

R A S H A A B B A S

T E N / E L E V E N



**THE INVEN-
TION OF ■■■
GERMAN**

The Invention of German

Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger

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About the writer

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The invention of German

Write it down: "The minutes of a meeting between the two most gracious gentlemen, Duke Karl and Duke Ludwig, concerning the invention of the German language."

And what language should I write in seeing as we haven't invented the language yet?

English. Slightly modified.

Fine. But then how come there's a system of nobility, dukes and so on, if we still don't speak a language?

Do you really think you're a duke? It's just that I thought we had a better chance of people taking us seriously if we had titles.

Okay then. We've already got a few words in the dictionary so this session should focus on the rules of the new language.

I propose that the gender of each word should play an important and decisive role in the rules of grammar and

declension. It should affect the verbs and prepositions and definite articles.

No problems there, but can we ensure that the form of the words at least give a clue as to their gender, so the language would be easier for foreigners to learn?

“A clue as to their gender”? What does that even mean?

That words take a gendered form. Take apple for example: it’s clearly feminine. And “moon” is feminine, too, obviously.

But aren't you being a little fussy, Duke Karl? As it happens I’ve a number of objections to what you’ve just suggested. First of all we’re only just starting to develop this gender idea, so the only way you could be aware of it at all is black magic and mysticism. I’m worried that your behaviour is going to turn this meeting into a dramaturgic failure. Secondly, I can’t see why making the language simple for students should be a priority. Do I look like a travel agent? Take a good look at me, my dear sir, and tell me: do I look like a travel agent to you? Is it the wig? Well, in my view we should do the opposite and deliberately suggest the opposite gender to the correct one. And I’m going to make apple masculine, just for you.

Why the tantrum, Duke Ludwig? Do you hate women, sir?

Certainly not, but we live in a pre-feminist age—right?—so I am compelled to behave in this manner. What about this, to

further confound those damned language-learners: "girl" will be neuter, not feminine.

Neuter? We're adding a third gender? I don't remember us agreeing to that. What's the point?

Do you want our language to become like English, where a table is grammatically identical to a baby or a dog, without the slightest distinction made between them? You want a blind language, do you, Duke Karl, that does not see the characteristics and dimensions peculiar to all things? That is why we've proposed the idea of gender, so that the language will be as sensitive as possible to each and every word. Adjectival endings will also differ depending on the gender of the thing they describe, its declension, and whether it is definite or indefinite or neither. Negations will also play a role, as will singular and plural.

On the subject of English, I'd like to draw your attention to the fact that the dictionary we drew up earlier is full of comically altered English terms.

Just remind me, if you would: is German supposed to be a source of the English language, or is it the other way round?

I've no idea. This is a completely unspecified historical period.

So we should sort that out. From now on, English words are to be even more comically adapted so it's clear we're making

fun of them. What do you think we should do with “milk” for instance?

No idea. “Molk” perhaps?

No, no... make it “milch”. Just imagine! Milch! How fearfully amusing!

It’s not funny.

It is, it’s just you’ve got no sense of fun, no idea what’s funny, that’s all. What’s next?

We have to name the animals.

Nearly time for our afternoon nap—it’s been a tiring day. That’s reason enough not to waste time naming each and every animal. We should just follow a rule like the one you use for mixing colours.

What do you mean?

Like when you mix the primary colours to make all the rest: we’re going to apply that to the animals. We’ll choose a few primary animals and the rest of them we’ll name by adding together the names of the primary ones. Have we got a word for mouse, yet? When we come to picking a name for the bat, of course, you’re going to pop up and waste my precious time. So when you do, just call it a fly-

ing mouse and we're done. Apply the rule to every animal that gives you problems.

But we're going to have to come up with some new words, aren't we?

No, no, there's no need for that at all. Just look through the words we've already invented and run two, maybe three—four, even!—into a single word.

Then how are we going to work out the gender of the composite word that results? From the first word in it?

Of course not, my dear sir. That's far too easy, and unbecoming of a great language. We don't want to do what's expected... No! The gender of composite words will be taken from the final word.

What about the verb declensions we agreed on last time. Will they work for all verbs?

Of course not. Hurry up and invent ten irregular verbs that don't follow any pattern and add them to the list. And don't forget to make it clear that composite verbs are to take two forms: one when they appear in the middle of the sentence and another at the end.

Fine. Oh, before you go, there's one more thing we have to deal with.

What's that? Why are you holding that tiny card in your hand?

I've written down three definite articles, one for each of the three genders we invented.

Three? What a simpleton you can be, my dear Duke. How basic! Run along and fetch a big pile of paper from my desk then come with me to the drawing room. After our nap we are going to extend this definite article business in particular. And throw away that ridiculous little scrap of card. We are going to go to town on this subject, and make sure we utterly destroy the morale of any arrogant language student. Are you thinking what I'm thinking?

That we make the definite articles when written backwards spell out: "Don't dream of learning this language you ignorant foreigner"?

Dear Lord! From what wondrous mettle is man formed! I've made a regular devil of you, haven't I? The idea I had was to make the feminine articles masculine depending on their case to confuse the students even more. I'm starting to get the feeling we'll make an excellent team, Duke Karl.

That much is clear.

Herr Muller

Thank you, sir. To be honest, I never dreamed I'd find somewhere so cheap to live in Berlin. I look forward to seeing the room!

What can I say? Back in the day the place was a paradise for people on the lookout for a leg-up in life. Now it's a veritable hell for students, artists and house-hunters.

Indeed, Herr Muller, I've often heard that said. May I call you Rudolf?

No

I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw the advertisement and with great difficulty, amidst all those obscure German phrases, managed to make out the price. You clearly speak good English: why not draw up the advert in both languages? Wouldn't that be a better way to attract more interest?

No

I'm a little worn out. Those stairs feel like they'll never end.
And I'm touch dizzy too, coming all the way out here from
the centre of Berlin. You know, I had to change trains three
times to get here.

You see, my dear Rasta, that...

Rasha

That's right: you mentioned before that you were from Russia.

Well no, the fact is... Actually it doesn't matter. You're right.

You're not Russian then, Rasta?

Middle-Eastern. Well, semi-Middle-Eastern. The family comes
from Grozny, which is why I look like this.

Okay then. Well, truth be told it's a little far from the centre
of Berlin, but as you know any room there would be twice
the rent without any real advantages.

I know. It's not a problem: I'm used to difficulties. I'm a regular
tigrress my dear Herr Muller.

Actually there's a perfectly simple way to cut the time down
to two and a half hours, if you work out how to use the
transport the right way and don't rely on the conventional
routes.

Amazing. So how do I go about it?

Okay then. First of all you have to take the U7 Metro from the train station then after eleven stops change to the S13. That will take you to the lake. Ride the ferry across and when you reach the other side you'll find yourself in a somewhat desolate region, with an elephant rank. Find an elephant with the same horsepower as a bus and hop on board, and you'll be able to swim across a small creek, after which it's the S44, then a nuclear submarine to the next station, from where you ride an intercity coach, followed by a seven kilometre walk, and you'll be here.

I'll be sure to write it down. Lovely. Oh, Herr Muller? I'm feeling nauseous all of sudden. Is that smell coming from this building?

You'll get used to it. That smell means we're getting close to the room. Some of the tenants here behave a little unfortunately.

Scumbags.

Some them come home drunk and can't wait until they're in their beds.

I get it, I do.

Then again, you've got the rats. Some of them don't manage to get out of their holes and they die of cold and hunger

and decompose inside the walls. I hope that won't be a problem for you.

Of course not. Why on earth would anyone object to a thing like that, Herr Muller?

Wonderful to hear you think so, Rasta. And here we are: the room! But just wait here so I can just hop across to the balcony, get inside and open it up.

Did you lose the key, Herr Muller?

There did used to be a key but one of the tenants mistook it for a penis after one of the parties they held in the room. I assume she was high as a kite on heroin. What happened was that she vanished along with the key and we never found her. I'm worried she might have died because I noticed that the smell got stronger. We assumed it was just another rat at first... What's up, Rasta? Do you want to say something?

Well, I've got a few questions about what you just said. I'm not criticizing or doing the place down: it's just curiosity. Actually, never mind. I don't think I want real answers to my questions.

At the end of the day the key didn't really bother me. It didn't work that well anyway. Anyway, the rest of the tenants are able to open your room with their keys so don't be shy or embarrassed: ask them for help.

Herr Muller. There appears to be a sick person in this room.

Dear me, no. This is Luigi, your roommate. Say hello to Miss Rasta, Luigi. Oh dear, not in a good mood today it seems. Don't you worry, Rasta, he's an exceptionally nice Italian boy. It's just that he has turned a touch green lately after swallowing huge quantities of wall paint, and he's constantly moaning from stomach cramps. He was an important art critic in the seventies, but I don't need to tell you how cruel the world can be to artists.

Herr Muller, someone's arm is moving over by the window.

That's Murat! You'll have a lovely time with him. He's an old Turkish video-game designer, but he's a little sensitive to criticism so try and be positive about the game he's writing at the moment. Don't say a word about the fuzzy graphics and irritating music. He's trying to convey a message,

And what's the message?

All right. Well, Murat's a bitter old supporter of Ataturk and he's a bit depressed due to the current political situation in his country. For years now he's been working body and soul on a game in which Kemal Ataturk swallows and squashes these tiny Erdogans. In any case you'll get to know your roommates better at the daily party. It's a perfect opportunity to work the rota for sleeping on the

mattress and using the blanket.

Doesn't matter, I can sleep on the floor. This mattress, I don't know... it's moving, or it looks like it's about to attack.

Don't forget to bring the necessary documents for signing the contract: a valid passport, a certified tax number, a Schufa number, family documents, work visa, university enrollment forms, your school grades and the dates of all blood donations made since you were born.

Herr Muller...

Yes, Rasta?

Do you think that Herr Luigi would object if I also had a few cans of wall paint?

I don't know, to be honest. You'll have to find that out for yourself: he's not always in a great mood. Don't worry, though. Being a Russian, I realise you're a little peculiar but I'm expecting you to behave as a good tenant should. Did you say that you're originally from Grozny?

Yes indeed, Herr Muller. That's exactly what I said.

How I became an artist

I never set out to become an artist. The whole thing was sheer chance. Like searching on the Internet for advice on how to get rid of bad breath and accidentally clicking on the Wikipedia entry for Henry V. Curious, you read a bit about him (even though your interest in history has previously been confined to knowledge of your great-grandfather's first name) then the next day you're sitting with friends when one of them happens to mention Henry and the boy you're keen on—the one you came to see—suddenly announces: "Ah me! I've stayed single all this time, keeping my virginity intact and waiting in the hope of meeting one of those people who know all about King Henry V and his perfumed mouth. To meet a girl like that would decide everything for me."

Well, something similar happened to me.

All I wanted was to learn to speak German properly. The first complaint of most students of the language concerns gender: masculine, feminine, and neuter. Initially I was dismissive since we have the same thing in Arabic (with the exception of neuter, of course) but I soon received a shock when I discovered that male and female words in German are quite differ-

ent to those in Arabic. I'd assumed there was a universal law governing which words took which gender... like physics.

I tried to play it down by telling myself this wasn't important. What did such rigid gendered divisions mean in 2016? I didn't believe in such things, nor did I think ignoring them should have too much of an impact on my assimilation of any civilized language. I could focus on the rest of the rules and take my time with the genders. As it turned out I dropped this approach by the third or fourth lesson when it became clear that it was impossible to study the language without including gender. There was nothing for it but to buy huge sheets of drawing paper, hang them on my bedroom walls, then draw a little picture representing each item of vocabulary I had to learn, somehow incorporating its gender into the image.

This is how I ended up with a wall-full of degenerate sketches: an orange with breasts, a bowl of soup lapping up fresh birth-control pills, an apple with a moustache, fish with penises and trains that were penises. The drawings also included little boys with two heads, one male and one female, but I had no idea how to portray the rest of the neuter words, so I crammed them all into one corner and embarked on a system to memorize them. Every day I'd bark mean gender-discriminatory phrases at them: "What's wrong with you, book? You'll have to pick a gender. Do you want the kids running after you in the street and chanting Abou Nuwas's line: 'With a woman's hand in the clothes of a man, she takes two lovers: the seducer and the sodomite.' Don't even get me started on bread and water: your gender's so mixed up it makes my skin crawl!

Do you want people to think you're women? I have no idea how you even made it this far. How did you pass the entry test for Noah's Ark?"

And everything would have been fine if only I hadn't done it all next to the window, attracting the attention of one of my anarchist neighbours who reported me to the police for "hate speech", leaving me widely loathed in the neighbourhood.

I bought thick curtains for the windows and for a while stopped going outside except on urgent errands. This self-imposed isolation would have been difficult to bear were it not for another neighbour of mine, a religious man who secretly slipped me hampers of food containing scraps of paper with scrawled messages that proclaimed his solidarity and belief that we shared a cause.

This painful incident did not stop me seeking to bring my system for learning the gender of German words to a wider audience. I was so overconfident, in fact, that I attempted to draw up a philosophy and Freudian interpretation for each and every word and then demonstrate it to my classmates: "The lemon is clearly feminine because, as we see, it suffers from a slimming complex. Don't you notice the looks of envy it gives the slender twigs of the tea-plant? Fish is masculine: can't you tell that he loves his mother? So is sugar: in a patriarchal society everything that is sweet and craved by the body must be male. That's pretty obvious!"

I never imagined that these silly little speeches, mainly pinched from things my friends had said to me, would ever travel beyond my classmates. But one of the girls in my class told the curator of a modern art gallery about the sheets she had seen stuck up in my apartment and my personal philosophy of word genders.

I can't remember how things got so quickly out of hand after that. Out of the blue I found myself attending a lot of gatherings where people held glasses of wine and plucked small pastries off silver platters, chattering away with artworks hanging on the walls behind them—including my drawings! Someone would always volunteer to interpret the gendered linguistic references of my work on my behalf, and so I'd stuff small pieces of pizza into my mouth while the expert spoke on. No one ever asked me my interpretation of what I'd drawn. This was an excellent policy on my part, since I became known as one of those artists who don't say much: who keep quiet and keep to themselves. My fame grew.

My only rival for attention was a Korean artist by the name of Hyejin, who drew portraits of people's faces as they were reading insincere compliments on Instagram beneath images of their newborn children. I would watch Hyejin closely as she popped sushi into her mouth and refused to utter a word, while someone else was explaining her work as revolution against fakery and hypocrisy in modern consumerist societies in the grip of their own digital revolutions. She must have learned German, too. I couldn't let it go. I couldn't let Hyejin play this part and rob me of my reputation as the profound,

isolated, melancholy artist: the lone wolf. I trailed her through a joint exhibition of ours and finally ran her down in a dark corner where she was hiding. I tried provoking her and shouting to make her speak, or to look me in the eye at least and reveal herself to everyone, but instead she had a breakdown and everyone rushed over to soothe her, while her agent told me off for acting irresponsibly and for frightening her without regard to the fact she felt cut off and isolated (she hadn't learned German).

Then came decision time. I couldn't dine out forever on these sketches. People's enthusiasm for the idea had begun to wane. At the same time, I had become used to the artist's life and was no longer fit for proper work. I'd go to bed at eight in the morning and wake at five in the afternoon. Like all creative people I went to parties, drank to excess, and lived on loans with which I paid rent, covered party expenses, and bought utterly useless things for myself. Incidentally, I discovered that there's a special section in supermarkets for these useless objects. There you can find special implements for removing the green leaves from strawberries, for instance, or de-coring kiwis, or special mops for wiping down rubberwood floors.

If I wanted to maintain my lifestyle I would have to act fast and come up with a project at least as successful as my last exhibition. It was around this time that I received an offer of a grant for an installation project. I didn't have any idea how to go about making an installation but no sooner had I seen the amount of money they were offering, than I wrote back: "I accept. I will inform you of the details later." I went

to seek the advice of a relative of mine, a well-known artist herself, and asked her to teach me how to go about something like this: how to turn an idea into an exhibition, to construct its visual equivalent. She mocked me mercilessly and told me that this was not how installations were set up. She told me to bring along half the amount mentioned in the grant email and took me to an empty parking garage where, instructed by her, we started work. When we had finished we had ourselves a huge circular box, like a gigantic model of a hamster's wheel. At the entrance to this wheel, my relative erected a big table on which she set out cups of coffee.

When people came to see the installation we would hand them a cup of coffee then make them sprint inside the wheel. But that wasn't enough for her. She hired an actor to throw balls of coloured water at them and flog them. When journalists inquired about the point of the installation she was brazen enough to improvise an endless and utterly meaningless stream of sentences: "The wheel of physical production in parallel with the incentives of the market and consumerism. Luxury capital which introduces poison to joy. We are slaves!" But her confidence and the mannered way in which she spoke gave the impression that she was speaking at some historic turning point, unburdening herself of a radical artistic manifesto that would change everything. In any case, we got the grant and our exhibition, The Wheel of Production, achieved a certain notoriety. But Hyejin outdid us yet again by putting on an installation at exactly the same time, and we lost the limelight. Her show comprised a recording device that made the sound of a cricket chirping whenever someone expressed an idiotic political view.

Show me more violence

Look, it's not that your novel's bad. Don't take it so personally.
I'm terribly sorry but I can't publish something like this.

But what's wrong with it? Can I at least get some idea, so I can edit it again? Four years I've spent working on this.

I'm afraid that won't be possible, I'm sorry. Don't be put off by what I'm about to say—it's only my opinion—but the fact is, if I dipped my arse in an inkwell and smeared it all over a pile of blank paper I'd end up with a more deserving piece of literature than your novel. I'm not saying you need to find another job, like sweeping up leaves in the park or photography... It's only an opinion...

Oh.

Believe me, if I didn't think so highly of you I wouldn't have finished reading the first page. Then there's Frida... Frida... Isn't she a friend of yours?

She certainly is.

Well in order to be fair and make sure I wasn't doing you an injustice, I gave her the novel so she could give her view. When she'd read it she said she hadn't vomited that copiously for five years: the last time was when she ate at that Japanese restaurant that the municipality closed down for breaking hygiene regulations.

She didn't say anything to me.

An hour and a half, one full hour and thirty minutes: vomiting without pause. Even then I wanted to give you another chance. Mr. Anton... Isn't he related to you? A friend of your late father?

That's right.

After I sent the manuscript to Antoon for him to read he wrote back threatening to abduct my children from school if I ever sent him filth like that again. Once more, I do hope you won't take any of this personally.

Oh no, I won't.

Look out of the window, here. Do you see that boy on his way to school?

I've got the idea. I don't need his opinion, too.

No, that's not it. The point I'm trying to make is that he seems very thin indeed. Malnourished, you might say. I just

don't want this conversation of ours to upset you. I wish you every success in releasing your novel with another publisher.

Fine. But don't you have a single positive thing to say about the book?

But of course, my dear! The last thing I want you to think is that I'm saying the book's pure shit. God forbid. There is this one thing that I, personally, found very inspiring and impressive. Your courage. You have considerable courage, there's no doubt about it.

Right! I smashed a lot of taboos in this novel, that's for sure.

Taboos? Aren't we being a touch optimistic? I was referring to your courage in making an awful piece of writing like this public and trying to publish it. Exceptionally brave of you. My god, don't that kid's parents ever feed him? I can see his joints sticking out from here.

There something I don't understand. I assumed this was exactly what was required. I mean, I put everything in this novel. Everything. I slander religion. The rebellious heroine even tells her pious father, "Why don't you take your prophet and shove him up..."

Yes, yes, I remember. There's no need to repeat it.

And I take on sexual taboos in Arab culture. In the face of an uncaring and brutal world, my protagonist cries out: "I wish I had a cock to fuck the world with..."

I'd noticed, thanks. Simply delightful.

There's a clear condemnation of dictatorships and some real political heft to it. In his first monologue, the heroine's lover states: "The grass can never flourish beneath the soldiers' boots." What else? The whole sacred trinity. The reference to sexism in Arab society, that's in there: the heroine endures the rough condescension of her father, brother and the mighty moustaches of Mahmoud the bean-seller. I even brought the Syrian revolution to the party even though it was exhausting trying to find a place to fit it in. I've included slogans that I predict the young protestors will be chanting in future Syrian demonstrations. I had to make up the character of the uncle-in-law of the heroine's boyfriend, the cheerful refugee smuggler, who gives his life to save the refugees from the sinking boat. The evil character is a security officer, a piece of symbolism that cleaves pretty close to reality. The handsome male protagonist, meanwhile, is an activist in the revolution, and I've dedicated four whole chapters to his time in detention, during which he reaches out and touches the humanity in one of his captors. To keep it exciting there's an influential official involved in antiquities smuggling, plus a thrilling murder: the official's mistress found dead in the swimming pool. There's everything. Everything's

here in this novel. Everything I need to sell it to foreigners. And here you come, telling me you don't want to translate it and publish it?

Look, there's something I have to tell you. There's obviously been a misunderstanding. It's 2016. The jam-packed plot you've put together here would have been perfect a few years ago, but we've got shelves groaning with translated Arabic fiction, their covers all frightened eyes looking out from behind niqabs and things like that. Ninety-nine per cent of these novels have broken all the taboos you're talking about. No one wants to read that stuff any more.

What should I do, then? What should I break?

What about visiting the Islamic State? It's a topical issue and I can get good distribution for a book that recounts your experiences in one of the regions ruled by ISIS... details of your relationship with one of the fighters...

That's never going to happen. I might be single, but I'm not desperate enough to sleep with a guy from Daesh and as long as Tinder gives me hope, I don't expect that to change.

In that case there's only one option left. You obviously can't give me anything I that will be a guaranteed commercial success, so let's at least try and come up with something with a more elite appeal. Something we might be able to enter in literary competitions.

We've spoken about this before. I'm not going to write a book about Jalal Al Din Al Rumi.

No, no... I'll think of something else. Would you be able to do violence? That's a new one! That kid's bones are thinner than my wife's G-strings. I just don't believe it. Where was I? Would you be able to write something violent for us?

Of course I could. I'm incredibly violent inside.

Excellent. Violence seems to be selling well these days, you see. We can market it as you being a refugee and having lived in a war zone and that kind of thing. We'll say your experiences are reflected in a language of violence. How far do you think you could take it?

I could... I could... I could beat the crap out of a character...?

Boring. What else?

Have a character eat human flesh? I don't know... They get turned on by corpses, too... They have sex with the corpses then they eat them.

Not bad. But we're not there yet.

More corpses, then. Say: a mass grave. An orgy at a mass grave by a heretical sect that believes that eating others is how you respect and honour them.

I don't know. It's still not quite right. Even the worst modern crime series have got that. I want more. More violence.

What if we made members of the sect polishing their fingernails on pieces of velvet in front of people they've abducted in order to torture them. Then they film it and upload it onto the deep web.

How cruel! We're getting there, but I'm not completely happy yet. Show me more. Why do you think that boy's so thin? Poor digestion or malnutrition?

You want to see more?

Yeah, yeah... But why are you closing the door? And what have you put those gloves on for?

Elementary, my dear Stefan

What a mess. Life's dull routine has practically rusted over my senses. No one can sleep in peace if they are denied the chance to make use of their talents: their very humanity if put at risk. When I left London for Berlin to challenge myself and throw myself into new problems in an unfamiliar environment (not to mention the rising rents in London), I assumed I'd be deluged with a flood of fascinating cases from the very moment I arrived. But no. All I got was an invitation from my Turkish neighbour to intervene in his dispute with the elderly German man who lived in the apartment beneath him and would bang his broomhandle against his ceiling whenever the Turk's children made a racket, and threaten to call the police. Waiting for the intricate legal case that would return me to the limelight, I thought I should at least keep my mental muscles toned by doing a little deductive work. I went outside and stood waiting in the street for a victim, and just so I wouldn't have to wait too long I took a packet of cigarettes from my pockets and waved them around a bit. A young man immediately materialised and asked for one. I slowly removed a cigarette from the pack, looking the youth up and down without him noticing.

"Of course. Here."

"Thanks."

"Maybe I should give you another, right?"

"No thanks. One's enough."

"But Stefan, your girlfriend waiting for you back at the apartment is dying for a smoke. This cigarette could be an excellent opportunity for you two to make up after that violent row you had today. She's got no problem with your drug addiction, or the way you constantly switch your focus and plans between music, photography, and art and your pathetic failure at all of them. Even your inability to find a suitable place to live isn't the problem. It's to do with your female friends, I would say."

"Have we met before? How did you know all that?"

At this, I smiled mysteriously beneath the brim of my hat and said:

"Ever heard of Sherlock Holmes before, young Stefan?"

"No."

"Fine then," I went on, put out: "I'm no great genius, Stefan, but I place my faith in the details. The details which you never pay any attention to, not knowing how telling they can be. Little things, perhaps... so small that no one really notices them: my eyes have been trained to pick them out."

"So, stranger with an amusing British accent, what were these details which allowed you to know all that about me?"

"OK then... The hatchet buried in your head and the freely-flowing blood was a significant clue. It allowed me to surmise that you had recently left the scene of a dispute."

"Genius! I can't believe it! Who would have noticed something like that?"

"The pair of pink gloves hanging off the axe handle told me that the argument had been with a woman, and one who lives with you, since no rational person would walk around wearing those gloves in public, even in Berlin. There are limits, Stefan."

"And the drugs?"

"Sure. From a penetrating glance at the lower part of your face, the section below your nose, I was able to observe that the entire area was covered in cocaine which you forgot to wipe off before leaving the house. There is one further, microscopic detail which my keen eye picked out immediately: the syringe of liquid cocaine hanging out of your neck and the tab of LSD that dangles from your tongue every time you open your mouth to speak. I simply surmised that these things weren't without significance."

"Extraordinary. And how did you know my name?"

"That was a little more difficult, but with the assistance of my piercing vision I saw that your cap bore the slogan: My name is Stefan the Fool."

"True. Absolutely true. The cap's a gift from my girlfriend. She was furious with me when she gave it to me. She gets angry a lot but she's a good-hearted girl. How observant you are! But tell me about the accommodation and my creative indecision?"

"Well... that bit was easier than making pizza."

"Extraordinary! An eloquence that combines the verbal refinement of the British with the soul of the Italian kitchen. A truly multicultural experience."

"True enough: my charisma is hardly hard to see. The point is, I could tell you were in your twenties and lived in Berlin, so all that was left for me to do was fill in the blanks."

"Right, right. Truly amazing. There's only one thing left, then."

"And what might that be, my dear Stefan?"

"How could you tell my problems were due to jealousy?"

I sighed, laid my hands on Stefans shoulders and turned him to face the traffic lights on the other side of the street:

"Elementary, my dear Stefan. You're a handsome young fellow,

twenty-something and living in Berlin. Do you know how many young, single women there are in this city? Do you see the cloud of dust coming down that street? They've picked up your scent, Stefan. They've located you, just as a flea locates a hot-blooded human through the clutter of a bedroom at night, and your girlfriend knows it. They are coming, Stefan. Coming with bared fangs to ravage your tender young flesh. They'll tear you apart, just like piranhas rip a drowning sheep to pieces in under a minute. Stefan, they've sensed your presence."

"My god! The wolf-whistles are getting closer! What should I do?"

"Flee from this place, young Stefan! Flee!"

The rise of the hipsters

Born into a culture that values disaster-readiness we are trained to spot the slightest sign of impending danger. Well, that's overdoing it: at that time in Berlin, noticing things weren't right didn't require you to be that alert or know what was going on.

It all began when I saw there were fewer and fewer people out in the street. At first I assumed it was because of the bitter December chill but a few days after that the cafes and bars suddenly closed their doors. I couldn't shake the idea that an actual war was about to break out and there was only one place I could go to confirm my suspicion. I hurried to the nearest shopping centre to make sure and the moment I arrived and rode the escalator down to the ground floor I saw that my assumptions were on the money: at all the tills were long queues of heavily-laden shoppers snaking out through entrance to the mall. Imagining what my mother would do in a similar situation I didn't hesitate for an instant but sprinted straight for the end of a queue.

Back home, whenever any rumour started the rounds—whether about an impending war with the Israelis, American sanc-

tions, a rise in the price of oil, stories about one of the Hafez family's children failing their exams, the singer Fekret Toshka getting a divorce, or a rise in Swedish suicide rates—my mother would rush to stock up for the disaster ahead.

This precautionary behaviour manifested itself in the purchase of stacks of loaves, vast quantities of flour and lentils and bulgur wheat, and anything else that could be stored for long periods. But once the rumour had run its course, this meant we had to suffer through weeks of eating stale bread and lentil soup so the stockpile wouldn't go to waste.

As I entered the supermarket I immediately thought of the best way to put my long experience in crisis-planning (now strengthened by what I'd learnt at school) to use. So, along with the bags of flour which, to tell the truth, I had no idea what to do with, I started throwing everything I could lay my hands on into the trolley: tinned meals at seventy cents a tin, big bags of rice, cans of olive oil—and I steered clear of meat or anything that might go bad before the war was over.

I managed to force my way through the crush of people, who had begun to act aggressively as a result of frayed nerves and the sense of danger. Before I could get to the till the employee broke down in tears under the pressure, but I paid for my things and on the way home, noticed a homeless man staggering down the street and declaiming, "The day is at hand! The end of the world is but a footstep away! They are coming! They are coming!"

I got home, thinking that I'd be more likely to survive whatever was coming if I teamed up with someone. I called my friend Tula and asked her to come round. She asked if everything was all right and I told her that I couldn't talk about it on the phone. When she arrived I had to explain what was going on all over town because she'd been out of her head on hash: the shops and cafes and bars all closing, the streets all empty, people swarming shopping centres. To those in the know it all pointed to one thing: the Rise of the Hipsters was upon us.

We heard the sound of explosions outside and then dogs barking. That's only natural: dogs always sense danger ahead of time. If things were that bad, the drums of war sounding outside the window, then there was nothing for it but to construct weapons out of the few items still left in the apartment.

We set up defenses so that we could use the apartment for shelter when the attack began. First we plastered the front door with posters that drew inspiration from the advertisements of the sexist Fifties in order to distract them, should happen to mount their assault while we were still making our weapons. One of the posters had a picture of a woman lying on the ground next to a shoe, with the tagline: Put it where it should be. The thing was somehow supposed to be an advertisement for men's shoes.

The sound of shouting from the alleys grew louder and we became increasingly nervous as we hunted through the apartment for anything to use as a weapon. Unfortunately, our expertise in this area was confined to what we'd gleaned

from vampire and zombie movies so we did our best, customising weapons to suit us in the best schlock-horror style. My friend was fortunate enough to find some McDonald's packaging in the bin, which we snipped up and stuck together to make a cardboard stake we could plunge into the hearts of marauding hipsters: at the very least it would make them suffer to see the fast-food logo. Next we had to find a workable alternative to holy water. We thought long and hard about what we could splash on the attackers when they came, then my friend found the solution: the juice drained from the tinned meat in the fridge. This would strike at the Achilles heel of our enemies, who would almost certainly be vegetarians. And so we began to decant the juice into the spray-bottles that gardeners use.

Seeing as no one had yet attacked us we had time to make a few extra modifications to the apartment so that it was properly reinforced against hipsters.

My friend hung dried pig and sheep legs from the ceiling and I started printing out and plastering up xenophobic and anti-immigration posters on every free wall. Seized by a sudden, wild enthusiasm the sayings of Donald Trump and Pegida slogans were no longer enough for us. We wanted to add our own special touch so we started creating our own hyper-extremist one-liners: "God, I love fascism!", "The Third Reich can't be rushed", "The Far Right is flowering in my heart", "The banks have their own irresistible magic".

Then for the final touch: pop music.

That done, Tula and I sat on the couch waiting for something to happen. No one attacked the apartment. We stayed like that for hours, staring into space and listening to the songs she'd selected.

"Is this NSYNC?"

"Um, yes..."

"Really, Tula?"

"Yeah. I hung on to a few of their records. Ironically, of course."

When I glanced out of the window the city still seemed utterly still and calm. The streets were empty as ever but the sound of explosions were clearly audible. At last we decided to give up. We turned out the lights and went to bed. Suddenly there was a faint rapping noise. Uncertain what to do we exchanged looks then dashed for the door. Was this how the rise of the hipsters would go down? After all, they weren't going to attack the house like a zombie hoard screaming, "Brainzzzz!" Nope: they'd have their own way of starting a fight, and knocking politely at the front door was unconventional enough and undeniably creative.

We glued our ears to the door, listening for the slightest sound. Nothing. After lengthy discussions we decided to open up. After all, it might be a neighbour wanting to discuss what needed to be done to get ready to confront the hipsters or to tell us about a hide-out on the ground floor. We opened the

door just a crack to see two women, their hair carefully arranged in traditional braids and wearing old-fashioned winter dresses with woolen stockings and antiquated leather shoes. From behind me, Tula whispered that I should be careful what I said since they looked to her like hipsters. Maybe we should play it clever at first, she said: try and persuade them we were hipsters too while we worked out their plan. It seemed a good idea and so I plucked up my courage and smoothly greeted the smiling women on my doorstep:

"Objective circumstances bless you!"

"What shit is that?" Tula whispered in my ear.

"I don't know," I replied: "I thought it worked as a hipster greeting."

The greeting had clearly confused the two women. One of them said with a smile: "Thank you, dear. The thing is, I saw we weren't on the list of people banned from entering your apartment, so we thought we might take the opportunity to come and talk to you about something that concerns us."

She said all this pointing at the front door on which Tula, in an effort to intensify her Psy-ops campaign had stuck a list alongside the provocative Fifties-style posters. The list read:

If you are an immigrant,
Muslim,

Jew,
or
black,
poor,
¹Leftist,
vegetarian/vegan
please refrain from knocking on this door.

God, Tula loved to exaggerate! Apropos of nothing the second woman blurted: "Why do you think evil exists on earth?"

I gave her a shaky smile and asked if she would excuse me for a moment, then I turned to consult Tula: "I don't like it. Do you want to bring the meat juice and the McDonald's stake from the kitchen?"

"Sure. You keep convincing them you're one of them."

I turned back to the woman, trying to come up with a clever response to her question. Having decided on the best answer I attempted to give it a romantic literary flavour:

"The victim always knows their murderer: of course I know why! Never make peace. Evil exists on earth because of global imperialism."

The women looked at one another in astonishment then the first said: "So why do you think the Lord allows evil deeds to be done when he himself is just?"

Sweat started to bead my brow as I edged backwards. Tula

wasn't in the kitchen any more: on her way to collect weapons she must have fallen under the spell of the beer bottles and abandoned me here alone in this desperate situation. What Lord is this woman talking about? I'd only been in Germany a year, and I to be honest I didn't exactly know what the hipsters meant when they said "the Lord". I tried summoning up a mental image of the posters I was always seeing in bars around Kreuzberg, then I improvised the following: "The Lord knows full well that capitalist relationships of production contain the seeds of their own destruction. He slows them down for a while, as we recover our breath and our energy, even as they on our behalf are doing the dirty work and destroying themselves by their own hands."

The two women went quiet for a bit along with a touch of dumb stupefaction, which encouraged me to expand on my theme and continue my lecture in dramatic tones: "This ancient god, perfectly wise, fully in touch with his feminine side, homosexual and transsexual, who in His wisdom appears to us in a rainbow-coloured gown... This vegetarian deity who pursues fur-wearers with buckets of red paint... This Lord, I tell you, knows that consumerist culture contains in its essence that which can destroy itself from within. This is why we call on His devoted followers to be content with having a good time in life, and spend it singing the praise of drugs and sex and music through which our very souls live. Amen!"

A perfectly timed little speech because, no sooner had I finished than Tula leapt out from behind me and threw the meat juice at the two women who backed away in alarm, shocked.

Then Tula brandished the McDonald's stake in their faces, screaming: "Go to Hell! Go to Hell, you hipsters!"

At precisely this moment, our neighbour opened his front door in order to see exactly what was happening. He was a strange young man, this neighbour of ours, with hair down to his shoulders and forever wandering about the building to check on the post or hang his washing on the communal washing line wearing nothing but his underpants with an old tattoo of an inverted cross on his arm. The lights in his apartment were always out.

Wiping the meat juice from her face one of the women said in disgust:

"What's that? We're not hipsters. We just saw those posters on your door and it encouraged us to offer you a chance to join our faith. We invite you to become one of the chosen ones: a Jehovah's Witness!"

The young neighbour shyly intervened: "To be honest, I'd love to talk to you if you'd like to."

The women stared at him for a bit then in the blink of an eye they were gone.

"Ah well, business as usual. People don't talk to me because of the way I look," said the young man when the women had vanished: "They're scared of this old tattoo I had done when I was a teenager and have no idea that in fact I'm

sensitive person who loves pop music and spends his time in prayer. All I wanted was a bit of company so I wouldn't be alone on this miserable public holiday when everything in the city stops dead."

Things began to get clearer in my mind and as they resolved themselves I started to feel dizzy: The closed shops, the people vanishing from the streets, the crowded malls... then the sounds of explosions outside: fireworks! And the barking of dogs: maddened by the explosions! As for the man I bumped into on the way he was just what he seemed: a crazy homeless man. They're always talking about the end of the world, even if public holidays make them a little more active. I turned to Tula to see if she'd understood what was going but she had left my side and attached herself to our young neighbour and was now accompanying him into his apartment, the pair of them chatting away. The last thing I heard before they closed the door behind them was a debate about which member of NSYNC was responsible for the band's break-up.

I went back in to clean up the chaos that filled the apartment. I went out onto the balcony to take down one of the anti-immigrant leaflets we'd put up there, which had a cartoon of a flying carpet carrying a Muslim family and beneath the picture the words: A safe trip home. You're nicer back where you belong. My attention was caught by the presence of a shaven-headed youth standing on the balcony opposite. He gave a thumbs-up in approval of the leaflet and flustered I answered him with a slight nod of the head. Scurrying back inside I heard him shouting, "Merry Christmas!"

Never say «Job Centre»

Neukölln was the first neighbourhood I lived in in Berlin. Truth be told it felt like home: since I had Arab and Turkish shopkeepers on all sides, and shisha cafes and Arab hair salons everywhere. This was important, particularly the hairdressers, since there is no room for the slightest mistake resulting from a mistranslation between you and the person cutting your hair. Hairdressers usually make mistakes even when they speak your mother tongue, even after you've given them a detailed explanation of how you want your hair to look. For instance, they will insist on interpreting, "I just want a couple of millimetres taken off my split ends," to mean: I want you to cut off every last strand of my filthy hair, this reminder of all my mistakes, this nest of Medusa's vipers. I want to punish myself for all the sins of my former life by mutilating my scalp."

The point is not the neighbourhood where I lived, but rather the bewilderment I'd feel whenever relatives and neighbours in Syria would ask me strange questions about my life in Germany: "Is it true that Germans are racists?" "Is it true that if you ask one of them a question in English, they'll refuse to answer even when they speak it?" "Is it true that the streets there

are cleaner than our hospitals?" "Is it true that if someone drops dead in the street in Germany, no one turns round?"

The questions astonished me, especially the ones about German racism. I had no answer to give because I genuinely had no idea where these Germans were supposed to be. I mean, I never saw much of them in my neighbourhood. I saw Arabs like myself, Turks, some Italians and Spaniards and a few Americans, but I knew precious little about Germans. I'd only ever run into them by chance, and infrequently at that, and so I had no idea if racism was common among them or not. To me, Germans remained a nebulous presence. I was once obliged to travel to the outer reaches of East Berlin, which meant I had to take a train which would deliver me to a station on the S-Bahn 7 line.

A friend offered to come with me and together we got onto Train 7. Gazing at the great quantities of blond hair clumped thickly round the carriage I felt deliriously happy. My God! These must be Germans! I've heard so much about you guys! My friend broke me out of my astonished, statue-like trance and pulled me over to our seats. I was still gaping happily at the passengers. There was an old lady sitting opposite and staring back at us, but not so happily, seemed.

I turned to my friend to discuss the steps needed to complete an application at the job centre. He gently shushed me and whispered: "Don't say its name in English because they know what it means." I looked around and saw that he was right. The looks of disgust were on the rise. I thought how it must

look to them: a pair of brown-skinned people, apparently foreigners (and even worse, immigrants), talking together in a strange, violent-sounding language, and then all of a sudden a single, comprehensible phrase, "Job Centre", springing from their lips. For the rest of the journey I kept my mouth shut.

I later learned that this issue had troubled many more people besides myself. I noticed that other immigrants I met, on public transport, municipal offices or at school, had devised coded phrases to avoid having to say the provocative words "Job Centre" out loud. Some simply compressed it to "Job", while others would say it in Arabic (adding, "Do you understand me?" just in case). Still others would use the word "group" to reference it, as in: "I went to the group," or, "the group asked me to..." However this last option, it seems, came across as considerably more suspicious than "Job Centre" itself because it hinted at some shadowy link with an extremist organisation or, at best, with drug dealers.

As it happens, it wasn't limited to concealing a phrase from ordinary citizens so as not to annoy them. When the flow of Syrians to Europe began in earnest, many didn't want it known that they were intending to apply for refugee status, or that they had obtained residency permits as refugees. This was particularly common in circles that could be considered "intellectual" in some shape or form, in which being a refugee was regarded as shameful. Oddly enough, all the Syrians I met when I first arrived said they were in Germany on work or study visas, dismissing the very idea they had applied for

refugee status while saying that, “of course”, they didn’t blame “ordinary people” and those “who had no choice” from doing so.

After we had got past the stage of concealing our refugee status, after it became common knowledge that we were all at it, we started to up the ante in other ways. It was almost like a competition: “Who is the least refugee-like?” I’ve overheard conversations in which one person boasts to another that they have a five-year residency visa, rather than a three-year one, which in their view means they are a “guest” rather than a refugee (even though there is no such official category). The boast is designed to aggravate the other person who only has a three-year visa and who is also looking to get on the scoreboard. So he might respond, for instance, by saying that he is employed (“thanks be to God”) and pays his taxes and doesn’t have to depend on the job centre for his living (“as some do”: meaning the first person), which is why he will get nationality faster than others. And so on.

There is another important competition, under the heading, “Who is most assimilated?”. This is usually won by the competitor who can claim the greatest number of German friends and the fewest Syrians, or at least is prepared to claim this is the case. His addiction to this dangerous game drove one man to almost miraculous lengths, he was able to attend parties at any time of day or night. Whenever you met him, whatever the time, he would volunteer the information that he had just got back from a party “with his German friends”. Such behaviour is only rarely associated with an inferiority complex. The fact is that there’s a worrying custom whereby those who reached Berlin earlier greet new arrivals with phrases like: “I keep

myself away from the gossip and lies and negativity you find among Syrians. I only ever run into them by accident. Most of my friends these days are German.” With a little experience I learned to be suspicious of those who harped on this particular theme, since within the course of a single day you’d find they were the most likely people to have reported the contents of your conversation to every Arabic speaker inside the German Republic and neighbouring countries.

Do you want to be like that?

It all began when I went home one evening and encountered Laura, my landlady, surrounded by a pile of papers. She asked me to come over and sit next to her so she could talk to me about a matter of importance. What was bothering was that the administration of her son's school had decided to expel the son of her friend after discovering him smoking in the bathrooms, and that would mean the child couldn't take his end of year exams. Laura, as a member of the student affairs committee, was required to discuss the issue at a meeting with the school administration and students and would be intervening on behalf of the child so he would be allowed to take his exams.

"Why don't you come along?" she said to me: "Aren't you a journalist or something like that? You must have something worthwhile to say."

Because of the connection I feel to any smoker in this thankless world, and my awareness of the injustice and rejection we smokers face each and every day (not to mention the fact that Laura was the landlady of the apartment in which I lived) I was keen on the idea and asked her to give me some time

alone in my room to think about what I'd be able to contribute. Once in my bedroom I began to draw up plans for this historic meeting, summoning up the fighting spirit of William Wallace:

"They might be able to take our lives, but they'll never take our cigarettes (or any other of the factors that contribute to a heightened risk of lung cancer)!"

It soon became clear that I was thinking about the thing all wrong: the aim was to persuade the school administration that the student deserved another chance to sit his exams, not to push the demands of smokers. Casting around for the words that would touch the hearts of the school's administrators I made a brief mental review of the speeches of Malcolm X, Harold Macmillan (the winds of change!) all the way through to George VI and Winston Churchill (before realising he probably wasn't the best rhetorical model to follow in Germany).

Following the brainstorming and blue-sky thinking I was left with a number of options:

Number one: The story of my struggle. I would stand up and tell them that I, too, had been a teen smoker and that if I hadn't been given another chance I wouldn't be the person I was today. I quickly dismissed this idea when I realised "the person I was today" wasn't the ideal role model for teens to follow, nor one that would convince the school administration: someone who'd never finished their university education, was practically unemployed and lived on state benefits.

Number two: The smoker is not your enemy. I can explain to non-smokers about the pain we smokers feel when they treat us like animals. We are human beings. Flesh-and-blood. We have feelings, sensitivities. Don't think we don't feel oppressed when we see those prejudiced signs forbidding us entering restaurants and public buildings. Again, I concluded this was not a great idea because, with my cough and hoarse voice, my yellowed teeth and lined face, I wasn't the persuasive paragon capable of making a convincing call for toleration and peace.

All I had left was the negative appeal: Do you want to be like me? Once I'd accepted the fact that I could never make any sort of speech in which I figured as some great role model for students I started to consider the polar opposite: to deliver a speech in which I warned them against ending up like me. I would tell them that the expelled student must be given another chance if he was to avoid my fate, not to mention educating the other students that smoking and similar teenage behaviours would lead them into a wretched condition like my own by the time they reach their thirties.

Once I settled on the best speech I had another brilliant idea: I could do it even better if I turned up with even more persuasive examples of failure than myself. Instantly, I knew who to call. I picked up my phone and dialed the number.

* * *

When they called my name out at the meeting and I rose to my feet to speak I was extremely nervous and had no idea how it would pan out. There was a big chance they'd throw me out along with the addict friends I'd brought along to illustrate failure, not to mention the smoking youth himself. Brain whirring, I started to consider an alternative plan in the event of that happening, so that the boy's future would not go to waste. My Plan B was to operate as a band of buskers on the Berlin metro, playing hits by Marcel Khalife, with the boy in the role of Marcel's red scarf. Or we could start a mime troupe that put on shows in the street and the boy could have the task of collecting donations from generous passers-by.

At last I plucked up courage and began to speak:

"I won't keep you long, gentlemen. To cut to the chase, let me state that by denying this boy the chance to complete his education and sit his examinations you may very well drive him to a black future. The same applies to the other students here today. I hope what you see will serve as a lesson to you and that next time you're tempted to smoke or sniff coke..."—a fierce look from Laura shut me up for a second or two—"...well, remember what you've seen and think hard: Do you really want to turn out like that?"

I gave the signal for Saeed and Saleh to come into the room. They dragged themselves inside with obvious difficulty. Saleh had forgotten to remove a syringe that was dangling from his neck. I gestured to him to pull it out but the movement of my hand irritated him and for some unknown reason his middle

finger chose to raise itself in my face provoking a wave of hysterical laughter from the students. Saeed meanwhile had realised where he was and quickly unglued the LSD tab from his ear and chucked it in the bin. Noticing a student staring at the tab with intense interest, the saliva flowing from his lips, one of the teachers immediately retrieved the tab and concealed it in a handkerchief which she stowed inside her handbag.

I asked them both to tell the students a little about their lives but they just stood there, incapable of doing anything except stare at one another. After an embarrassing silence Saleh cleared his throat:

“Aristotle, born, lived and died...”

At this precise moment Saeed was struck by a dizzy spell and sank to the floor. Saleh didn't react: he was gaping vacantly at a wall-mounted lamp.

There was a scramble in the room and people rushed to help Saeed, while I stood there convinced that my life was as good as over: the poor kid was going to be expelled because of me, there could be no doubt about it, just as Laura was definitely going to throw me out of her apartment.

The following morning I decided to preserve what little dignity I had left and quit the apartment before Laura asked me to leave. But Laura invited me to come over to discuss something with her. Over I went, readying myself to excuse my behaviour on the grounds that all great ideas seem crazy to normal

people... or otherwise, to simply state that I was a refugee: that I'd seen war and my family scattered to the winds, and so I couldn't be responsible for my actions. When she saw me she placed an envelope in my hands. Was it a court summons?

"This morning I have received approximately seven invitations from various primary and secondary schools that have heard about the talk you and your friends gave at my son's school. They want you and your workshop team to deliver similar talks to their students." Before I could respond, Laura was on her feet and speaking urgently: "There's no time to waste. Duty calls! We have to save these students from the cesspit of addiction, plus the schools are offering to pay us handsomely for our services. We've got appointments all over town this week."

* * *

So we went to sessions all over the country and the invitations starting pouring in from abroad. And thus it went until, one evening, my two partners asked to see me. They were fed up with the job, Saleh said, and the thing that was breaking them was having to roam the country performing like monkeys for the students. Then Saeed had fainted. I quite understood, of course, and drank a toast with Saleh to our last meeting as the Do You Want To Be Like Them? workshop team. The news coincided with my having to leave the room I was renting from Laura, who needed it to house her elderly mother-in-law, and this helped me get away from everything that reminded of those happy times with the team.

A few weeks later, in my new room, I was randomly flipping between channels on the television, bored and depressed now that the group, which had been my life, was finished. Idly surfing the channels my attention was caught by something that seemed familiar. I quickly returned to the station in question, unable at first to believe my eyes. A music video for a techno track appeared on the TV screen, and there were Saleh and Saeed jerking along to the beat. The video had high production values, and there were schoolchildren, too, shown shouting encouragement at the pair. I tried phoning Saleh to find out what was going on but his number was unavailable. I didn't try Saeed, of course.

Gnawing on my fingernails I turned back to the screen. We were in a studio, and a female presenter was greeting Saleh and Saeed who were apparently now well-known musicians with a recently released smash hit. "Do you want to be like them?" the presenter was saying: "Do you want to be like that? Yes, like that. Like that. These are the amazing lyrics to your new song that has won record numbers of listeners. Where did the inspiration for this song come from, and did you write the lyrics yourselves?"

I awaited the reply to this question with trepidation, as they sprawled arrogantly in the studio dressed like newly-successful rappers: huge rings on their fingers, fur coats, formal suits, garish shades. Glancing over at Saleh, Saeed answered that they had written the song themselves and no one had given them any help at all. Saleh confirmed this with a nod of his head, adding that suffering leads to creativity as a matter of

course. At which Saeed passed out, right there in the studio. This was extremely hurtful to me, but even so there was a glimmer of hope because Saleh went on to say that, "there's an amazing person we want to thank for helping us, discovering us and supporting us." I felt for them all over again and I blamed myself for thinking poorly of them. I waited to hear what they'd say about me. "We want to thank Mrs. Laura," Saleh continued, "for supporting us from the beginning. It was her who gave us the opportunity to bring our message and our art to schoolkids, and encouraged us to release this track after paying for the production costs out of her own pocket."

Saeed, who had regained consciousness during this statement, said they were especially grateful because Laura had given them a room in her home so that they could record. The room also gave them a fixed address which had become well-known among the city's drug dealers. He ended his speech with the declaration that, thanks be to God, they'd finished producing an entire album which would be released soon, now that its crown jewel, *Do You Want To Be Like That?* Had dropped to such acclaim. Fascinated, the presenter asked him if the album's content was also aimed at promoting teen awareness and he responded that of course it was. Saleh listed the titles of the album's tracks for her: *Like That Do You Want To Be?*, *To Be Like That*, *Do You Want To?* and *Like That You Want To Be, Do You?*

I made great efforts to get in touch with Saleh after this, but he had changed his number and Laura would constantly dodge me, pleading chronic illness and permanent hearing and

memory loss when I eventually went round to her apartment. I had lost hope of talking to her, especially when it got to her claiming she was possessed by the Devil, speaking Latin in a male voice and trying to climb the walls.

I decided to trail her when she left the house, and after a few days I managed to follow her to a bar where she met up with Saleh and Saeed. They toasted one another and danced on the grave of my sorrows and suffering over the stab in the back I'd received.

They were startled to find me looming over them and I turned to Laura: "What's this Laura? I see you're speaking perfectly easily. These last few days you've been pretending you couldn't speak to me in English because it's been so long since you last used it and because it brought back bad memories from the war and traumatised you. And here you are, trilling away in English with these two as though you're Franklin Roosevelt himself."

I remember saying a good deal to them, and making my anger and pain known, and that they promised to compensate me for what they'd done by making me a partner in the business. What happened next, however, was that Saleh got a restraining order forbidding me from getting within fifty metres of any member of the group.

Despite the court order, no one can resist the temptation of following the progress of the monster they have created, and I started going to their concerts—which had a huge follow-

ing—to watch from a distance. After one such gig, held in a well-known anarchist bar, I spied an exhausted youth collecting empty bottles and cans and recognized the very youth for whom we'd first held a meeting to convince the school not to expel him. He spotted me, but didn't recognize me in my new, shabby-looking state. Pointing enthusiastically at the stage he said, "How could anyone be like that?"

Visa?

As freezing January came round I had already begun the process of submitting my documents for refugee status in Germany. I hadn't the faintest idea how to go about it, plus I had a bad feeling about the whole process, perhaps because I made the mistake of reading *Maus* around this time, a graphic novel about a Holocaust survivor.

When I went to the place where you were required to hand in the documents on Turmstrasse it was the first time in two years that I'd seen large groups of Syrians gathered together. It felt wonderfully familiar, and I tried starting up conversations with everyone I met. After a while it became clear this was going to be exhausting. At first I tried answering every question put to me frankly and honestly, then I saw that there were simply tons of questions and that my answers were occasionally and unintentionally provocative.

I was one of those lucky souls who had never had to face the dangers of travelling by sea, or traversing the brutal overland route. I got here with a regular visa, something that is relatively uncommon among those applying for refugee status. It was for this reason that I was subjected to various incredulous in-

terrogations. One woman asked the entirely natural question, "When did you get here?" which I honestly answered, "About three months ago," which received the glowering response: "And why didn't you declare yourself all that time?"

"Because my visa was valid for three months," I naively said, at which a sinister silence descended. Then the woman slowly echoed: "Visa?"

She might well have been speaking in a perfectly normal tone of voice, but my guilt at having got here so comfortably led me to imagine her manner as hostile. Yet every time I heard the word "Visa" repeated it really was in a scornful tone, the way my mother spoke when she caught me smoking as a teenager: "Cigarettes?" It was always said with a kind of contempt, as though the speaker was trying to say: "And who are you to have a visa?"

There was another question: "Who's that with you?" I was accompanied on these expeditions by my dear friend who did everything he could to assist me and would come along so I wouldn't have to spend hours waiting alone. I'd answer this question honestly, too—"My friend!"—and watch my questioner's lips purse in disapproval: if he wasn't my fiance or my husband, what was he doing with me?

The final question I faced was also the most irritating: it was the question about where I came from in Syria. For those not intimately acquainted with the socio-geographical map of Syria, this is a complicated business. I had lived in Damascus

my entire life, but even though my great-grandparents on both sides had lived in Damascus, too, I couldn't simply claim I was Damascene myself. This was something true Damascenes, whose families had lived in the city for generations, would never concede so easily. Anyway, the last thing I wanted was to look like I was trying to be provocative on that account. Damascus really was the only home I'd ever known, but my family name made it perfectly clear we weren't originally from the city. This might make it seem as though I was lying or pretending to be Damascene, an accusation I was not prepared to face despite my love for the city.

Now we come to the heart of the problem: Where were my family from then? Why didn't I just tell anyone who asked me the truth? There was a problem here: many of the inhabitants of the place from which my family was join the State Intelligence, an organisation that is the reason most Syrians in Germany have fled the country and become refugees. It's hard to explain all these things in a few seconds. It's not like talking about your personal affiliations or post-capitalist ethics, or saying that my family's origins don't concern me in the slightest and that I've come here for the same reasons as other people and that I stand with them. Which is why, when asked, "Where are you from?" I mutter inaudibly and try and dodge the question with bad jokes and nervous laughter: "From this wide world of ours!" I might try and turn the question on its head—"Where does it look like I'm from? Have a guess..."—then I simply select one of the guesses as my answer.

Subsequently I would start to devise pre-prepared scenarios to respond to these questions. For instance: I set out the day

before yesterday, took the land route through Macedonian and Bulgaria, stopped over with relatives in Austria this morning then came here to declare myself and begin the refugee status process. On another occasion I might say that I came by sea from Libya and landed in Italy then rode here in one of the masked smugglers' vehicles via Berlin. This guy with me is my cousin, the son of my maternal aunt whom I'm staying with at the moment while my application is processed and I get residency. Or he's my husband who is rough with me and beats me. I'm frequently from a small family in the Damascus countryside, often from a family that comes from Iraq, and I've been known to have Turkish roots.

All was well until the time came to register me in a refugee camp. They gave the address where I was required to register and live temporarily until they would send me elsewhere. My friend and I had no idea where this camp was, so we asked a young man who turned out to be staying there at the moment, and he volunteered to take us.

On the way, the questions resurfaced, but they were directed at my friend: only naturally, of course, because he was the man and therefore had the job of answering on my behalf. "Is she your fiancée?" "Where are you from?" "How long have you been here?" My friend answered that I was indeed his fiancée and our guide almost levitated with joy when he learned that my friend was from one of the first Syrian cities to have held demonstrations against the regime. When he discovered that we were opposed to the regime his manner became friendlier. Keen to make a gesture of goodwill he turned to my friend—my supposed fiancée—and said: "Don't worry about the lady,

we'll look after her. I'll speak to the camp director and make sure she gets put with Syrians, not with women who've come from God knows where." He meant well, it's true, but I had already started to revisit the interrogation I'd received from Syrian women, so I stepped ahead of the two young men and entered the temporary camp on my own.

I rushed over to the camp official and handed him my papers, looking anxiously over my shoulder. Then, carrying clean bedding, a female official led me to a room full of bunk beds. Inside, a young woman was asleep. It seemed to me that she'd been sleeping there for eons, from sheer boredom at waiting to be processed. When I came in she woke up and turned to look at me. Quickly, I asked: "Do you speak Arabic? English? Did you get a visa?" Yawning, she drawled: "Eenglish leetle leetle..." "Excellent," I said: "That's perfect."

Solar drugs

When I decided to leave Damascus for Beirut I remember that my mother, who initially refused to countenance my departure, had at last surrendered to my decision, but she continued trailing me around the house asking me, if I left the country, to behave myself as I was raised and complete my degree. Anyone listening in would have assumed that all I was after was to develop a drug habit and have random sex with every man I passed on the street, then would end up as a prostitute, forced to sell myself for the drugs I bought. Well, I really did want freedom but without the drugs and sexual-services-in-exchange-for-cash. Not because I have any problem with people who do that, but because I'm not cut out for such a tough life. My mother should have known that best of anyone since she'd lived with me for years. I'm much like a retired vampire: a nervous system on the brink and a dodgy stomach. The smallest sliver of sunlight damages my skin and brings me out in spots. For this reason I prefer to avoid exposure to the sun and only rarely go outside the house. The smallest sound makes me nervous and I feel nauseous at the drop of a hat.

When I went to live in Beirut, as I was dashing about trying to find furniture and other items for the studio apartment I

was renting at rock bottom prices, chewing my fingernails as I drew up daily budgets to ensure I had enough money to make it to the end of the month, I was quite certain that in the minds of my neighbours in Damascus (who would ask my mother about me with the greatest curiosity) I was spending my time on the yachts of wealthy men, lying on the pool table while someone snorted cocaine out of my belly button.

Once in Europe, I noticed that people had a strange conception of the place. For instance, on Facebook pages for new arrivals, you would find people asking things like: "Is it true that Europeans force their children to fuck at school as part of their sexual education?"

I didn't make much of these things at first because I was busy with the deluge of official procedures I was required to follow, but when the summer break rolled around it became hard to ignore a strange phenomenon taking place in the city. During the summer months here, strange mass stampedes would take place. People would rush to strip off their clothes and dash en masse to parks and similar places.

I started going along with them carrying my notebook to record what I saw in an attempt to understand what was going on. I shouldn't expose myself to the sun, of course, but no big deal: scholarship requires sacrifice. I observed that they were all full of energy as they pushed through the crowds in the metro stations and streets to reach the parks and open spaces. I summarized the traits of those participating in the phenomenon as follows:

- Excessive energy
- Involuntary movement
- Lack of focus
- Extreme joy
- Detachment from reality
- Tendency towards tolerance, love of all, and non-violence
- A desire to listen to music

There's more than one kind of drug that can give rise to these symptoms. I intensified my online research and noted down the effects of every drug that was a potential cause of this strange phenomenon and cross-referenced them with my own observations. But to no avail. I was unable to pinpoint a specific cause. I had almost lost hope when I noticed something important: The symptoms tailed off towards the end of summer then disappeared completely as winter set in and people returned to their normal depressed state. In my notebook I jotted down my conclusions:

"A suspected yearly religious ritual connected with the consumption of narcotics and practiced only during the summer months, whereby worshippers draw closer to their gods by divesting themselves of their garments, thereby communicating with the divine more directly and without impediment, while ingesting drugs (of a type as yet unidentified at time of writing) until they are capable of reaching the elevated spiritual dimensions that these gods inhabit."

I was writing up my results and editing them in preparation

for publishing them at some research centre or other, when there was a sudden and radical change in the course of my research which forced me to review everything that had taken place to date.

I was with a friend who had come round to see me in my apartment, and we were sitting in the kitchen talking and drinking coffee. My friend was a little on edge as she had recently split from her boyfriend. She excused herself and went to the bathroom, and when she came out she seemed somehow changed. Her expression was unfocused, her movements were jerky and she was smiling for no reason and staring into the distance. Her hands trembled as she tried to lift the cup of coffee to her lips. I asked her if she was alright and she simply nodded her head and gave a nervous smile. Suddenly the cup fell from her hand and pieces of glass scattered across the floor. As I bent to pick them up she took her chance and, snatching my bag from the table, sprinted out of the apartment.

Aside from my concern for her wellbeing, something else was bothering me: this was the only time I'd seen anyone exhibit the symptoms of summer hysteria in the depths of winter. Faced with these new developments I needed to gather and reorder my thoughts, but I started to feel dizzy and I had to take my daily handful of supplements. One of the packets was missing even though I'd put it on the table just before my friend had arrived, but I'd forgotten to take it once we'd started talking. I was sure the packet was there but I couldn't find any trace of it. Confused, I kept searching for a few minutes before a crazy idea suddenly hit me: it might explain everything. The

revelation was almost more than I could bear and I despite the freezing cold outside I opened the window to gulp fresh air. The sun's rays, weakly filtering through the clouds, held all the answers. The missing packet was a box of Vitamin D supplements, which I'd had to take for many years to compensate for lack of sunshine. Something about that packet had tempted my friend and pushed her to try a tablet, and then she had been struck with the symptoms of the summer hysteria. That meant the symptoms afflicting those people over the summer resulted from their direct exposure to sunlight after a long absence causing their Vitamin D levels to spike and producing effects similar to those caused by taking drugs.

I went to my friend's place to talk to her. I was concerned she might be abusing Vitamin D or overdosing. There she stood in her doorway, looking ragged. She'd lost a lot of weight and had dark blue bags beneath her eyes. She was smoking voraciously. Worried, I watched her closely. She puffed out smoke and said: "There's no hope for me any more." Then she gave me a long, mournful look and added: "I'm seriously considering ending it all: getting shot of this miserable life."

I ushered her inside and began to scold her:

"I don't want to hear that from you ever again. And how have you let yourself get into such a state. You're a well-educated university student."

"At first I assumed I could stop myself whenever I wanted and that taking a few pills couldn't hurt me. But it was a slip-

pery slope: you take the first step and you don't stop till you hit the bottom. Just a few tablets stopped me thinking about the break-up with my boyfriend and it ended up with me getting fired and heavily into debt."

"All that in two weeks? Where's your furniture gone? I see your young son's got nothing to sit on except your overcoat. And why does he look so stupefied? Please tell me you haven't been taking the tablets in front of your boy?"

"I was forced to sell the furniture because my pill habit left me drowning in debt. I don't think the little one has been using from my stash because I've barely got enough for my habit, but I suspect that one of the Vitamin D dealers has been targeting the schools and selling them to the kids when they go home."

"We can't keep quiet about that! Have things sunk to level of selling pills to kids?"

"Unfortunately it's bigger than both of us. The dealers are connected to international Vitamin D cartels who smuggle the pills from the fields where they're grown in Columbia to be distributed by their networks all over the globe."

"You discovered the sun-like narcotic effect of Vitamin D supplements only a fortnight ago at my apartment! How could the news have spread so quickly that they're now harvesting the vitamin in Columbia to meet a worldwide demand?"

"To be honest, I don't know. I don't remember... though maybe...

Look, I tweeted these lines of poetry, highly symbolic but they could have been taken as praise for the amazing effect of these pills."

"Really? What did you write?"

"It went: 'Get addicted to Vitamin D / It's even better than Ecstasy'"

"A scarcely perceptible reference. Incredibly artful. Is that all?"

Well, to be honest: no. After I left your apartment I went to a techno party with a few friends. I handed out the pills I'd taken from you after explaining what they did. We'd never felt so happy as we felt that night. It appears that news got around the next day and the pills became the latest club fashion. They call them "Solar Orgasm". Pharmacies ran out of stock and the dealers started selling whatever they could get at the highest prices they could charge. The city council started counselling sessions to help the addicts. The national football team joined the campaign to educate teenagers about the dangers, wearing T-shirts bearing the slogan: Say NO to Vitamin D.

I later convinced her to join a government-run addiction treatment programme that offered addicts exposure to a sunlamp, an hour a day for the first month of treatment, then the dose gradually dropping until the Vitamin D was entirely gone from their system and the addict was clean. After the treatment the addict might be offered a job or given a grant to return to university. It made me so happy to see her back with

her boy, her health improving and putting on weight, not to mention the wonderful bronze tan she acquired from regular exposure to the sunlamp. But this happiness would soon vanish whenever I saw a dealer flashing his stock of vitamin D down some darkened alley. As she'd said: it was bigger than us both.

Language learning in the school of life

When someone's application for refugee status in Germany is accepted, they are required to learn the German language to a certain standard and they are sent to a job centre until that standard is reached. As for myself, I didn't need to be forced: I wanted to learn German. It goes without saying that I want to communicate with people in the place where I live, just as I want, at least, to be able to take care of business myself, without needing the assistance of an expensive translator or begging reluctant friends to volunteer their services.

Fine, then. It may well be the case that I never dreamed of learning German before, given the unpleasant experience I'd had with the language. In Damascus, a veritable paradise where copyright on anything simply did not exist, you could get your hands on any disc for the paltry sum of fifty Syrian lira, which is why I was in the habit of buying all the language DVDs I could get my hands on. But I'd only watch the first lesson. After that I'd get bored, or the disc would be lost to the creative chaos of my bedroom. In this way I acquired a strange foreign vocabulary, comprising the words from the first les-

sons on each DVD. In Italian, where the first lesson was about food and drink, I knew the names for pickles and beans and a few fruits, though I couldn't place them in a single sentence. The first Spanish lesson was titled, "In the hotel". The Spanish disc was a touch peculiar since the character teaching you the language was a dog wearing a sombrero and the first lesson taught the student how to book a single hotel room, for a single night (without a bathroom because "you are able to go out and use the tap in the street"). I got absolutely nothing from this, not even the chance to use the line as a jokey way of starting a conversation with Spanish speakers, since there was nothing funny about it. In Hebrew, for some obscure reason, I started memorising sections of the Torah spoken in Hebrew with a pronounced American accent. From the French disc I learned a few questions. When it came to the German I tried hard to get through the first lesson but the only thing that stuck was a solitary and simple piece of vocabulary: Kuchen, meaning cake. I never dreamed that one day this would be the language I would have to learn; that years from now I would end up in Germany regretting I'd never paid sufficient attention to German.

When I was required to start studying German officially at a government school I balked at the thought of learning a language in such a traditional manner. I'd always been convinced that schools couldn't teach languages. On my next trip to the job centre, when the employee who worked as an advisor asked me which school I'd chosen to study at, requesting that I enroll, I handed him a large envelope. He opened it to find

a small piece of paper on which was scrawled: "The school of life". He turned it over and seemed confused.

"Very inspiring, madam, but if I might ask you the same question I put to you last time... Some of those who have managed to escape war zones can suffer from psychological difficulties, and if you have the slightest suspicion that you might have a problem of this nature then we are absolutely ready to help you. Do you require psychological support?"

(Tensely) "No, thank you, I'm perfectly all right"

"You're quite sure you don't have any psychological condition that might make you a danger to yourself or others?"

"Of course not, I'm fine." (Stabbing the teddy-bear in my lap and pulling out the stuffing).

I reemerged from the job centre, told to leave by the employee who, unconvinced by my idea that I should study German at the school of life, renewed his demand that I return next time having enrolled at one of the schools on the list of those that took foreign students.

Fuck the system! I decided to learn German by the time I was due back and astonish him with proof that my approach was right all along. To give myself a boost I started watching YouTube videos of a young Irishman called Jimmy who claimed to speak nine languages fluently and said that his secret

was to immerse himself in the process and talk to people. In other words, he “threw himself into” the environment whose language he wished to speak.

I liked the idea and decided to go out right away and throw myself into the language. I boarded a bus and tried to recall exactly what it was my friend said to the driver when he bought us tickets. I stood there like an idiot for a moment or two, staring at the driver while I tried to think, then without warning the phrase flashed through my mind, and in a voice so loud it alarmed him, I declared: “Zweimal zwei Zonen, bitte...”

The driver peered past me to see if anyone else was with me, then seemed to be asking me something. I didn’t understand the question and doggedly repeated the phrase I knew: “Zweimal zwei Zonen, bitte...”

He handed me two tickets instead of one and I had no idea how to correct the misunderstanding. Then I thought that maybe this was how it worked: you took two tickets, one for the outward journey and one for the return. I noticed that the other passengers were staring at me quizzically but I paid no attention, taking out the teddybear I liked to keep in my bag and whose stuffing was sticking out thanks to my idle stabbing. I sat it on the seat beside me and began rehearsing a conversation, using a few basic German sentences. The ticket collector climbed aboard and when he got to my seat, the driver, squinting suspiciously behind the wheel, said something to him and he walked straight past me.

I tried a few lines at the cafe but it really wasn't going very well. I was in the habit of saying, "Good day! I would like a cup of coffee if you please!" but the waiters would never confine themselves to saying "we have coffee" or "we don't have coffee", which were the two responses I understood. They always had to unload these extra long responses which I found completely impenetrable, asking if I wanted to modify my order at all or whether I might like something else with the coffee—like all the sweets and cakes they had behind the counter.

Engaging with people didn't go well, so I gave myself a narrower target. I joined a language exchange website. They would want to learn Arabic and in exchange for teaching them they would instruct in German. All I got from the website was friendship requests from young Arab men or creepy letters of the "I'll teach you German if you come round to my place" type. But of course, strange-man-I-know-nothing-about-except-your-name-on-the-site-is-Mr.-Punisher-69! Of course! Why wouldn't I want to come round to your house? Who wouldn't want to find themselves the next morning diced up and distributed around the city in black binliners?

I almost despaired, but then I glanced at my wardrobe on which I'd pinned a picture of Jimmy, the genius linguist, for inspiration. It occurred to me that going outside and talking to people required a foundation period inside. I tried watching children's programmes in German, like *The Smurfs*. It wasn't very successful since I became so focused on following what was going on that I paid no attention to the words. I tried language websites. I watched a silly soap opera to see

I might pick something up. Listened to old German songs. Tried changing the language settings on the computer games I played. It was all in vain and I got no further than a smattering of phrases: "please", "goodbye", "how much does it cost?", "ninety-nine balloons", "a happy day".

I gave up and went out. I asked the Lord to send me a sign to show me how to learn German in revolutionary way. I wandered around for ages and no sign of the sign. Then, suddenly, I spied a familiar face. I drew nearer to make sure. Could it be? A young man, like a tourist, asking passers-by for directions in broken German:

"Sir... oh! Herr! Hallo Kennen sie wo is... I mean, ist... hubbanhof? Wie gehe ich nach sie..."

Good Lord! His German was almost worse than mine. I went up to him to check. It was him! Scowling, my face dripping poison, I accosted him. He looked like he was about to ask me the way, but I got there first:

"Aren't you Jimmy? Jimmy the language wizard?"

He looked at me for a few seconds then took off. I caught up with him a few streets later. He tried to get away by scaling some of the steel fences and a couple of buildings but I kept after him till I cornered him by a canal and got a good grip on his collar.

"In one of the videos you uploaded you were speaking German better than Nietzsche, Jimmy, isn't that right? Isn't that right, Jimmy?"

"Sure, sure. I really do speak it fluently. I honestly don't know why you're asking. It's just I like to carry out a few experiments in the field, as it were, to test out people's reactions, and I pretend I don't speak any at all."

"All right then my little linguistic songbird, enlighten me. Say, "Gargamel's destroyed our wheat stores, Papa Smurf!"

"Gargamel bread dead Papa Smurf."

I let go of his collar and when he'd got his breath back he began to confess:

"Did you really believe that anyone could speak nine languages fluently, including German? I was unemployed for a long time. I'd wait till the best-before dates had lapsed so I could buy supermarket sandwiches cheap. Then I got the idea to upload videos onto Youtube. I tried a lot of different ideas without success. I set up a channel called The Wrong Food which exclusively showed videos of animals eating things they shouldn't, like goats munching newspapers, or cats eating spaghetti, or dogs eating..."

"Got it, got it, there's no need to go on. I've seen lots of dogs eating that before..."

“Unfortunately the channel didn’t manage to attract any viewers.”

“Most peculiar.”

“I tried lots of things, until I remembered the one talent I had. I knew a sentence or two from every language.”

“I know the feeling!”

“This is where I got the idea of making videos teaching people a revolutionary new way to learn languages, in which I’d pretend to have absolute mastery of nine languages. The videos got lots of views and I got paid every time someone watched.”

“So you mean the famous Japanese video...?”

“Not a word. Nada. I can only count up to eight. The video went viral because of the Hentai clip I selected to go with it.”

“It was really beautiful. So, you don’t really think we’re able to learn languages ourselves just by speaking to people on the street?”

“Absolutely not. It’s impossible.”

“That’s what I’d always assumed. Go in peace, Jimmy. What you have given me is more than enough.”

"Thanks, but could you tell me how to get to the main train station?"

"Go in peace, Jimmy, and you'd better go before I show you the way to the train station in Hades."

Jimmy vanished into the crowd, and I stood there wondering what to do. Then I went home and wrote a letter which I posted the very next day to the employee at the job centre:

"Dear Mr. Schneider,

We would like to inform you that we went to the school of life but found it empty. Please accept my enrollment in any school you care to choose.

With thanks.

P.S. I would like to know more about the psychological support programme, which may be of benefit to me."

How computer games helped me cope with German bureaucracy

When I was small my parents were deeply concerned by my addiction to computer games. Honestly, I had no idea how to make them happy since they didn't like anything I did. For example, before computer games came into our lives, when I was about seven years old, they would go on at me about the benefits of reading and its importance in gaining knowledge. I became genuinely enthused and went to stand by the huge bookshelf we had at home, staring at the shapes and colours of the books until one of them caught my attention: a shiny red cover. I pulled out the book and went to bed to read for a bit before going to sleep. I wasn't old enough to know about sex but I sensed there was something strange about this book with its ribald stories of Caliphs and slave girls. In any case, what I took from this little reading session was a comprehensive knowledge of classical terms for all the intimate organs of the human body, male and female, and the most renowned verses written to celebrate them, as well as learning that the price of a girl went up if she had perfected the art of uttering sounds during sex. I learned about contemporary standards of beauty (as laid down by the poets: though their descriptions

seemed a little indelicate and strange at times) and became acquainted with our ancestors peculiar sense of playfulness when it came to sexual matters, with a typical joke on the subject something along the lines of the following: The Caliph saw a slave girl in the market and was entranced. "Are you a virgin, or what?" he asked her. "I'm a what, O Commander of the Faithful," she replied.

This study session sent me to sleep and I woke next morning to the sound of my mother shrieking, having found me slumbering with the book between my hands. The book, it seems was *The Bridegroom's Treasure and the Soul's Pleasure*. I did not give up my attempts to extract learning and knowledge from the written word. My next selection was *1001 Nights* with its beautiful bright blue cover, and I set about devouring the stories until it, too, was snatched from my hand. The turning point, the end of my adventures, came when I got my hands on an Arab cultural magazine that contained an article on a court case brought by the family of some child against Michael Jackson, though the nature of the complaint seemed obscure. Without a moment's hesitation, hungry for knowledge, I carried the magazine out of the living room and went to find my mother who was washing dishes in the kitchen. I asked her to explain the phrase, "He sexually molested me." When my father returned from work that evening he told me to come and talk to him about something important. Gently, he explained that I must stop reading anything other than my schoolbooks, and that they were more than enough for me. I asked him the reason and he thought a little then said it was because he wasn't convinced that the language in these books

was grammatically sound: that I had to lay the foundations of good grammar in school before exposing myself to “unsound language”. I consented and naturally my desire to steal books from the bookshelf grew stronger.

When computer games entered our home, my parents had no problem with letting my brother and I play them, first and foremost because the first ever game we had on our machine, Prince of Persia, wasn't fun enough that we'd spend too much time playing it (which led my father to believe that we were not genetically predisposed to be addicted to computer games: an assumption later shown to be a grave error), and secondly because they set up a password for the computer for the purpose of limiting the number of hours we could play. Both of these comforts soon fell away, as we discovered the password on our first attempt: my younger brother's name. I'm the middle child, by the way. My parents would never use my name of course, not even as a password for a computer. When floppy disks began to die out and the Windows operating system became widely used, replacing the complicated DOS protocols we'd been forced to run our games through before, we embraced the flood of new games with passionate enthusiasm, and our parents were unable to do a thing about it. They resigned themselves to reality, hoping that at least we would pick up a decent standard of English from these games. This wishful complacency quickly vanished, to be replaced by concern, especially after the time my younger brother called my father to come and witness his skill at removing a young woman's shirt in Leisure Suit Larry 6. Truth be told, my family weren't far wrong in their assumptions. The games taught

us good English, but they also taught us values. For example, Doom taught us that success is impossible without access to the passwords that help you cheat the game itself, and even then it might lie out of reach. The King's Quest series taught me to be wary of anything that seems beautiful or beneficial, while Prince of Persia taught me to cope with frustration and to leave my problems for sheer luck to solve. As for Leisure Suit Larry, it taught us... well, it taught us some valuable things, of that there can be no doubt. Ok, we didn't learn a thing from Leisure Suit Larry, but it was fun!

I subsequently discovered that my youthful attachment to these games had immunized me against the trials of real life, and granted me the ability to transform these difficulties into adventures. The first time I visited New York I had an agreement with a Chinese acupuncturist that for a nominal sum he'd let me sleep in his clinic after he closed up. When I arrived in the city my phone wasn't working and my laptop battery was empty and because my plugs were the wrong kind I couldn't charge it anywhere. Furthermore, the piece of paper on which I'd written down the acupuncturist's address had disappeared. And when I called the man from the phone of a young woman I met in the street he hung up, which made me suspect I was the victim of a scam, since I'd already transferred the money to his account. Finally reaching the address after a series of adventures it was became clear that the man was perfectly honest and had been waiting for me. He had hung up because he didn't speak English. I realised that I hadn't felt one iota of panic, the reason being that I'd treated

the whole thing as though I were playing a computer game called New York with the difficulty level set to moderate.

During the course of my first experience with German bureaucracy this ability to retreat into a game-like unreality helped me stave off despair. The documents I had to submit at each stage of the refugee process I treated as the tasks I had to complete before I could finish the level.

Sometimes it seemed like one of those role-playing games, where the player must find the ingenious solution to each puzzle by talking with a variety of in-game characters and looking for objects that might assist them. I needed all my experience, especially at those points when the way forward seemed completely impassable. For instance, when obtaining document A required you to submit document B but in order to have document B you needed to already possess document A. What made it seem as though the game was always on a medium-difficulty setting in Germany was the fact I couldn't really speak German. In all games there are helpful items that you must guess or discover on your own accord if you're to progress, like the boxes containing mushrooms and fire-flowers in the Mario games (which make you grow, or give you the power to throw fireballs), or the computers which you find scattered about the house in the early stages of Resident Evil, which allow you to save your progress so you don't have to go back to the beginning when you die. In the case of German bureaucracy, the helpful items included German friends who volunteered their free time to accompany people like me to German government buildings and translate for them, as well as hunting down any officials who spoke English. Finding one

of these officials gave you the same feeling of joy as you get when you come across a bazooka in Doom. But the happiest feeling of all was finding officials who, although they couldn't speak English, were good natured enough to try and communicate with you using sign language.

But we're still talking about the early levels of the game here. The toughest stage, what they call the Boss Level, was the process of enrolling at a job centre when I was looking for work. I was forced to go there several times accompanied by a German friend, and each time we would come away having failed to submit all the required documents, or else they would have suddenly remembered a new piece of paper that we had to bring. I set about filling in all the papers, eager to finish the level. This time I didn't use one of my friends to help me, but instead enrolled the assistance of a professional translator who spent his days traipsing between the various departments of the job centre and knew everything there was to know about the laws and documents involved. From the very first, the translator seemed to be extremely experienced, a born leader. He took my file full of documents and started re-ordering them. Then the game began. He spoke to the woman behind the desk. He even answered questions directed at me, without once involving me. In mere minutes it was over and we were out of the office. I couldn't believe it. The translator's name was Saleh. Thank you Saleh! You're more important than any password for any computer game.

Communication leads to loneliness

Globalisation has laid many a trap for people trying to communicate with others. In the past, when topics to break the ice with strangers were confined to the weather or commentary on world affairs or home remedies for burns and the common cold, people were more adept at getting along. The reason might be that conversations like that don't give you the chance to swerve off course into a danger zone where you might inadvertently insult some third party, or reveal to your interlocutor the true extent of your worthlessness and awful sense of humour. Nor was it so common to be in contact with people from other cultures and so you weren't required to show that you knew things (i.e. clichéd trivia) about other countries.

You can do worse, of course: you can try and add a lighthearted touch to the whole disastrous enterprise. You are already resting your hopes on a nerve-wracking social engagement, plus you have no concept of what constitutes funny or cute in the culture you're addressing. For example, I once tried holding a conversation with a South Korean classmate at my language school. "Know what?" I said: "It's a good thing Kim Jong Un

isn't as fond of the cinema as his father or you lot would be abducted in droves!" I wanted, you see, to show how funny and clued in I was by referencing the older Kim Jong's abduction of a director and actress from South Korea, due to his passion for cinema.

I'm not sure how my classmate effected his disappearance. Was it some sort of ninja technique? Teleportation. In a fraction of a second he was gone leaving me in a state of profound embarrassment facing the astonished stares of other people in the room.

By the way I'm pleased that we're discussing this subject because I'd like to say something serious to those people who always say, "Please don't kill one another," whenever they find themselves at some gathering where Arabs and Israelis are both present. Please don't keep repeating that little witticism: it's long past its sell-by date and its only effect is to make the occasion tense and uncomfortable.

Now, if we talk about this subject with reference to Germany there's of course a lot that could be said. Many of you may be familiar with the strange phenomenon that happens whenever Arabs and Germans try to communicate with one another for the first time. To be more exact, what is it that an Arab can talk about when he sees a German? This is a somewhat outdated point, of course, before Germany became home to many Arabs and before Arabs got to know the country better.

Seeing as this is a somewhat tender subject let us prepare the ground a little first. First, shall we say, a large proportion of Arabs who have not followed events in Germany since the Second World War have a somewhat erroneous conception of how to make Germans feel comfortable and at ease. Is it clear what we're talking about...? That's right, it's to do with that man whose name we don't like to mention. You know: the man with the funny little moustache and the uncomfortable relationship with the arts. No, not Salvador Dali. Many would find it hard to believe, but not long ago it was well within the bounds of possibility that an Arab citizen could greet a German tourist thusly: "Germany? Good, good! Hitler so good! Nice man!" The explanation for this attitude is not that Hitler and the courteous Arab have, shall we say, a common enemy, or indeed anything in common. It's simply that the host is mentioning the first famous German figure to pop into his head, and he treats Hitler's relationship with Germany much like the association between the Giza Pyramids and Egypt, or the Great Wall and China. He thinks he's building bridges between himself and his German guest. You must imagine the astonishment the tourist feels in such circumstances, unable to tell is this is a joke, or a plain statement of fact, or a threat, or some kind of modern art performance.

That this particular practice is dying out does not mean we aren't doing other, terrible, things in Germany in our attempt to reach out to Germans. The comedy that is the clash of civilizations doesn't help at all.

I remember a work meeting here. The suggestion was to have supper together and brainstorm for a new project. The German participant proposed that everyone bring a traditional dish and music from their home country. By way of explanation, she told me I should bring Syrian food and a recording of Syrian music, and she would bring something German. This was where I made the mistake for which I would later pay a high price: making a joke to lighten the mood and create a more comfortable atmosphere during our work meetings. "I get it," I said: "I'll bring Syrian music and you bring the Rammstein."

Ok. Let's just say she didn't think too highly of this pleasantry. She seemed a touch angry and in a sharp and somewhat judgmental tone, said: "German music is not Rammstein," before walking out in a temper. All that remains for me to say is that I didn't see or hear from her again and I've no idea what happened to the project. In any case, I hope it all went well.

Proposals for developing integration courses and German language curricula

Naturally, my life became a lot easier once I started attending the language and assimilation school as I was able to speak a few simple sentences in German. Even so, I might have been the reason for the rise in incidences of terminal illness among the employees of local coffee shops due to my remorseless exploitation of them for language practice and my insistence on addressing them in broken German, especially the change-counting, which I adored: keeping them waiting while I slowly counted out the coins in German. That said, I have some excellent proposals concerning the curricula at these institutions, for the ultimate benefit of all immigrants.

For instance: include a class on interacting with drug dealers. In Berlin in particular there is growing need for lessons on the subject. The first time I was ever offered drugs on the street was in Germany and the fact is that the first few times it happened I had no clue what to do. Should I run away? Or was there some special code I was supposed to use? I reckoned the

second of the two. Honestly, the directness of the approach made it less appealing. If he'd been less direct it would have been more tempting. Something like: "We've got the sweet green". But that's another subject, something we might expand on a chapter called "Proposals for developing a marketing plan for drug dealers". Let's not get off the point, which is the curriculum. I was saying that including phrases in the textbooks such as "No thanks," "I don't want drugs," or, "Give me five grams, please" etc. is a matter of the greatest urgency.

And with greatest respect for the current ordering of the lessons in the textbooks there are a couple of matters which kept the recently arrived refugee up at night: visiting government departments and renting accommodation. For this reason it would seem preferable to begin courses with extended training programs on these two subjects, in which the student can practice holding conversations at the municipality and job centre, as well as meetings with landlords.

Although the textbooks contain some lovely stories, like the tale of Jan and Sara who love each other through thick and thin, and so on, the fact is that they are not that appealing to the likes of us, who are used to stories that pack a greater dramatic punch. We yearn for real thrills. It would be a good idea to include a few tales about the wiles of mothers-in-law and wars with sisters-in-law. Why, for instance, don't we learn about the different stages in the development of the language through the story of Mrs. Schneider, whose son Uwe marries the young Sabine, a young troublemaker and comes to live with them in the Schneider family home and tries to

get between the son and his mother? Resorting to witchcraft she makes charms to harm Mrs. Schneider and secretes them about the house, but Mrs. Schneider, with her natural cunning and long experience, manages to discover the charms hidden in the houseplants and thwarts Sabine's plans. Next, the old woman makes some strategic moves of her own, forming an alliance with Uwe's old lover, a Turkish girl named Burcu, to entice him back to her. It is also important to include an element of danger in these love stories. At risk of being murdered by the girl's father the lovers are forced to meet in secret, under cover of darkness, and so on. Alternatively, there are those stories that see a poor girl fall for a rich young man whose family refuses to let them marry, only for it to emerge that she is in fact related to a rich family and is set to inherit a huge fortune.

It's also nice to find a variety of stories that make the student feel at home. Like, the story of Ahmed, who's lived in Germany for thirty years without a residence visa and works in a foundry. A story like that, brimming with life, teaches us how to construct questions, such as the scene where the investigator interrogates Ahmed who has been avoiding paying taxes and working on the black market.

Then there's the tale of Jumana, invited along with her family to a wedding which her mother turns into a military operation to find a groom from among the sons of the other women at the event. In this lesson we would learn how to ask these sons what they do for a living, then how Jumana was introduced to them, and see her domestic skills, good morals and manners

praised. That would be a genuinely important addition to the "Family" chapter that you find in every language textbook, where you learn the terms for different relatives.

There needs to be an extra section on goodbyes, especially those three-hour-long partings on the doorstep. I myself have become aware of a most serious issue, one that does not respect our cultural beliefs and has the potential to bring about complete social disintegration: the farewells we are taught are frighteningly brief. "Auf Wiedersehen". Is that it? Dynastic wars have been started, long-standing engagements have fallen apart, for less. It is absolutely imperative that an entire chapter be dedicated to teaching an extended farewell conversation on the doorstep.

How I failed in my attempt to create a German superhero

What do we learn from the fact that there's been no German superhero to date? I mean a superhero like all the rest, like Superman and that lot: someone who wears their Y-fronts over their trousers and zooms about fighting evil. This task should be put off no longer and I have volunteered to do it myself. They told me pityingly to go off and try writing this hero's first adventure but I should be ready for frustration since "our way of life here" might hamper the pace of the plot a little.

What's that supposed to mean, anyway? Superheroes only have one way of life, and that's saving the innocent. Nothing should stand in their way. Coming up with a character didn't prove difficult. In no time I finished my first sketch of the hero with his big square chin. I called him Jan, which was the first German name I learned. Now I was ready for mission number one.

On the other side of the street a gang snatch a woman's handbag. Jan stays stubbornly where he is, absolutely refusing to

move towards the scene of the crime. He just looks at me with an expression of disgust on his face and nods at the signal on the pedestrian crossing. It's red. Is he really going to wait for the light to change?

The gang have managed to wrest the woman's bag off her. One of them pulls out her lipstick, daubs his lips red then puts on a pair of her earrings and takes a selfie as the woman weeps, sprawled on the pavement. Jan says nothing to this, keeping his hands clasped firmly together and refusing to make the slightest comment until the light turns green. But the gang have gone. There's not much to do, but Jan still helps the woman to her feet and escorts her to the police station.

"No one starts out great".

When Jan returns crestfallen from his failed adventure I tried writing this phrase in one of the speech bubbles to boost his confidence but he blew the bubble away. The solution had to be a successful mission, proving to him that he'd been created with the role in mind and encouraging him. I quickly drew a square frame in which I sketched the lobby of a bank and added a masked robber threatening the staff with a gun. This time, luckily enough, there were no pedestrian crossings to stand in Jan's way. There was only a pedestrianized alleyway in front of him: nothing to prevent him whizzing hawk-like straight for the bank and stopping the crime. I held my breath in anticipation as I followed Jan's assault on the bank, him roughly collaring the robber... Without warning a member of staff marched into frame carrying a bundle of papers and a

pen. She addressed Jan:

"Pardon me. I believe you are the gentleman tasked with saving the bank from the robbery currently in progress. Is that correct?"

"Yes, that's me."

"Do you have a license that entitles you to engage in bank protection?"

"No. What's that?"

"No problem. I'll just need some information from you quickly and then I'll leave you to go about your business."

"Of course"

"Would you mind filling out the boxes on this form? First name, family name, address and postcode."

Jan hung the robber up on a coat hook, filled out the form, returned it to the staff member then turned to lift the robber off the hook.

"Excuse me, may I make a copy of your accommodation form?"

Jan took a form from his jacket pocket and handed it to the woman who disappeared for a few minutes then returned with the copies.

“Thank you so much. Here’s the document. Just one more thing: I have to make a record of your tax and pension numbers, then you can go and get on with your mission without any obstacles.”

Jan took out the documents in question and while the woman was busy jotting down the information on a form of her own he stole a glance in the direction of the hook, which was now empty. The woman returned and as she handed him a final stamped document, said:

“Thank you for your cooperation Herr Jan, this official license grants you complete freedom to rescue the bank from robbery as and when you wish.”

Before leaving the room she turned to him with a smile:

“I made a special effort to get you a top-class license. The standard license only grants you permission to save the main branch and is valid for just three months, but I pressured them into giving you a license that is valid at all branches for a six-month period. Your inbox is going to be flooded... Sorry, I mean you will get the chance to see all our latest offers and activities delivered straight to you.”

After that, Jan wouldn’t respond to any of my attempts to communicate with him, walking grimly along with his hands stuffed in his suit pockets. It was clear that things were over, that he didn’t want to take part in the project any more. He

walked on till he came to the station from where he rode the metro home. This might be the last time I saw him, I thought to myself, and just before I gave up completely an idea came to me: a last-ditch plan to save my project. Outside the entrance to the metro I sketched three youths stealing a piece of candy from a kid.

The kid started to cry and the gang ran away with the candy. A call to arms that Jan could not resist: aside from the cause itself which was supremely just, nothing moves a man like the innocence of childhood. And Jan really did commit himself, sprinting after the gang, but then what happened? The gang leapt into a metro carriage that was about to move out of the station. During these critical few seconds Jan was frantically stuffing coins into the ticket machine. I hadn't taken that into consideration. Of course Jan wouldn't contemplate pursuing the bad guys into the train illegally. While he was getting the scrap of paper out of the machine and having it stamped, the train departed, taking the gang with it and leaving a bewildered Jan clutching his ticket and watching them leave, while the child's wails continued uninterrupted in the background.

I shut my sketchbook at this point and just sat there in the living room, frustrated and smoking. Suddenly I noticed that a cloud of smoke was gathering and thickening in the room. Once again I told myself I had to give up smoking or at least cut down, but suddenly, out of the cloud, stepped someone I knew well: someone whose adventures I'd long followed and who I couldn't believe was standing there in front of me, coughing from the fumes. As I gaped at him in astonishment the cigarette dropped from my lips:

"My God! Superman! Have you come to me in a vision, as happens with the great comic-book geniuses when they get writer's block...?"

"Well, to be honest, no. I'm the poorly-drawn Asian knock-off Superman. My ghost happened to be passing by and the smoke from this place really made its eyes sting, so I came down to put out the blaze and save the civilians. Where's the fire?"

"There's no fire, Superman. I was smoking, is all."

"So I see," he said, astonished and disgusted: "Maybe you should give up smoking. Now, did you say that you wrote comics and had come up against a problem?"

"Indeed I did, Superman."

"Please, there's no need to stand on ceremony. Just call me Man. Drop the Super."

"All right, Man. The problem is that I was trying to draw a superhero but something would always intervene to prevent him saving the innocent."

"What could stop a superhero doing his duty? Looks like you've made a poor choice of hero. The superhero draped in the States' stars should be unstoppable when he wants to save his fellow citizens."

"What stars, Man? Seems like you've walked a long way since the last time you checked the border signs."

"What?" Man asked alarmed: "Have I reached Mexico?"

"No. We're in Germany now."

"Oh, Germany. But what's that got to do with...? Ah! Now I see the problem. Well in that case I'm sorry to say I can't help, but before I go I'd like to tell you one last thing. Don't leave your hero high and dry. Do your utmost to give him a space in which he can do good for people, because that's what he truly desires."

At just this moment someone else emerged from the cloud of smoke, wearing spectacles with thick, black frames and a brightly coloured T-shirt.

"Dear me, I've had a hard time finding you! Have you decided to make a comeback, saying wise things to people to give them the impression you're the real Superman? Do you really think anyone's going to take you seriously wandering round in those red pants? Get back to the studio right now. We have to print a new adventure by tomorrow morning."

Once Superman and his director friend had departed through the cloud of smoke his words continued to echo round my head. I rushed over to my sketchbook and set to work eagerly.

I worked till midnight and was able to go to sleep with a clear conscience. On publication, Jan's adventures proved unpopular, with hardly a copy sold, and I had no idea why this might be so. I had tried to make them as exciting as his abilities would allow: he saved lives at a children's swimming pool and walked the neighbours' dogs.

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