories on Abu Jurgen, the German Ambassador, appeared between November 2014 and February 2015. Since October 2015 Assaf Alassaf lives in Berlin.

It's Assaf

- 9 As part of the preparations for my campaign to obtain a German visa it occurs to me that my friends should not be calling me anything that's not strictly my name, like Assouf or About Assaf or Assaafou. It's Assaf and that is that. Even the Dr. that precedes it doesn't matter, though my mother and father would be most upset: a lifetime's effort getting hold of that D R gone to waste.

An exception will be made for Nibal, my wife.

I shouldn't say anything, but there you have it: Allah is more powerful than Ibn Saud, after all.

Vital intelligence

- 10 As part of the preparations for my campaign to obtain a German visa a couple of friends volunteered to go and sniff out the neighbourhood around the German Embassy. Anyway, they brought back important and sensitive information, to wit: that the ambassador adores mutton and white cheese from Deirezzour. A package of cheese and a sheep's leg were promptly made ready in a kitchen in Deirezzour along with a quantity of curds (there are reports that the ambassador's wife is particularly fond of curds).

The ambassador's brother-in-law

- 11** As part of the preparations for my campaign to obtain a German visa, contact has been made with the German ambassador's brother-in-law, a kind, obliging character who turns no man from his door and has one of the nicest wives you could hope to meet. It turns out that he's distantly related on the maternal side to a friend of mine, who then went round to their house. By the time he left, the ambassador's brother-in-law was calling him Buddy.

Assembling documents

12 As part of the preparations for my campaign to obtain a German visa I have assembled all the documents and testimonials that have to be handed in at the embassy, including:

- Testimonial from a regionally renowned leading light in the field of eloquence and rhetoric
- Testimonial from an emerging young poet from the 8th Qassem and Mazraa Poetry Festival (sponsored by the famous Q&M board games manufacturer and held at the headquarters of the Union of Revolutionary Youth in Aleppo)
- Cassette tape with a recording of my voice in both German and English reciting the ditty, "I neither eat nor drink, but with my eyes I watch... Ah!"

National Unity is unimaginative

- 13 In all the tales from the Syrian diaspora we never hear of the Sunni refugee who saved Alawites and Christians from drowning after their boat went down, then went under himself after delivering the last child safe to shore... nor of the Kurdish smuggler, his hard heart softened by the penniless Arab family, getting them out for free and delivering them in his own car to Berlin.

National Unity is unimaginative.

An apology to the supporters of the Mannschaft

- 14** As part of the preparations for my campaign to obtain a German visa, I have officially retracted my support for the Argentinian national football team in the presence of a notary public, declaring it to have been mere youthful folly. An official apology will be presented to supporters of the Mannschaft for the orgy of torments and agonies we inflicted on them at the last World Cup.

Campaign manifesto

- 15 As part of the preparations for my campaign to obtain a German visa, two members of the campaign team will set out to walk through seven countries on the way to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Berlin where they will officially present the campaign's manifesto. Wreaths will be laid on the tomb, the Fatiha and whatever Quranic verses come to mind will be recited, and an entry made in the visitors' book.

Anniversary of the start of the German Corrective Movement

- 16 As part of the preparations for my campaign to obtain a German visa a tent has been erected outside the embassy to commemorate the anniversary of the Glorious German Corrective Movement. The campaign manager would like to state that the attendance of Kim Kardashian's rear end at the unveiling has been confirmed.

Believe me !

- 17 Believe me! Back in the day I was better-dressed than Larry King but the day my wife started buying me these red and yellow tops, all this tawdry, body-hugging stuff... Well, I don't know what's become of me. God willing the ambassador won't see any of it. The style's all gone, my friends!

La collection

- 18** As part of the preparations for my campaign to obtain a German visa I have been measured for a pair of black trousers, suede effect, with eighteen pleats and two buttons at the waist, and have bought a wide-sleeved striped shirt (in seven colours!) and a pair of white wellington boots. This is for my meeting with the ambassador. The clothes have been transported to a secure location out of reach of the media.

The collection will be revealed to the general public following the meeting.

Uncle Ghazi

- 19 I dropped off just now and had one of those dreams people call “disturbing”. Point being, I dreamt that Uncle Ghazi, who died fifteen years back (God have mercy on his soul) came to visit us at home. Mother greeted him then she went off somewhere, and when he wanted to leave he was asking “Where’s Umm Assaf gone to?”, and we couldn’t tell him where she was. At the door he asked again—“Where’s Umm Assaf?”—and we didn’t answer. “Okay then,” he said to me, “Where’s the German ambassador?” “Go home, uncle,” I told him. “You couldn’t find anyone apart from Mother and the German ambassador to ask after? You leave everyone else in peace and come and bother me? Let me get this visa first, brother, then we’ll talk. God, make everything all right...”

Sponsors

- 20 As part of the preparations for my campaign to obtain a German visa, offers to sponsor the campaign have been subject to scrutiny, and it's a close-run contest between Seham Gum (their bid includes printing the campaign slogan and logo on all the company's products, plus a surprise: me parachuting down on the embassy the day of the meeting, carrying a tray of Seham chewing gum...) and the Military Housing Company's offer to set up prefabricated kiosks around the embassy handing out free contraband cigarettes and bottles of Red Khazna soda covered in the campaign slogan on the day of my interview.

On wisdom

21 When the Iraq war began in 2003 my uncle-in-law, who'd joined the army himself in 1949, told my father: "I want to buy a tent, Abu As-saf." "Why's that?" asked my father. "You don't know what might happen," he replied: "We might have to leave home and then we'll need it. At the very least I can set it up down by the Euphrates and stay there with the family should the war comes here."

My father told me this story that same day and I remember that I didn't think it the least bit ridiculous, because I am one of those who believe in little things called Wisdom and Life Experience. This wisdom: you'd be hard pressed to find it in a book. You'll only find it in those who've experienced life and lived through its ups and downs. The problem was that my mind was unable to come up with a rational argument that supported his plan, so it stayed as it was: a story.

Given another life, I'd want to be wise in advance, before it's too late.

The slogan

- 22** As part of the preparations for my campaign to obtain a German visa, three cans of black spray paint were purchased for the purpose of writing the campaign slogan on the walls of the embassy along with some first-class nail-clippers that our operative will use before each spray-paint operation.

Penning poetry

- 23 I'm tired of writing these daily posts on teeth and visas and women. It's back to shaping verse. Boy, fetch me the shears!

My airborne beloveds

24 A verse I clipped out this morning:

Each day it passes before my cup of coffee,
four-uddered, swaying forward,
to suckle clouds on the milk of distance
and rouse in me a lust for faithlessness
for bedding the whorish cities...

Go easy on me, Air France jet!
My dreams are pregnant
with the foetuses of a German visa.

A telegram to the French foreign ministry

25 I sent a telegram to the French foreign ministry. I told them I was ready to cooperate with them over that French citizen who joined ISIS and had lived in Mauritania (seeing as I know Mauritania like the back of my hand). I proposed they send me a visa so I can come to France and discuss the matter further in Paris.

Today, I got their reply. "Monsieur Assaf, Thank you for your interest. We will send you a visa for Mauritania so that we can look into the matter on the ground, as it were."

So now I'm looking for any German member of Islamic State who's lived in Mauritania (Sahnaya would work, too).

His Excellency the Ambassador's sandwich order

26 I reached out to hand the guy behind the counter the money for a falafel sandwich and the guy lifts his head and says, "Just wait until we've finished with His Excellency the ambassador." Looking over at the person standing next to me I recognized those kindly features. It really was him! Flesh and blood! As he lives and coughs! I said to the guy behind the counter, "Add a couple of falafel to His Excellency's order, plus some extra chilli!" and I gave the ambassador a wink: "So you and the wife will be mentioning me in your prayers tonight, right?"

The ambassador said, "Pardon me, but I've no idea who you are..."

"Come on!" I replied. "It's me, the one who runs the German visa campaign."

"You're Abu Rita?" he shouted, "The one causing us all that grief on Facebook?"

"Grab your sandwich and we'll carry on talking at the table," says I.

He took a dish of pickled peppers and we sat down.

27 "Brother, just get it done!" I said. "Give me the damn visa. The wife and girls are suffering!"

"I hear you, I swear, but on my sister's honour, Abu Rita, I'm not telling you a word of a lie: the government's coming down hard on us these days. We can't get away with anything now they're watching us night and day."

"So what's the solution?" I asked him: "I need you to look after us, brother. I need this visa and I don't care where you get it from: here, there, from this moustache even..." and I reached out and plucked a hair from his top lip. He shied. Then pondered. Then he said: "Look here, brother. Next month we'll be sending a plane straight over to Germany. There's only two free seats on the flight, which we usually save for political security—the ones who work for that Abu Ali of yours. You must know who I mean. Anyway, I'll try and get you one of them." "It's not a problem, brother," I said: "I can stand. Just so long as the wife and girls sit." "Stand?" he said, "Not a chance! You'll sit in the steward's seat. As soon as the plane's taken off and it's in the air you'll come along and sit in the co-pilot's seat. As you know, the co-pilot spends the flight handing out water

28 and tea and sick bags. I can promise you you'll be in heaven: drink your tea and smoke just as you like. And the pilot's right up your neck of the woods: an Iraqi who really knows his music. Bring along a couple of cassettes and the pair of you can get cosy."

I said, "Fine then brother. I'm going to run along now and I'll wait for your call. Shall I order you another sandwich?"

Campaign hashtag

29 The call goes out to all peace loving nations of the earth, to Asia, Africa and South America! I call on you to spread the hashtag of my campaign to obtain a German visa.

Wives everywhere! Tired of your husbands' prattling? Come and join our hashtag! Bored of cooking, plumping-up egos, and changing nappies? Just drop everything and come to us, alone or with friends and neighbours. Our cafe stocks narghile as good as you'll find anywhere!

Young men! We're online 24 hours a day. Come, drink beer with your friends and watch the Premier League on our hashtag! You'll never forget our barmaid's smile.

Young ladies! Invite your friends round to the hashtag at the weekend. Shopping, hair and nails, yoga, aerobics, sport: do it all with us as you sit back and wait for your order of song-bird milk to be brought through.

My friends in the opposition! Hold your conferences and meetings in our hashtag's conference hall. The hall is foam-lined and free of sharp objects. You can argue and splinter

30 and trade accusations and punches to your heart's desire.

You can write anything here: your journals, your desires, your burning passions (God knows, if your burning passions had a hashtag to themselves it wouldn't be enough), your political perspectives on Adonis and Ahlam Mostaghanemi, George Sabra and Omar Suleiman... We welcome them all here over the course of the coming week.

Look forward to seeing you!

Waiting

- 31** It's pandemonium down at the embassies to pick up visas and I'm getting invitations to play Candy Crush?

What the hell?

From the campaign inbox

32 A friend wrote:

"Listen Doc, if you're serious about this visa business you have to stop this campaign on Facebook. It could go against you at the embassy."

To which I answered:

"Well if that's the case then let's forget the visa and work on the campaign. We'll have more fun."

Total transparency

- 33 As part of our commitment to transparency, and unlike those who carry out their dirty dealings in secret (the ones who duck under the surface and leave us wondering where they've gone only for their bodies to bob up days later, swaggering down the boulevards of Europe) we shall announce the results of our campaign as they come out, updating you on every new development.

Tune in this evening for the latest campaign news.

In the ambassador's office

34 Two days ago, with the storm and rain at its worst, I was making a box of pastries and praying for God's guidance. The phone rang. A private number came up on the screen. I answered and the voice came down the line: "How you doing Abu Rita? Where are you?"

"At home," I say. "To whom am I speaking?"

"Put on your clothes, we're coming round. We're on your street."

And five minutes later they were outside the building in a car. I tucked the box of pastries under my arm, went downstairs, and got in. The ambassador's chauffeur and a couple of his colleagues in the back I didn't know. We drive through the rain to the embassy and went straight up to the ambassador's office. The minute we're there the two colleagues sit down and relax, as though it's home. One of them sits on this green metal bed, like the kind you find in the army, having first removed a pair of socks and slipping them under the cushion. I give the chauffeur a sign: Who are these guys? He sidles up and whispers in my ear: "The tall one's the ambassador of Kazakhstan and the other's the North Korean cultural

35 attaché." It was only then that I took a good look at their faces.

Just then the ambassador emerges from the bathroom. He's wearing a pair of khaki pyjama bottoms that come down just below the knee, a dark blue tank-top and a pair of blue flip-flops, a towel draped round his neck, and he was stroking his freshly shaved chin. "Looking good, Your Excellency!" we chorused. "Welcome Abu Rita," he said: "Bless you. You've met the guys? Well you can introduce yourself while we're playing. What's that you've brought with you? Pastries? Really? Can't you smell the chestnuts on the stove? Forget the pastries for a moment and if you take a single hand off me today I'll peel you a chestnut with my own hand. But if I beat you don't go blaming your partner like usual."

"You say that every time, Your Excellency, and you lose. You draw cards and you chuck them away. Anyway, you can talk like that to your bodyguard or your wife, but don't try it on me."

"Come on then, let's see what you've got," says the ambassador, and pulls the pack from a desk drawer. I sat opposite the Korean attaché,

36 and the ambassador partnered with the Kazakh. I said to the ambassador: "I could sit on my hands and still beat you. Swear to God, I'll get you so you can't tell the difference between Haytham Al Maleh and Haytham Manna!"

The ambassador dealt the cards and my Korean partner got the seven of hearts and the game began. The game was pretty much evenly matched. When it was the ambassador's turn to choose the c' tract he became all excited and with every card he drew and queen he passed off on us he would thump the table. It all revolved around the king. Whoever took it would lose. The ambassador turned it over on the table. "I'm going to make sure I give it to you," he told me, "I'm going to shove it down your throat till it oozes out of your eyes. This is going to hurt you more than losing your parents."

The ambassador began the next round with an ace of spades and got rid of the three of diamonds so his partner could take over and answer with a two of spades. But I claimed control instead with a heart, then my partner went one better with an ace, while the ambassador's partner put down a queen. I looked

37 over at my partner. What was the idiot playing at? I carried on playing hearts until the king came up. As usual the ambassador started waving his cards in his partner's face and shouting, flecking our faces with spittle. "Just tell me...! Just explain...! That whore of a queen of hearts! Why didn't you put her under the ace if you didn't have anything better?"

The point is we broke their partnership, and I said to the Kazakh ambassador: "In your country what do you say about someone who selects the king as trump then loses it?"

"The same as you: someone you can legally fuck up the arse. It's true the world over, regardless of race or colour."

At this point I caught sight of my Korean partner clambering to his feet and trying to unzip his fly.

"He didn't mean it literally!" I shouted, "get him to give us the visa first, then do what you like." And I turned to the German ambassador and said: "Brother, stop it with your card games

38 and showing off. Give us the visa and travel with me. Only last week I only just managed to keep the Congolese ambassador off you. Just get me my chestnuts will you?"

On the roof of the German Embassy

39 Days now and I've been depressed, not myself, no enthusiasm for anything. I finished work and said to myself, Why not head over to the German Embassy? Maybe you'll find a bit of fun and company.

Anyway, I got to the street where the embassy is and as soon as I turned into it I saw the ambassador up there on the roof. He saw me, stuck his head over the wall, and shouted down: "Abu Rita! Here you are! Get yourself up here. The door's open. I need your help."

"The proverbial bad penny," I said to myself. "God protect us from you, you and you stories!"

I climbed up three stories to where the ambassador was standing. He pulled up two cane chairs, overturned a big empty oil can, then placed a kettle and two empty glasses on it and we sat down. The ambassador said hello and poured me a cup of tea with my standard five sugars.

Then he started asking how I'm doing and whether I'd heard anything about the visa.

40 I took a sip and looked him straight in the eye: "You winding me up? Anyway, I don't feel like talking about the visa. Why don't you talk for a change? What's going on with you? What is it you want?"

He fell silent, got up and walked to the other end of the rooftop, picked up a large tarpaulin and turned it over. "What's that?" I said. "Back to the same old story, is it? Aren't you going to stop this? It wasn't enough for you, the trouble those pigeons gave you when you were ambassador in Tunis and they went and transferred you here so you'd give it up? Give me strength! It's true what they say: Happy is he who changes his habits."

"Brother, I'm not saying you're wrong," he said, "but let's find a solution to my problem then you can say what you like."

"I'm listening..."

So he began to talk:

"From the day I got here I've promised myself I'll give up the pigeons. I've only got ten birds here, plus I've clipped their wings so I won't

41 be tempted to fly them. I come up onto the rooftop every day to check on them and feed them and watch them. No more than that. About a week ago the wife brings me this beautiful pigeon called the Deirezzor Flipper. Says it's a present from her. I kept my word, you see, and stopped flying them. So I put the pigeon in the coop with the others and don't let it outside the door. Till yesterday, that is, when the devil starts whispering in my ear. What'll it look like flying, I ask myself? Will it flip? So I take it out and chuck it up."

At which point I butted in: "What's happened?"

"Ah! So this Flipper flies and starts flipping across the skies! Just incredible Abu Rita! Like a dream! Abu Dhabi Airshow eat your heart out!"

"Stick to the point." I said. "What's happened?"

"Well the French ambassador flies his birds and turns about half of them past my flock and by the time I'd brought them down I found that the Flipper had gone with the Frenchman's birds and wasn't coming back. So now I've got the French ambassador

42 making a fool of me and stealing my birds and there's my wife who'd string me up if she found out. I'm throwing myself at your feet here, Abu Rita: what can I do!"

I thought for a moment then said: "Get yourself a cup of tea, light a cigarette and I'll tell you. Listen here friend: first thing tomorrow you and me are going down to the pigeon market and buying one hundred birds of all kinds—Bright Whites, Tikritis, Kazandis, Misayafs, Israelis, Egyptians—and we bring them back here. We shut them up on the roof fifteen days without flying them and feed them really well till they're good and happy up here. Next, you choose a day the French ambassador's out and you send your whole flock up just before sunset. Send them round about ten times then bring them back down to settle on the roof and the house. You have to do this again a few days later. The third time, you send them up when the French ambassador's flock is flying. Your flock will outmatch his and when you bring them down you'll take a few of his with you. Grab them, break their necks, and chuck them onto his roof. You'll have your revenge and you'll have taught him a lesson he'll never forget."

43 The ambassador hugged me. "Bless you, Abu Rita! What would I have done without you? I swear on my kids, if this works out I'll put in a good word for you with the German government."

"You and your good words," I said. "That's all I need: a testimonial from a pigeon-fancier."

"And what about my wife and the Deirezzour Flipper?" he asked. "What are we going to do about that?"

"Get dressed and follow me," I said. "We'll go to the pigeon-fanciers café and sort everything out down there."

"Let's go!" he said, then asked: "Is there WiFi at the café? Shall I bring the iPad?"

"Bring anything you want," I said, "just so long as you bring your knife along and strap it to your hip."

Wifi? I ask you!

Donating

- 44 I donate all proceeds accruing from the intellectual copyright on my Facebook posts for the year 2015 to the Chicken Cancer Clinic in Germany and I urge you all to follow my example.

Investment plan

45 I was pushing the trolley round the food court at the mall, buying crisps and chocolate for the girls, and I saw this guy bent over the display and writing in a little notepad. "I know the back of that head!" I said to myself, and over I go. He was muttering, "Packet of crisps, 500 lire. Lollypop 250 lire. Gum 250 lire." Up I went and nudged him with the trolley. He looked up and laughed: "Hello there, Abu Rita! Haven't seen you since the Flipper business." "And two hellos back to you, Abu Jurgen," I replied. "What are you up to here then? I see you scribbling away and not buying a thing!"

"Give me a minute and I'm all yours... Tell you what, why don't you come back to the embassy and I'll tell you everything there?" So I finished my shopping, and we took a bus to Dawra from where we caught a taxi to the embassy.

When we got to the door he asked, "Shall we go in, Abu Rita, or should we warm our old bones in the sun?" "Right you are," I said. "Let's sit outside." So he fetched a mat and a couple of pillows and placed them on the concrete bench beside the guard post. "Excuse me a moment while I change my clothes," he said and off he went and came back wearing the blue

46 nylon pyjamas and white wellington boots. He set up a narghile, put the kettle of yerba mate on the camping stove then hunkered down on the mat with the pillows between us. He started sucking on the narghile and passed me the tube. "You know me," I said. "I don't smoke the stuff. Tell me what you were doing in the mall."

"Long story short, brother, me and the wife, Umm Jurgen, we're making a savings club: twenty names on the list, all staff at the embassy. It's 500 dollars a month, and next month's our turn. We're getting our hands on 10,000 dollars, so we said why not invest in a project instead of letting the money go to waste on little things."

"I like your thinking!"

"So I suggested to Umm Jurgen that we set up a little kiosk on the corner by the embassy: cakes and smokes and sweets. You know, kids stuff. An easy living, no headaches, and anything we make guilt-free and all to the good. What d'you say, Abu Rita?"

I exhaled.

47 "Pour us a cup of mate first. And make sure it's properly brewed! And take your straw out. You know I don't like to share. Now... Brother, there's nothing in this for you. The project would be a failure from the get-go. It would make nothing. Get me paper and pen and let's work it out. How much will you be selling a day? 100 dollars-worth?"

"I'd hope so!"

"So that's three thousand a month. Take away two thousand for the cost of the goods, and what's left?"

"A thousand!"

"Now take away six hundred for your employee's salary. After all, you think you'll find anyone willing to sit in your kiosk all day for less?"

"No."

"So you end up with 400 dollars. The thing's a joke. Forget it."

48 "Alright then, what if I sat in the kiosk for a few hours and the wife stays there the rest of the time?"

"You're using your whole brain are you? You thinking of the kids that will be back and forth like flies? Give us gum for a quarter! Then this one wants a red juice like the one his brother bought yesterday—and try working out what that was—and this kid's got a runny nose and that one's wet himself. And I'll eat my hat if the French ambassador doesn't get jealous, open his own kiosk and start undercutting your prices. Just forget the whole thing!"

"So there's nothing for it but that plan the wife's idiot brother came up with: that we buy a car and work it as a taxi."

I chuckled and sipped my mate.

"Don't even consider it! Not for a moment! I'll do the numbers on that one as well. If you work the taxi all day every day you're still making 80 dollars maximum, or two thousand four hundred a month. Take away eight hundred for the petrol, a thousand for the driver (because he's working double time for you),

49 then subtract insurance, fines, bribes... you'll be lucky if you're left with two or three hundred. That's aside from the fact they'll wreck your car. No one cares for a car but its owner."

"I've got a private vehicle license. I do a few trips with it every night."

"You're kidding me? No way! By diplomatic rules you're not allowed to do that kind of work, and if the French ambassador gets wind of this he'll ruin you."

"I could change my clothes and cover my face."

"What? Why don't you just wear a Zorro mask and start a trend with the local taxi drivers? Just drop the idea, OK? A taxi driver!"

"So what am I going to do? The money's going to go to waste if we don't find a use for it."

"I've got it. Property and rent, brother!"

"But you won't find a place for that amount, Abu Rita..."

50 "You're not going to be buying. Pass the pen and paper and I'll show you. Build a couple of rooms on the embassy roof and connect them up to the utilities, then kit them out with second-hand stuff from Bir Hassan: fridge, TV, shower and sofa, then crockery and cups, and you can rent them out for 1000 dollars a month minimum. You can give them a private front door and staircase down by the side of the embassy: no one to see, no one to get upset. Plus, I know a very clever little builder who can get it all done and the walls dressed inside twenty-four hour before the French ambassador has had time to alert the municipality to come and stop you. My friend, I've even got a tenant for you, and all you have to do is sit there and watch the rent pile up in your account. But the ten thousand might not be quite enough. An extra thousand or two maybe."

"How much?"

"Five thousand?"

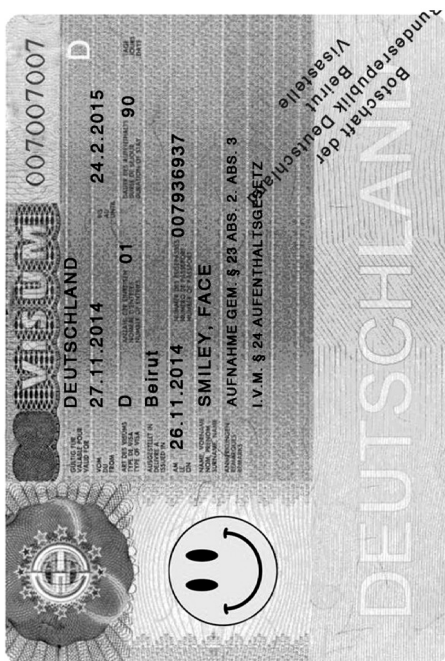
"No problem. I'll get the wife to sell some of her gold and if we need to we can pawn the rest. You don't want to give us a loan, Abu Rita?"

51 "Ah, I'd love to, Abu Jurgen, but you know how it is: just making ends meet! There's my income but then there's expenses, you know. Here, pass the paper and pen, I'll show you."

The visa I'm after

52 The visa I'm after:

This is a picture of the visa a friend of mine was given a while ago. I don't want a fuchsia visa, or a mint and lemon one, or one that runs on paraffin. I want one exactly like this: no different.



My fellow Syrians

53 My fellow Syrians!

Ask not what the member nations of the EU can do for you, ask what you can do for my campaign to obtain a German visa.

My complete works

54 Coming soon! (i.e. eventually)

My complete works will be available in German, not merely translated into that clunky tongue but composed in it. My complete works will run the gamut of the German national syllabus. They will sit on the front rows of the Brecht Theatre, asking with him, "Why were these poets silent?" They will be sung, will float aloft like the symphonies of Beethoven and Bach.

The Allianz Arena in Munich and Dortmund's stadium will roar to the hoarse recitation of my complete works.

My complete works shall give Faust's beautiful cry: "Stop time! Thou art so lovely!"

My complete works: Rita and Nayy.

One day

55 One day I'll reach Germany, even it be the last day of my life.

On the wings of a bird. By land. By sea. In a carriage. On the back of a lame donkey.

The German visa is an idea. And ideas never die.

Taxi driver

56 Yesterday, going home about one in the morning, I ended up in a taxi driven by a woman. After a bit we got to talking and I asked her, "Aren't you scared to work at night?" "No," she said, and we went on talking: had a nice chat. The point is, that just before I got out she handed me a brochure for the Jehovah's Witnesses with a website on the back. "You should visit the site and have a read!" she said. "Are you a Jehovah's Witness?" I asked her and she said, "Yep," then gave me her number so we can stay in touch and talk.

Now I'm confused. Is this part of a plot against my campaign for a German visa, or just regular evangelizing?

Happy Christmas to one and all, by the way.

A phone call with the ambassador

57 I called the ambassador to wish him a Happy Christmas and he picked up and said eagerly: "We've just got back from church, Abu Rita, and I swear on Christ and his agonies and his resurrection that I offered up a prayer from my heart that you will get your visa. I lit a candle for you and the wife promised she'd dress up like the Virgin Mary for a whole month if your dream comes true."

"Oh I'll have to end the call," I said. "I can scarcely contain my surprise. I can hardly bear it. But tell me, that candle... you didn't light it with that silver lighter you stole from the French ambassador last week?"

"Yes!"

"Well in that case I'm never going to get that visa."

Roadblock

58 A short while ago, without any official ID, we got stopped at a roadblock. The Lebanese soldier poked his head through the car window and asked, "The brother's Lebanese?" and I answered him at the top of my voice and in tones of maximum despair and indifference: "Syrrrrriiiiiiaaaaan!"

"And are our papers in order?"

In the same loud voice as before, I answered, "Naturally!" and we were waved through without any problems at all.

Thus is life: it opens its arms to the desperate, the liars, the loud of voice. And, naturally, to the possessors of German visas.

Brotherhood

- 59 Stayed up last night, and after the second glass the ambassador said: "Abu Rita, I'm worried that as soon as you get your visa and get to Germany you'll forget all about us." "Don't talk that way," I told him: "You're breaking my heart. You're my brother, man. Just give me a chance to get my affairs in order and then I'll bring you over to Germany as a family member."

Tribes of Greater Syria

60 Yesterday the ambassador called me up and said: "What have you got on today, Abu Rita? Get over here. The wife and kids went to the mall this morning and they aren't getting back till evening."

"Not a thing," I said. "I'm coming over. I'm coming now."

I got to the embassy and went straight to his office. He was wearing his suit, looking disheveled and tired, the table cluttered with coffee cups and glasses of whiskey. "What's up?" I said. "You all right? How come you look so tired? And what's with the puffy eyes? It looks like you haven't been to bed for a year."

"I didn't sleep last night, as it happens. I've been sitting at my desk since yesterday. After I finished my work I picked up this book called Tribes of Greater Syria and started reading, and I was unable to put it down till I'd finished. Where do you come from Abu Rita?"

"Syria. Deirezzour. Why do you ask?"

61 "Well you all belong to tribes, right? I read that people from that region are all members of tribes and clans."

"Well, what you're saying is by and large true but you've got the people who live in towns and urban areas as well. It's a complicated business. What got you interested in it? Anyway I'm a member of a big tribe called the Agedat that is found along the Euphrates, all the way from Aleppo down to Boukamal on the Iraqi border."

"Did you know," he said, "that my grandmother, my father's mother, visited your region and lived there for a just under a year? She went with a German archaeological expedition about seventy-five years ago. She worked with my grandfather at the Berlin Museum and they were madly in love, then they fell out and left each other, and she decided to get away and came to Syria. To Deirezzour to be precise."

Here, I shouted: "Wow! Keep going! The story's just starting to get interesting! But before you do, just get up and pour me a glass. An hour you've been talking to me about tribes and hospitality and honour and you haven't

62 offered me a thing. Pour me an arak and water, fifty-fifty with a lot of ice, and come and finish your story."

He set the glass in front of me and went on: "There you go friend. So as soon as my grandmother gets there she resolves to throw herself into work to forget my grandfather. Of course she was fed up the exhaustion, the poor living conditions, the heat, the dust... everything..."

I broke in: "You mean she didn't fall under the spell of the East and all that stuff?"

"Spell of my arse. She could hardly bear it. Then a group of peasants turn up and settle down next to the expedition headquarters: them and their sheep and goats and horses and tents. As you know, these peasant types take to the scrubland in spring and summer to put their flocks out to pasture..."

"Of course!" I said. "Go on!"

"So they start engaging with the expedition, bringing them milk and yoghurt and meat and teaching them to ride. Now there was this young man in their group, so beautiful that

63 his own sister had an unhealthy attachment to him. 'Admirable' was how my grandmother described him when she spoke of him. Now this young man owned a mare and a foal, and he started taking an interest in my grandmother—maybe he liked her—and he gives her his foal. My grandmother lost her mind over this horse. She felt like her whole life and destiny were connected to the animal and she started to spend all her time with it, looking after it and taking care of it and forgetting everything else: my grandfather, the archaeological remains, the expedition. Everything. You know women when they get something into their heads! Anyway, one day, a group of Bedouin turn up. Long story short they steal the filly and disappear. My grandmother goes wild with grief and starts heaping the dust over her head..."

"Dust? You sure your grandmother was a German archaeologist, not a peasant girl from Deirezzour?"

"Anyway, the young man vanishes for two whole days and reappears with the filly. Now, Abu Rita, you can imagine what effect this

64 had on my grandmother. When she saw him she clapped and ululated and one day after that she was his bride and he was her groom and she lived with him, as she maintained till her dying day, the happiest nine months of her life. The young man died of tuberculosis. You remember the year tuberculosis struck Deirezzour?"

"What next! You'll be asking me about the famine next, or the Year of the Seven Snows!"

"When he died, my grandmother returned to Germany and my grandfather got in touch with her and got close to her till she was convinced to marry him. They moved in together and had my father and aunts. But as she told it, my grandfather remained jealous of the man she'd married in Deirezzour till the end of his life, so much so that he came to loathe the Arabs and Syria, and Deirezzour, and horses, and everything and anything to do with that young man. And just before he died he told me, 'You're not my grandson and I'm not your grandfather if you don't take revenge for me and help my bones rest easy in my grave.' So now I'm reading the history of this region in order to locate where the young

65 man's children or grandchildren, or any member of his family might be, and let my grandfather rest in peace."

"Did your grandmother tell you the name of this lover?"

"Of course! His name was Azzaf, but I don't have the name of his father or his tribe."

"And your grandmother was called Anita? And she had a birthmark on the right side of her neck? And she called her foal Rafa?"

"And how would you know?" the ambassador asked. "Abu Rita, might I ask for your full name?"

"Assaf Al Assaf," I said.

"Germans might pronounce that Azzaf, might they not? And that young man might be your grandfather or some distant relative. Aha!"

His eyes gleamed, his cheeks reddened and suddenly the ambassador leapt from behind the table and attacked me. I dodged and started running round the office, him chasing after me and screaming, "Today and not a day too late!"

66 Your soul will have peace at last, grandfather!"
And while I ran I screamed back, "Calm down,
friend! What's got into you?"

"Got into me? Zere Vill Be Blood!"

And so on, until he subsided into his desk
chair and said, panting, "Look at me today! Not
a bad performance, hey?"

"A bit over the top. You overdo it and that
doesn't look good on the campaign updates.
My followers are discerning people and they
don't care for drama. Play it natural!"

"Do you want us to take it from the top?"

"No forget it, I'll fix it in the editing room.
Just don't do it again. Stay natural and you'll
be more convincing. My grandfather told
me about a French dig that visited the area
around that time. You don't remember what
the French ambassador's grandmother was
called, do you?"

Campaign break

- 67 The campaign for a German visa will be suspended over the New Year holiday so that the German ambassador can go in for repairs and maintenance before returning good as new in the New Year. The French ambassador will continue to operate on a part-time basis.

Appointments

- 68 Yesterday evening a friend asked, "Assaf, would you like me to get you an appointment with the German ambassador?" "Not right now," I said, "I'm not free. The campaign's taking up all of my time."

A German dream

- 69 Just now I woke from a German dream, which to say that I was speaking in German the whole time, even though in reality I only know how to say, "I love you", "midnight" and "thank you".

Tomorrow morning I'll send the dream to the embassy and demand a visa so I can get it interpreted, though I'm worried they'll say, "Okay, you go to sleep now and we'll mail the visa to your dreams."

The star of Bavaria

70 A friend sent me the CV of the former German ambassador to Lebanon.

In the coming days Her Excellency the former ambassador—Blue-eyed beauty! Pride of the German diplomatic corps! Fond and fertile! Star of Bavaria and its surrounds (taking time differences into account)! The Special Forces Chief of Staff, Comrade Engineer Brigitte—will be the campaign's guest of honour.

Catch her here!

A message in foreign

71 I opened Facebook and found a private message, all in foreign with lots of statistics. I thought it must be one of those letters we all get: My-grandfather's died-in-Senegal-and-left-12-million-dollars-send-me-your-email-address-and-a-photocopy-of-your-passport-so-we-can-split-the-cash.

Then just before I moved it to the trash I spotted my name, Abu Rita, written at the bottom in English, so I started to read. Turns out it was from the German ambassador. "Write in Arabic, so I can answer you," I sent back, "and cut out this nonsense. Just so you can show off about how many languages you speak! My arse. Anyway, since when do you write to me on Facebook? You're too important to call me any more? As we say: The shit finally got a wife and now he's threatening divorce."

"In Germany," he wrote back, "we say: The fly's opened a shop and now he closes every day at noon. Anyway forget all that now, I'm on holiday in Germany and my phone doesn't have enough credit to call you so I sent you a message there. Do you think you can spare me an hour of your time? There's something really urgent and I'd like to ask your help."

72 "Well, I might not be much use, but let's see."

"Okay, so I'm in a chalet at the seaside with our EU negotiator, the guy who handles Syria at the Foreign Ministry, the government's refugee czar, and a representative from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Works. We've left the women and kids back in Berlin. Now just a moment ago the official in charge of the Syrian file said we need a greater and more precise understanding of Syrians—what they think, what they're like—if we're to get our heads round the problem and find solutions... particularly now the country's packed with Syrian refugees. He suggested we start online and look at trends on Syrian Facebook. So I speak up and say, 'I've got one! None other than my friend Abu Rita. He'll be our bridge to Syria, the key, the link! And now you're going to suggest a group of Syrians on Facebook who can help us do what I was just talking about.'"

"Easy," I wrote. "Simple. You want me to draw up a list and send it to you, or what?"

"No, give the names now. Here and now, Abu Rita. The quicker the better."

73 "I'll open my list of friends and suggest names one by one."

"Right," he said, and I opened my page and started to type them out.

"Mustafa Al Jarf."

"Abu Rita!" the ambassador wrote, "Mustafa's page is all political analysis: the peasant's revolution, the defeated bourgeoisie, March 18th, the nation's last chance ... all that stuff. Spare us!"

"Fine, fine! Yassin Al Hajj Saleh?"

"God love you, but save us from The Wise Man and his enemies. Look, the German government took a position on him when he refused to take shelter in our embassy and went to the Americans."

"Ayham Majid Agha?" "

Come on, Abu Rita, who's got time for that Abbas and Dabbas stuff? Anyway, he's already over here in Germany. Keep going!"

74 "Sakhr Haj Hussein?"

"You trying to ruin us Abu Rita? You'll get us caught up in his nonsense. In no time he'll start on us: 'You think you're ambassadors? You should see the ambassadors in Hollywood! He'll depict us all as peasants and make fun of us. Forget it!"

"Hossam Qatlabi?"

"Qatlabi? The guy's got a mouth on him. Forget him."

"Kinan Kouja?"

"Don't go near him! He'll be finding a link between me and Caliph Al Baghdadi in no time. You've no idea! Forget it."

"Maamoun Al Sharaa?"

"Maamoun's in the UAE and I don't want to Facebook friend him. All those pictures of women would get the whole government on my back. Just send me his phone number, and I'd be grateful."

"Firas Al Diman?"

75 "All his posts start 'The Barmaid said..' and 'The Barmaid did...' We need a picture of this barmaid so we can get her a visa and put a stop to this 'she said and did' nonsense."

"Maladh Al Zoabi?"

"Don't mention his name. Or do you want me to end up as one of his caricatures? Bavarian cabaret dancer, perhaps? A Russian stripper? A Berlin Wall bint? God keep him happy and far away from me."

"Hakam Al Baba?"

"Definitely! Hakam's a well-known writer, let's add him right away... Oh! he's blocked me immediately! But to be fair, he's blocked thirteen ambassadors and five ministers. I just didn't think he'd do it to me. I should have known."

"You deserve it. Akkad Al Jabal?"

"Abu Rita, how are we going to keep up with all his posts? Even a Mercedes would have trouble."

"Kanj Dandashi?"

76 "I'm kissing your arse, no, in case I find him writing that the most beautiful thing in the world is to wake up and find yourself next to the German ambassador's wife. Next!"

"Ahmed Al Assaf?"

"Come on! Because he's your brother? We haven't got Rita and Nayy out of the way so we're not ready for Balquis and Baibars and little Furat. And on top of that, do I need my kids learning to smoke this early? Impossible."

"Lukman Derky?"

"We'd have to spend the whole time reading his crappy posts about tourism. No way, Abu Rita."

"Well there's no one else! Aboud Saeed!"

"I said Syria, and Facebook, and the latest trends, not the local administrative offices in Manbij!"

"Azad Othman?"

"We want to waste our time reading things like, Azad Othman has been released from his position at Aleppo International Airport? Don't we have anything better to be doing?"

"Dahir Ayta?"

"I'm heartbroken you even considered him."

"Moaz Al Khatib?"

"As the Syrians say, even Boris Becker couldn't get his initiatives back over the net."

"Alaa Tarqaji?"

"Cut it out, Abu Rita! I'm kissing your balls man."

"Brother, you're killing me here. Every time I mention a name you screw your face up and give me a list of faults as long as your arm. What do you want? Just tell me, don't be shy!"

"You're just unbelievable, Abu Rita. I told you we want trends and stories, and all your suggestions are male. Not a single woman; not a single girl to leaven the loaf. What, you want

78 our government to call you a chauvinist who has no conception of gender? Women, Abu Rita! In German, trends means women!"

"Alright, just let me get this straight. You and the guys have sent all your women back to Berlin and now you're looking for new trends?"

"Exactly."

"Ok then, I won't be a second."

I went offline for a bit then came back on and asked:

"You went to see that play, The Wolf's Howl, didn't you?"

"Yes, the one where Salah Qassas says, 'A thousand gallow-ropes may hang but they cannot say Abu Omar is a traitor, Khadija!'"

"Go and open the door, then. Khadija and the rest of the gang are outside. I sent your wife and the rest of them the text of our chat and the chalet's address. Trends, right? That wasn't so hard was it, you pimps?"

Fed up

- 79 I'm fed up with everything. The travel, the visa, the waiting. I'm going to put an end to this farce. Boy! Fetch me the cartoons that insult the ambassador!

Interview with Libération

80 I called the ambassador: "I'm in a taxi outside the embassy and I want to drop by and chat to you a bit. There might even be some news about the visa." "Ah, my dear Abu Rita! Come right up!"

And that's what happened. I went straight in to his office and he gestured to me to sit down. Just a moment and I'll be with you... There were two other men in the room, one clutching a camera and taking pictures, the other sitting down and talking to the ambassador: "Your Excellency, is it correct that you are about to resign from your post as a result of serious disagreements with your government's foreign policy with regards to the region? We do hope you'll give the readers of our newspaper Libération the scoop!"

"Alakazam!" the ambassador barked, somewhat unexpectedly: "There's nothing in it. Rumours, and I know where they come from."

He ended the interview, then turned, greeted me and said: "Welcome Abu Rita! Forgive me, I was distracted!"

81 "It's fine," I said. "But what's all this 'Alakazam!' business? Ambassadors don't talk like that in interviews with respected papers."

"I have to," he said. "There are so many rumours about these days and to be honest I suspect that the French ambassador's behind them. Trust me, he's the one that sent that journalist over for an interview, just so I'd find out about the rumour."

"Understood, but you haven't answered me: why did you say Alakazam? You could have said you knew nothing about it, and left it there."

He thought for a moment, hesitated, then said: "Keep this quiet, but I think somebody is doing black magic on me. I haven't been myself for a week now and strange things keep happening to me. I have a constant headache and I'm forgetting a lot. I can't even... I can't even get close to the wife... and that's one of the signs you've been cursed: black magic of the kind that it's almost impossible to negate or undo. And the most important step of any spell is making up a rumour about the target then making sure it reaches them and they've heard it. That's why I said Alakazam: to cancel out the spell so it

82 wouldn't affect me. And just to be extra safe I'm wearing my underwear inside-out." And he shows me the waistband of his boxers turned the wrong way round.

"What's this! Get a grip man. Alakazam and reversed undies?"

"What if I told you that yesterday I looked out of the window and saw a completely black cat walking past the main door of the embassy, and a couple of days ago I found a lump of shit wrapped up in a filthy rag and dumped by the garden. And the embassy guard found a clump of hair under the sink in the bathroom. These are signs of black magic, nothing else. Our French friend's behind all this. You know he was ambassador to Morocco before he came here and he must have learnt it over there. There's nothing stronger than Moroccan magic so they say. God keep us safe from him."

"To be honest I'm not convinced. A rag? A clump of hair? You know that all sorts of people visit the embassy every day. It's perfectly possible that a mother changed her kid's nappy and chucked it away, or someone's hair ended up under the sink. Get these stupid

83 thoughts out of your head, take a few days' holiday and relax. Everything will be fine."

"Here. Let me tell you this story, and I promise, when I'm done, you'll believe in spells and magic, too."

"Lay it on me!"

"When we were small—I was ten, my sister eight—our father took us to Morocco for our summer holidays. We stayed for a week in this village in the mountains: absolutely stunning. This one time, while my sister and I were playing on the doorstep, a barefoot man walked past wearing a tattered old shirt that hung down to his knees and carrying a staff with a bundle tied to one end. He came to a halt facing my sister and just stood there, peering at her. Frightened, she screamed, at which my mother came outside and started to shoo the man away. 'Don't be afraid,' he says in Moroccan dialect, 'I'm just taking a look at the girl's future.' This only made my mother more uneasy, but she couldn't help asking about her daughter's future. The Moroccan answered: 'Your girl's wearing three necklaces, and one of them is crooked.' 'What does that mean,' Mum

84 asked. 'It means she will marry three times,' he said. 'The first will die, so will the second, and the third man she takes will bring her bad luck.' At this the Moroccan fell silent and turned to stare at me. Immediately my mother asked him, 'What do you see?' 'Your son will roam through this world from land to land,' he said, 'and every time he leaves a country his feet will grow another shoe size till he reaches 48, and only then he will return to your side, barefoot, and rest in your arms.' 'What can I do?' my mother asked. 'I'll make charms to protect them, but the charms must hang round their necks their whole lives long. If they don't, only bad will come of it.' My mother handed him some food and a bit of cash and he left. And now," he went on, "you can see what's happened with your own eyes." "What?" I asked. "What happened to your sister? Did she really marry three men?" "No, my friend," the ambassador said. "She's living a happy life with her children, but her husband's tried to kill himself three times to get shot of her but she's still there!" And he laughed.

At this point I looked down at the ambassador's feet. They were pretty big. "But your feet really are big!" I said. "Tell me about it," he said. "Last week I went to buy some shoes and I

85 couldn't find any in my size, so I took a pair in the size down and now I ache from toes to head. You know what new shoes do to your feet the first few days after you buy them..."

"So no magic or any of that nonsense?"

"What do you think?" he said. "Magic? There's no magic. It's just a little show me and the French ambassador put on for your benefit. The journalists you saw here were staff from the French embassy. Hook, line and sinker, Abu Rita!"

He laughed and repeated: "Hook, line and sinker! I reckon you should take it as a joke and accept you were beaten this time. What do you think?"

"I certainly do accept it," I said, "and I'll write it up for Facebook, but you my friend have to accept this, from me..."

And I jumped to my feet and stamped on his foot with all my strength, till he screamed.

"See if your underwear helps you now," I told him.

Visa booze

- 86** Arak for writing, vodka for dancing, and low alcohol beer for second-rate ambassadors.

A question of faith

- 87 The German visa, unlike its Lebanese counterpart, requires no papers or files of proof. It's a leap of faith, mysticism, like membership of the Baath Party, or swearing allegiance to the Caliph.

Bismarck's cousin

- 88** Today I feel like an important German philosopher, and that's without the visa! When I get the visa I'm going to feel at the very least like first cousin to Bismarck, unifier of Germany. For sure!

Just sitting there

- 89** There's nothing sweeter than being a Russian expert or strategic analyst or German philosopher and just sitting there raking in the cash.

Unemployment benefits

- 90 There's nothing I love more than the idea of unemployment benefits.

You wake at five in the afternoon, drink coffee, wash and shave, slip into the silver robe your sister's ironed, then you sprawl out on the mat in the centre of your bedroom, with the tray in front of you (a pot of tea, three packs of long Gitane, and a Sony tape player) and listen to Yas Khidr till the stars come out. And think on the world.

Future TV

- 91 There's an interview with the French ambassador to Lebanon on Future TV. I won't stop till the German ambassador gets an interview of his own.

Shame. Poor guy. He won't sleep tonight.

A thousand and one ways

92 I've got a thousand and one ways of getting into Germany. I could put on sandals and a rucksack on my bag and potter along just like any other tourist wandering East to West through Europe, taking in the sights as he goes.

I could put on shiny shorts and jog on and on like Forrest Gump or sprint like Lola, as the roadside crowds shout, "Go, Assaf! Go!" looking at my watch occasionally to check my pace, and making it to the German border in record time, as duly noted by a team from the Guinness Book of Records who would be waiting for me there.

I could backstroke through sea and ocean for days on end, wanting nothing but a few biscuits and a long novel (In Search of Lost Time?) to read when things get dull.

I could dig a tunnel from Beirut to Berlin with a spoon and a box of matches (the matches to light my cigarettes when I'm taking a break).

I could stand on the bridge beneath which runs the Baghdad to Berlin train and leap onto the carriage behind the driver's cabin, even

93 as I ponder the solution to Agatha Christie's mystery, Murder on the Orient Express.

I could hang from a helicopter flying to Frankfurt as I bawl Demi Roussos's immortal lines into the air: "Far away...!" I might even have a go at Hotel California.

I could walk outside now and stop a taxi and politely instruct the driver, "Germany, please!" and when we reach the border the German customs will smilingly help me unload my bags from the vehicle: "Welcome home!"

I could also, like Keanu Reeves, just jam a metal spike into the back of my skull and materialize in the German Matrix as the Chosen One, the Saviour!

Degree certificate

94 The ambassador called. "Abu Rita," he said. "How come the file you handed in at the embassy's incomplete? Where's your degree certificate from university, the original?"

"It's in the file," I told him. "I'm sure it's with the rest of the documents in the file."

"No problem," he said. "If you're sure then we'll find it. Don't worry! Come over and we'll look for it together."

"Coming!"

I went into his office and found him sitting behind the desk, rummaging through a huge pile of papers and photographs. I sat down: "Found the certificate? Put my mind at ease. From the moment you told me I've been terrified it might be lost. You know I've only got the one certified original. My future as a dentist will be down the drain if it's lost."

"No, man. Of course not! Don't you worry. I'm just having a little rummage and I'm sure it'll turn up in no time. Here, take a look at this photo, Abu Rita!"

95 "Is this any time to be looking at photos?"

I replied.

"Just look will you? It's a shot from middle school: me and a bunch of guys after a football match." I took a look. It was a shot of the two teams following a game of soccer. "Who's that kid with the grey hair?" I asked. "He's obviously young like the rest of you, so why's his hair white?"

"Come on Abu Rita, that's me."

"So why's your hair white? Something you inherited from your parents, perhaps?"

"Of course not," he said. "Here brother, it's a long story. Let me tell it to you..."

"Back when I was in middle school I went away for the weekend to visit my aunt who lived in this little village about two hundred kilometres away from Berlin. Now my aunt had this huge German Shepherd called Buster. When we arrived, Buster bounded up to the car, jumped up to greet me and knocked me flat..."

96 "And your hair went white with fright?"
I broke in.

"Of course not," he said. "Don't jump the gun, Abu Rita. Anyway," he went on, "the pair of us started playing together and I went off for a walk with him through the trees. Everything was fine until we came to this open field, the dog bounding ahead in front of me, when, in this dreamlike moment I saw a flash and there was the sound of an explosion and then through the dust and shock I spotted the dog lying lifeless on the ground."

"And your hair went white?"

He looked at me out of the corner of his eye:
"Of course not. I realised it must have been a landmine left over from the war. I froze, rooted to the spot by the sight of the dead dog and the thought that I could be standing on another mine. Anyway, I stayed where I was, without moving a muscle, until night fell and my family noticed I was missing and came to look for me. When I saw the lights and heard their voices I screamed, 'I'm over here, watch out! I'm in a minefield!'"

97 "Obviously your fear of the mines and the dark turned your hair white."

"Of course not! They immediately alerted the village's civil defense force who turned up with a mine clearance specialist. They cleared a path for me and after we'd collected Master's body we came out together. Back home I washed and had supper and went to bed, and as I drifted off I opened my eyes and stared up and saw a gecko scuttling across the ceiling, which fell and dropped onto my neck."

"That's it! Your hair must have gone white then! It happens all the time!"

"Of course not! I grabbed the gecko, chucked it out of the window and went back to sleep. When I got up in the morning I ate breakfast, went outside and took a walk around the village. I came to the sports field where there was a game in progress between the local team and another team from a neighbouring village. The point is I sat down to watch, because anyway, the coach was a relative of my aunt's and knew me. At halftime I went to the home side's changing room and started listening to the coach's instructions. The coach noticed

98 me and suggested I come on in the second half to replace one of the team who'd picked up an injury. I didn't know what to say, but in the end I agreed and pulled on the shorts and boots and jogged out with the other players. At one point our team got a corner and it floated in to the left-hand post. I sprinted up, jumped and the keeper and me went for the ball at the same time. As the keeper grabbed the ball he lifted his knee up to protect himself and that knee hit me in the balls. We collapsed onto the ground, me clutching my balls and screaming while the goalkeeper dropped the ball and started flipping around like a slaughtered hen. His knee had hit the post after it hit me and been dislocated, and when he saw it all out of joint he lost it and started screeching like a madman. Remember the Danish player that happened to in the 1992 European Championship? Just like that."

"Surely that's it. This is where your hair went white. And now please just shut up."

"Of course not. The physio and the guys with the stretcher came on and gave us treatment and then the game went on as usual."

"Ugh, you're so tedious. Just say! What happened? Why did your hair go white? And where's my degree certificate got to?"

"To be honest with you, brother, I don't quite know how it happened, but the guys and me were playing cards on the desk yesterday and we wrote the score down on your certificate. It got all filled up with numbers and scribbles and then it got chucked away. And my hair went white because of a mistake developing the picture. I accepted it. I didn't get angry. I just took a moment to tell you that story to make you see that anything and everything happens to you in life and you have to accept these things. Look, you're a dentist. A real dentist, and you don't need a certificate from anyone. Trust me Abu Rita, even in Germany you can practice your profession without a certificate. You know more than anyone that the Ancient Egyptians and old-school barbers used to pull teeth without any papers or degrees or any of that nonsense. Abu Rita..." he went on, "You're not going to get upset about this, are you?"

"Of course not," I said, "I won't lose my temper and I won't go crazy. I'm, just going to get up

100 out of this chair for a moment and take two deep breaths..."

I punched him in the eye.

He screamed and said, "You know what, Abu Rita, there was a flash before my eyes just like when the mine blew up Master..."

"That's right," I replied. "That was a mine left in my hand by the Ancient Egyptians. And of course, Your Excellency will have no objection to me taking a selfie of you and me and that black eye together."

"Of course..." he began, but was unable to finish. The second caught him before he could say, "...not".

A marketing initiative

101 Dear Campaigners!

We would like to inform you that the campaign's marketing team has observed a recent decline in the number of followers, and so, with great regret we will swallow the bitter pill and turn to the commercial tactics we have refused to countenance throughout our long history of struggle. We will now publish a new pornographic picture of the ambassador every day as a means of attracting new followers. May our struggle continue for the sake of a happy nation and a visa for all!

A role model

102 If we had just five men like the German ambassador in our revolution we wouldn't find ourselves in the mess we're in now. I mean, I haven't shown him any gratitude and he hasn't said a word, or objected to me, or cut me off, or threatened to deny me a visa... nothing.

I give you the German ambassador, Abu Jorgen, a role model for all you orientalists!

Paper plane

103 I won't make the same mistake as Ibn Firnas.

I'll print out all my Facebook posts on plain white paper, then construct two wings and a tail, stand on the roof and...

... I'll fly and I'll fly and I'll fly.

I can flyyyyyyy... (just not too high).

Down at the Western Union

104 I stopped in at the Western Union to receive a transfer and saw him standing at the next window handing the employee a roll of cash. "Abu Jurgen! Abu Jurgen!" I called out. He turned and saw me, then raised his eyebrows, grinning as if to say "What brings you here?" He signaled to me to wait so we could leave together. We left and went to a nearby café, ordered coffee and sat down. He pulled out his iPad and said, "Read this!" "What is it?" I said. He just waved at me: "Read! It was the Prophet who said 'I am no reader', and you're not him."

I grabbed the iPad and started scrolling through the text. "What's this?" I said.

"I started writing my memoirs a few days ago and I'd like you to start helping me with the writing and editing."

"Memoirs? What the hell do you mean, memoirs? You think you're Churchill or something?"

"What's all this now?" he said. "It's my fault for asking you to help. My stupid fucking mouth for opening and giving you a chance to make fun of me."

105 "Now don't get angry with me, Abu Jurgen," I said. "I didn't mean it. But what I've just read is like one of those seventh grade textbooks on nationalism. There's no excitement, no seduction. People are tired of this stale language. As a line, 'stupid fucking mouth' has more vibrancy and vigour than this wooden prose of yours."

"Abu Rita, I'm trying to write a political memoir, not tales from the street."

"Even so, you have to give people something they haven't heard before if they're going to buy it. Who's got time to read about your horrible conversations with the Guatemalan ambassador while the pair of you queue for bread at the baker's? Do you really think people care if you played cards with the Iranian ambassador? Look," I went on, "why do you think Clinton's *My Life* sold so well? Trust me, it was all down to Paula and Monica and that stuff." And this juncture I winked at him. "People love that stuff, God preserve us."

He thought for a moment, then said: "I know you're going to drive me mad, but I don't want to back down now. *Que sera, sera*, no? Can you keep a secret?"

106 "Bring it on!" I said, "Let's have it."

He began to recite.

"Now, this took place some little time after I had joined the diplomatic corps..."

I interrupted the flow: "My friend, even in Egyptian dramas and movies they've stopped saying 'diplomatic corps'. Use another phrase."

"The point," he said, "is that they posted me to our consulate in Rotterdam, Holland, and I said farewell to my family in Germany and departed forthwith. We were a small staff: myself, the consul, an official, and the consul's secretary Samantha. Now this Samantha, Abu Rita... A rocket! A piece of work. Pure feminine seduction. The endgame itself. All eyes on her wherever she went, laughing at that one, winking at this one. Anyway, the consul had his eye on her and she, it seemed, wasn't adverse to the idea. They started going out and about together, then one day our friend the consul was posted somewhere else, abroad, and without any warning, without even a goodbye, he leaves everyone behind, including his little sweetheart Samantha, who had a breakdown

107 from the shock of it. That which falls from the sky..." "...is met by the ground," I said. "Not so!" says he: "Is met by the embrace of your friend the wolf, Abu Jurgen! I became her comforter. I cheered her up, took her out on errands and trips and in two weeks had managed to put the traitorous consul out of her mind and make her fall for me, and we embarked upon an intimate relationship. A little while later, about a month, she informed me that she was pregnant. I lost it and completely refused to countenance the idea because my circumstances simply didn't permit it. I asked her to have an abortion but she refused because the doctor told her she'd be putting her life at risk if she went ahead. I was forced to give her a break from work and rent her a place far away from people we knew and the consulate until she'd had the child and was back on her feet."

"Oh Abu Jurgen, what a hero you are."

"Well anyway, the point is I get a call from the hospital five months later telling me that Samantha was giving birth. I was surprised. Shocked. What was going on? Only six months pregnant and now giving birth perfectly normally. I went to see her and when she was

108 recovered I frankly told her my doubts over what had happened, so she started crying and saying that I was going to leave her, too; that all men were faithless dogs; that I was a coward who wouldn't believe that this was my very own son. Then she called a relative of hers, a doctor who worked at the hospital where she'd given birth, and he starts explaining to me that thanks to modern medicine a woman can give birth six months after conception, and that this is a perfectly normal and frequent occurrence."

At this point Abu Jurgen peered at me and asked, "Abu Rita, you know about modern medicine, don't you?"

I nodded my head and waved my hand:
"Go on!"

"I told her I had no intention of giving the boy my name, because my domestic circumstances made it impossible, and after taking a moment to think she offered me a compromise: that she'd register the boy under the name of this relative of hers, and that way she wouldn't be making trouble for me in Germany. All she needed from me was the expenses to cover her and the child. I thought about it and decided

109 that this really was the best way to solve the problem without recourse to lawyers and court cases and scandals, and so I started sending her a regular sum of money until I had to relocate for work and went abroad. I've kept up these payments for about ten years, Abu Rita, and whenever I got a bit of extra cash I'd transfer it to her and the boy. I'm just a money drain! The transfer you saw me making today was to pay the nuclear physicist who's tutoring the boy. What do you say to that?"

"About what? The memoirs? Modern medicine? Nuclear Physics?"

"All of it," he said.

"Well modern medicine says you should go and cancel the transfer right away before your little piece Samantha gets hold of it and all the money disappears. And you should forget these memoirs, unless you intend to call them *The Fool of Rotterdam*, or even better, *A Carry On at the Embassy*.

So anyway...

110 A back way in!

In any case the German visa's gone off...
but still edible!

Nationalities

111 In Syria there are 700,000 Assyrians, four million Kurds, seven million Turkomen, four million Alawites, two million Christians, and five million others from the Shia, Druze, Ismaili, Syrian Orthodox, Circassian and Chechen minorities. Plus one Native American who goes by the name Squatting-On-Embassy-Doorstep.

Give him a visa! Get shot of him and his whining!

Choosing a school

112 Nibal and I can't agree on a school for Rita and Nayy. French, Arabic, or English? Or one of the Syrian schools in Lebanon? Or should we wait till we get to Germany and the problem takes care of itself?

Yesterday the answer came: two kilos of bananas that the girls polished off in less than a day.

There's no point to all this agonising, it's clear now: they're country girls to the core. We needn't bother.

Shooting the ambassador

113 First thing in the morning the mobile started to ring. I answered without even looking at the screen to see who was calling. His voice came down the line: "Morning, Abu Rita! Still asleep? Get up, get up, I need you! Get up! There's a saying in Germany: A morning's work is worth its weight in gold..."

"Give me ten minutes to get myself up and I'll call you back," I said.

I got up, washed, made a cup of coffee and dialed his number: "Okay, so what do you want? And anyway, where have you been? Not a peep out of you for a while now."

"If you're free," he said, "then get down to the embassy. I'll tell you everything."

I went over and found him in his office surrounded by suits and clothes of all kinds: something blue, something orange, jewelry, projectors and filming equipment. "What's all this?" I said. "I've got a photo shoot in a minute and these are all the clothes I brought to wear for it. You know: different poses, different outfits."

114 "All right," I said, "but why the photos? Is there some political event or meeting at the embassy?"

"Oh no, they're for the book."

"What book?"

"Come on, Abu Rita! The book about your visa! We have to put a few photos in the book!"

And before I could get a word in he continued: "I've got everything ready. Photos from my childhood, school, university... Every stage of my life through to Damascus, Mauritania, and Muhasan. They're all ready. I found them in record time! The old German proverb's true: A strong will gives the feet wings!"

"Abu Jurgen," I said. "What are you talking about? What's this book you're talking about? What is this about Muhasan and Damascus and Mauritania?"

"The world's a village now, Abu Rita! Everyone can see everyone. As the German proverb says: All channels lead to the sea!"

115 Then he got up from his desk and started showing me the photographs.

"This is a photo from Muhasan about a month ago, and this one's from Nouakchott before that, and this one's from Mount Qassioun in Damascus. What do you think of them, Abu Rita? Not bad, hey? Now don't you go quoting that famous old German saying at me—A lot of noise and not much to show for it—because a lot of travel and suffering went into them. You know how dangerous it is to get into Muhasan these days with Daesh about."

"Brother," I said. "it's not a question of suffering and noise and Daesh. We're talking about a work of literature here, Abu Jurgen, not a photo album. What does the reader want with your snaps of school and university and Damascus? It's a book about the visa, not your life. Sorry, but I'm afraid I can't have a single photo of you going into the book."

The ambassador thought for a moment, then said: "How hard-hearted you are, Abu Rita! Here's me coming to the end of my days and

116 you'd begrudge me a few photos in this book of yours? Farewell friendship! It's like the German proverb says: There's nothing softer than a heart and nothing harder."

"Abu Jurgen," I said. "Enough with the emotional blackmail. You're my friend, and you know how dear you are to me, but this isn't the time or place for flattery. This is work. And anyway you're still young! All your hair in place and not a single white one!"

"Sure, my hair's black but what good does that do me? As the German proverb runs: The madman's head never grows grey."

"Damn you, you're breaking my heart! Fine, don't worry: I've got a solution. What would you say to writing a short preface to the book, or penning a few lines at the beginning of each chapter? We'd say, 'From the pen of Ambassador Abu Jurgen.'"

His eyes shone and he quivered with happiness: "I'm ready to go! I've already written a few things that I was going to add as captions for the photographs."

117 "Great! Read them to me now!"

He pulled out his pocket diary, leafed through a few pages and began to read, peering at me as he did so:

"Man dies only when he is remembered by no one. You must venture the impossible to achieve the possible. Lies multiply before elections, during war, and after the hunt."

Here he stopped reading and started looking at me to gauge my opinion. "Go on, go on!" I cried. He went on:

"At times, words can be more violent than fists and guns. They shall not say, 'the times were dark,' they shall say, 'Why were the ambassadors silent?'"

He fell silent then said, "What do you think?"

"You want to know what I think? You'll give me a heart attack. Those are quotes from Brecht and Herman Hesse and Bismarck and Heinrich Boell. You want to put them in the book and claim you came up with them?"

118 Anyone who's read them will spot it and the lie will be exposed."

"Abu Rita," he said. "Brecht said, 'Why were the poets silent?' I'm talking about ambassadors. It's a completely different thing."

"It's no use," I said. "You're no good for anything. Not the visa, not the book, nothing. Even a German clock gives the right time twice a day! But know what? There is one thing you can do for me!"

"What's that?"

"Take that orange jumpsuit of yours, go back to Muhasan and hand yourself over to Daesh. That would be a huge scoop for the book."

Mahatma

Abu Jurgen

119 What I have learned is not much. Not much at all. So little in fact, that you could put it all in one of those little clear plastic pouches they use to collect donations in malls and mosques.

From my mother I learned to fear silence and the silent, for that is where danger lies.

Dentistry taught me the maxim, By thy teeth I shall know thee!

I learned what the Ancient Egyptians knew: how to place a short stick beneath a huge stone and shift it with a flick of your finger.

From statistics I learned that extreme positive and negative values are the ones to be ignored, despised even, because they are tricksters and refuse to mingle with the pack.

Physics taught me that black holes can come dressed in jeans, or red sweaters, or the military boots of a resistance fighter.

From proverbs I learned that the deft weaver who can weave with a goat's leg makes the worst clothes.

120 From the French revolution I learned that biscuits and croissants are what keeps the guillotine snapping.

From the Tunisian revolution I learned that tyrants will scuttle away at the first "Boo!" but only if their armies stay asleep.

From Egypt I learned the line uttered by Khaled Saleh in the The Yacoubian Building: "People cling to the government like a kid to his mother's dress."

From Deraa I learned that one grain placed atop another is enough to bury a dictator.

From Homs I learned that this city contains many citizens of Homs, many more than this wretched world can bear.

From Aleppo I learned that barrels do not cower before history. They plummet down bare-naked with defiant eyes.

From my hometown Muhasan I learned that MiGs and Raduga Publishing are two faces of the same wretched coin, which is why they fall together.

121 From Kafr Nabl I learned that a length of fabric is enough to inspire the world, but insufficient to clean up the mess from a single barrel bomb.

From Al Sarout I learned you can guard the dream with a song, from Al Qashoush how hearts and throats can replicate.

From Ghayath Matar how to bequeath your son a rose and a bottle of water that will one day supply a nation and bring solace to its orphans.

From the regime I learned that you can bathe in the same river time after time, so long as the international community despises those who wash themselves with dust.

From the opposition, I learned that the cubs are not the lion's true sons, but the offspring of his cousin.

From my trips in Mauritania's taxis I learned that every nationalist tendency is a chauvinistic desire to marginalize other groups. As a sidenote (or perhaps this is the main text, after

122 all) Mauritania taught me that the pretty girls are the fat ones.

From the taxis of Lebanon, that foul language won't stop the electricity being cut off or stop the warlords. Car bombs will.

From the Sunnis and Shia I learned that the Hundred Years War is not the longest war in history.

Mark Zuckerberg taught me that Facebook is the latest version of the lie detector.

Adonis taught me that a crowd of critics is no less important than a mob of admirers, whether at university or the mosque.

From Nibal I learned that beauty, like the Devil, lies in the details.

From Rita, that fathers are beings who do more harm than good.

From Nayy, that the second child knows this fact from the day they're born.

123 From Christ (and Deirezzour) that after I've turned my other cheek to my abuser I must headbutt him so hard he'll never get up, because if I don't he'll never stop hitting me.

Football taught me that El Clasico is more deadly than two lines of trenches and the Battle of the Camel.

My friends who know the countryside taught me that a fast-food joint and two paved roads either side in a small village count for more than the university in the nearest town.

From the Kurds I learned that the word "al-Kurd" is not some recent invention or a pun, but derives from the narratives of the inhabitants of Mecca: those who knew the city and its mountains better than anyone else.

From the Armenians, that a year from now a right will have been lost on which millions of plaintiffs rest their claim.

From the Yarmouk Camp, that not all wise sayings are correct. That hunger is the same as smoking, traffic accidents and barrel bombs... as all causes of death, fast and slow.

124 From the Syrian revolution, I learned that I must know myself before anything else.

It also taught me to see the walls that have been raised up in place of the wall of fear.

From my campaign I learned that a hashtag will get you into hearts before it gets you across borders.

From Abu Jurgen I learned nothing, not even a single word in German. Abu Jurgen is good for nothing; his hide and flesh and eggs: good for nothing. But I'll let you into a little secret: he taught me to laugh and smile through war and death. Don't tell him that, though. Please.

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