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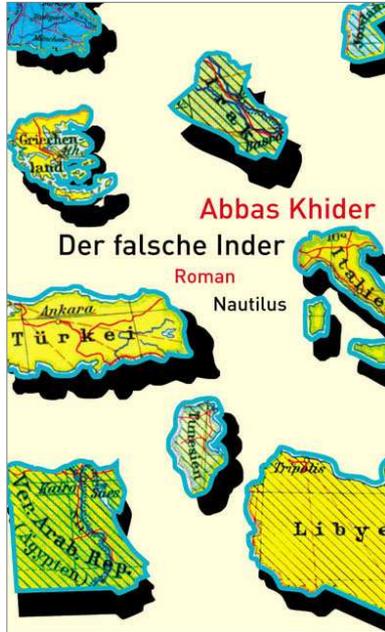
**additional information on
Abbas Khider:
“The Village Indian”
(Der falsche Inder)**

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Abbas Khider

**Der falsche Inder
(The Village Indian)**

Novel

160 Pages

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Rights sold to Iran, India; Arab language rights; English language rights world

The narrator in *Der falsche Inder* comes across a script in Arabic language while he travels from Munich to Berlin. Miraculously it tells his very own story even though the main character has another name. Rasul Hamid, the protagonist, describes in eight different ways how he fled his homecountry Iraq and tries to live as a refugee. He strays between Northern Africa and Europe, but he never feels anywhere at home again.

The voices and fates in this debut novel tell a realistic fairy tale. Abbas Khider combines the tragic with a laugh, the grotesque with ordinary life. This novel is the story of his life and impresses by its unadorned point of view and his en-passant-way of narrating the misery.

Abbas Khider was born 1973 in Baghdad and lives in Germany since 2000. In 1996 he was released from prison, where he was held due to »political reasons«. From 1996 to 2000 he had to survive as a refugee in many countries. He studies philosophy and literature in Germany. He published various poems in Arabic language. He lives in Berlin, Germany. *Der falsche Inder* is his debut, it won the »Adelbert von Chamisso Förderpreis«, a renowned sponsorship award, in 2010. Abbas Khider was awarded several stipends and grants.

Also published:

Die Orangen des Präsidenten (2011)

Brief in die Auberginenrepublik (to be published in February 2013)

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Honorary speech: “Adelbert von Chamisso” Award 2010

Sponsorship grant awarded to Abbas Khider

Ladies and gentlemen, prize-winners, Abbas Khider.

When Adelbert von Chamisso arrived in Plymouth on 7th September in the year 1815, Napoleon was already on his way to exile on St. Helena. The world traveller, who wanted to begin his voyage around the world in the English port aboard the »Rurik«, missed the conqueror by exactly one week: »As Napoleon was sailing towards his misfortune, Chamisso«, writes his biographer Beatrix Langner, »had been carrying his around for a long time«.

A dictator, a journey half way around the world and a traveller who believes that misfortune has somehow settled in his luggage and is following him everywhere – these are ideas we also find in Abbas Khider’s debut novel, »Der falsche Inder«. Chamisso was taking refuge in an expedition; Abbas Khider depicts his own flight as a journey of discovery. Involuntarily, it explores how much someone can endure, how much they can lose without going mad, how many memories, bonds and feelings can be carried in their emotional baggage, without breaking down under its weight on journey without a destination. What does it mean when the last thing that you have are the memories of the life that you once led and when you have to conclude that memories are heavier than lead? What does it mean when you have to leave behind the last thing that you have?

Abbas Khider gives us one of many possible and impossible answers to this question and portrays to those of us who have never been in a comparable situation at least a hint of what it means to be a refugee. The dictator who leads a whole nation into misfortune in the book is Saddam Hussein and the journey around the world that Abbas Khider depicts takes place because it is the only means of escaping Saddam’s regime. The journey leads from Baghdad to Jordan, Libya, Greece, Turkey, Italy and Germany. Ever since antiquity, Homer’s readers have been trying with varying degrees of success to follow the wanderings of the Odysseus on a map. Abbas Khider’s readers can do this without great difficulty: we find out the exact route of the ill-fortuned Odysseus from Baghdad, whether the journey is by train or ship, whether the refugee is accompanied by a people-smuggler or whether he tries to get through on his own or with friends and chance acquaintances. You learn some useful things but spend the whole time hoping that you’ll never have to put this knowledge into practice, especially when it’s about tariffs for people-smuggling through the Greek-Turkish border, for example.

You can trace the route over a map – and will soon lose track. Because it goes backwards and forwards, wildly. Abbas Khider jumps from one place to another and changes the setting and time frames, often several times within a few pages. There's a reason for this, and the reason is literary nature. Because we're not dealing with a documentary or an chronologically-ordered field report, but with a novel, a piece of literature, which requires a literary form. Abbas Khider makes the search for this form one of the themes of his book.

It begins with a classic framing mechanism. A passenger finds an envelope on a train which contains a manuscript recounting the writer's life – which is identical to the life story of the one who so unexpectedly finds the manuscript in his hands. »Der falsche Inder« is the book that its finder had been trying in vain to write himself for years.

It's not some late post-modernist mannerism if writing and paper are so often talked about in this novel. Especially in the first half of the book, the process of writing and its meaning for the narrator are dealt with again and again. Rasul Hamid, as the writer is called, succumbs quickly to a desire to write, which is erotically charged for him. It is the glimpse of female beauty which causes him to reach for his pen, as though he were a troubadour from Provence. Later on he scratches his words on prison walls with stones. Because he has no money, he steals paper. Right from the beginning, writing means danger. He writes love poems which no-one is allowed to see, on paper which no-one is allowed to know about, because it's almost always stolen. Nothing, nothing of Rasul Hamid's early work is left. The father, who overnight became a supporter of Saddam, throws his son's manuscripts and books into the water. The writings which he so carefully smuggled out of prison are accidentally burnt by the clueless mother. Other texts are left behind with changing lovers. Nothing that the refugee writes remains. None of his texts lasts. When the poet puts pen to paper, it should be more enduring than if it had been cast in iron. But it is as though Rasul Hamid's words were written in sand.

And it is of the very essence of all these writings that they must be lost. For it is in this way that Abbas Khider refers to the fundamentally different character of writing and literature under dictatorship. We write things down to keep them, so that they are saved from being forgotten. But under dictatorship, the process of written conservation is associated with great danger. Texts can bring their writers to the gallows, or to the heroes' swings, as they are once called in the novel.

Abbas Khider was born in Baghdad in 1973, in the same year as the Revolutionary Council named Saddam Hussein as the three star general of the Iraqi armed forces. As Abbas Khider grew up, Saddam waged war. First against neighbouring Iran, then in 1990-91 against Kuwait, an ally of the United States. Tens, hundreds of thousands of young Iraqis had to leave their lives on the battle fields. Two years later, Abbas Khider was just nineteen years old when he was arrested for the first time. He had spent nearly his whole life in a dictatorship. He knew nothing else. There was neither satellite television nor the internet. And yet, still a teenager, he decided to resist and became active politically.

At the beginning of the book, Rasul Hamid sums up the years of war and the countless small battles and uprisings and then draws a fatalistic conclusion: »Fire is this land's fate, and even

the waters of both the great rivers, the Euphrates and the Tigris, are powerless against it.« But like his author, Rasul Hamid didn't want to submit himself to this fate without fighting.

Hamid spends eighteen months and four days in an Iraqi prison, covering the walls with his writing, before he finally gets the writing paper he so longed for in the hospital ward. Just a few sentences are enough for him to describe the consequences of imprisonment and torture: panic attacks, sleep disturbances, nightmares - »I might have left prison behind me, but it still existed, deep in my soul«. Or in another place: »I can no longer sleep. I only lie down sometimes in the morning. In prison it was dark. For two years, I couldn't see the sun. I was tortured with electric shocks. Prison has gone, the darkness has remained.« Unlike the first quotation, the previous sentences are not from the novel, but from a short interview that Abbas Khider gave last year. Occasionally the meeting of fiction and reality, novel and autobiography is so hard and direct, in circumstances one can hardly imagine. In the same interview Abbas Khider also revealed how he learned to deal with the burden of his experiences in prison: »With humour. People have this wonderful ability to retain their sense of humour, even in the most awful situations. I'm sure that some people survived National Socialism only by keeping their sense of humour.«

How sharp and caustic but also how self-deprecating this sense of humour can be is not only visible in the novel but also in the poems with which Abbas Khider entered the literary scene before his debut novel appeared in 2008. In »Return from War«, edited by fellow Iraqi Khalid Al-Maaly, a bilingual anthology of new Iraqi verse, Khider draws a comparison which may appear unsettling to German readers, but which becomes uncannily fitting in light of Khider's words on the function of humour: »umpteen massacres on the streets/ another massacre/ in the rocking stool between Abbas Khider/ and the poem.« Only on first sight is it about the discrepancy between the murder on the street and the apparently peaceful situation of the poet in the rocking chair. In fact, an inner relationship between the real situation on the streets and the poem is created – which in the same breath becomes a subject of irony: the massacres are not identical, but they are inextricably linked.

When Abbas Khider was released from prison in 1996, he fled Iraq and began an odyssey as an illegal refugee through many countries, before coming to Germany in 2000. He was intending to travel through Germany, but was arrested as he did not have a valid passport. He was threatened with deportation back to Iraq, but was able to avert this by his asylum application. Khider has been living in Germany ever since, initially in Munich, where he studied philosophy and literature, before moving to Berlin, where he wrote his first novel. A review called »Der falsche Inder« a »radically unsentimental report from hell«. This is only partly true. Abbas Khider describes, not just with a cold regard but also with keen, sparse humour, how closely the wanderer's loss of home is linked with the loss of almost all his rights and how disempowerment leads to disempowerment. But I have a further objection: the label »report« does not do justice to the this book's literary standard. For five years, the narrator finally reveals, he has been trying in vain to write down his »journey on the phantom ship«, his »odyssey«. »And time and time again I stopped, because I wasn't convinced by it, or because I didn't have a good construction or simply because I wasn't satisfied. I always knew exactly what I wanted to write, but never how!« Writing »Der falsche Inder» in

German, as the author once said, made things easier for him. »When I write in Arabic, it's all about pain. German gives me distance. In this way, with the help of the distance offered by a new language, with his complex sense of humour as a survival tool and with a poet's awareness of form, Abbas Khider has written an extraordinary novel, which unfolds its autobiographical content in a refined interplay of revealing and hiding. The child who started in the first class in primary school in Baghdad as Saddam Hussein achieve the »first class of power«, as it is called in the book, survived the dictator and his reign of terror – both in the novel and in reality. But something else has been rescued too. Throughout the whole novel, writing itself is also on the run; it has to hide, it is always afraid of being discovered. Through the detour of the framing mechanism – remember the manuscript found in the envelope – Abbas Khider has also found a safe place for his own writing. With the story of love and passion, which after a long search finally found a literary form of its worth, he has liberated literature for itself and for his readers, so that it can fulfil its real function: it prevents fates from being forgotten. I would like to congratulate Abbas Khider wholeheartedly on winning the Adelbert von Chamisso promotional prize 2010!

(© Robert-Bosch-Stiftung)



»When I write in Arabic, it's all about pain. German gives me distance.«

Abbas Khider wins an award for his debut novel, by Hubert Spiegel

Abbas Khider was born in Baghdad in 1973. In his country's history, this was the year in which Saddam Hussein took a further step on his path to power: the revolutionary council named the former Vice-President as the three star general of the Iraqi armed forces.

In 1979, Abbas Khider was six years old when Saddam first became General Secretary of the governing party, then party leader, and finally Head of State and Government. The bloodshed began straight away. Saddam discredited party colleagues he didn't like and had them liquidated without trial. From that point on, Iraq was on its way to dictatorship.

As Abbas Khider grew up in Baghdad, Saddam waged war: First against neighbouring Iran, then in the Second Gulf War in 1990-91 against Kuwait, an ally of the United States. Tens, hundreds of thousands of young Iraqis, often only just older than teenagers, had to leave their lives on the battlefields. The Iraqi army suffered a crushing defeat, but the American troops aborted their march on Baghdad, whereupon Saddam assembled the rest of his army in order to bloodily put down the uprising of the Shiite Kurds in the south of the country.

Two years later, Abbas Khider was just nineteen years old when he was arrested for the first time. For nearly his whole life he had experienced a man in power over his country, for whom human life was worth nothing, who ordered massacres, who used poison gas against his own population, who had friends liquidated and who employed a secret police which imprisoned and tortured countless Iraqis. Abbas Khider had therefore spent nearly his whole life in a dictatorship. He knew nothing else; there was neither satellite television nor the internet. And yet he decided to resist and became active politically.

Rasul Hamid, the first-person narrator in Abbas Khider's debut novel »Der falsche Inder« sums up at the beginning the years of war and the countless small battles and uprisings and then draws a fatalistic conclusion: »Fire is this land's fate, and even the waters of both the great rivers, the Euphrates and the Tigris, are powerless against it.«

But like his author, Rasul Hamid didn't want to submit himself to this fate without fighting. Hamid spends eighteen months and four days in an Iraqi prison, covering the walls with his writing, before he finally gets the writing paper he so longed for in the hospital ward. He might have managed to smuggle his writings out of prison when he was finally released, but at home they were burnt by his mother – along with the louse-infested clothing in which he had sewn them up to protect them from the eyes of the prison guards.

In the novel, we only learn a little about the time Rasul Hamid spent in prison, for although he presents himself as a prolific writer, he wrote very little about this phase of his life later on. Just a few sentences are enough for him to describe the consequences of imprisonment and torture: panic attacks, sleep disturbances, nightmares – »I might have left prison behind me, but it still existed, deep in my soul«.

Photo caption: Abbas Khider always knew exactly what he wanted to write, but for a long time, not how.

Fiction and reality meet in such a hard and direct way

»I can no longer sleep. I only lie down sometimes in the morning. In prison it was dark. For two years, I couldn't see the sun. I was tortured with electric shocks. Prison has gone, the darkness has remained.«

Unlike the first quotation, these sentences are not from the novel, but from a short interview that the author gave last year. Occasionally fiction and reality, novel and autobiography meet in such a hard and direct way and in circumstances hardly imaginable. In the same interview Abbas Khider also reveals how he learned to deal with the burden of his experiences in prison. »With humour. People have this wonderful ability to retain their sense of humour, even in the most awful situations. I'm sure that some people survived National Socialism only by keeping their sense of humour.«

How sharp and caustic but also how self-deprecating this sense of humour can be is visible not only in the novel but also in the poems with which Abbas Khider entered the literary scene before his debut novel appeared in 2008, for which he has now won the Adelbert von Chamisso promotional prize 2010. In »Return from War«, edited by fellow Iraqi Khalid Al-Maaly, a bilingual anthology of new Iraqi verse, Khider draws a comparison which may appear unsettling to German readers, but which becomes uncannily fitting in light of Khider's words on the function of humour. In the poem »Massaker im Hausgarten« (Massacre in the Garden) which he wrote in 2003, it says:

Umpteen thousands died from mustard gas
umpteen massacres on the streets
and another massacre
in the rocking chair between Abbas bin Kidi
and the poem.

Only on first sight is it about the discrepancy between the murder on the street and the apparently peaceful situation of the poet in the rocking chair. In fact, an inner relationship between the real situation on the streets and the poem is created – which in the same breath becomes a subject of irony: the massacres are not identical, but they are inextricably linked.

Books

:: Der falsche Inder. Novel. Hamburg: Edition Nautilus, 2008

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:: Massaker im Hausgarten. (Massacre in the Garden) Poem. In: Khalid Al-Maaly (Ed.), Rückkehr aus dem Krieg. (Return from War) An anthology of contemporary lyric verse from Iraq. Cologne/Frankfurt am Main: Kirsten Gutke Verlag, 2008

Photo caption: For two years, Abbas Khider couldn't see the sun in prison.

An odyssey on the ghostly ship

When Abbas Khider was released from prison in 1996, he fled Iraq and began an odyssey as an illegal refugee through many countries, before coming to Germany in 2000. He was intending to travel through Germany, but was arrested as he did not have a valid passport. He was threatened with deportation back to Iraq, but was able to avert this by his asylum application. Khider has been living in Germany ever since, initially in Munich, where he studied philosophy and literature. He later moved to Berlin, where he wrote his first novel.

A reviewer for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* called »Der falsche Inder« a »radically unsentimental report from hell«. That is undoubtedly true, as far as the depiction of the refugee's experience is concerned. Abbas Khider describes with a cold regard how closely the wanderer's loss of home is linked with the loss of almost all his rights and how disempowerment leads to disempowerment. But the label »report« does not do justice to this book's literary standard, which develops within a framing mechanism and ceaselessly jumps between time and countries.

For five years, the narrator finally reveals, he has been trying in vain to write down his »journey on the ghostly ship«, his »odyssey«. »And time and time again I stopped, because I wasn't convinced by it, or because I didn't have a good construction or simply because I wasn't satisfied. I always knew exactly what I wanted to write, but never how!«

Now Abbas Khider has not only written an impressive novel in a language which is not his mother tongue, but he has received invitations, scholarships and prizes for it. Writing »Der falsche Inder« in German, as the author once said, made things easier for him. »When I write in Arabic, it's all about pain. German gives me distance.«

In this way, with the help of the distance offered by a new language, with his complex sense of humour as a survival tool and with a poet's awareness of form, Abbas Khider has written an extraordinary novel, which unfolds its autobiographical content in a refined interplay of revealing and hiding. The child who started in the first class in primary school in Baghdad as Saddam Hussein achieved the »first class of power«, as it is called in the book, survived the dictator and his reign of terror – both in the novel and in reality.



From the press...

The novel »Der falsche Inder« is an imaginative play on narrative style and perspective. A literary bridge between Orient and Occident, in which dream and reality merge to form a fairy tale. A story full of zest for life...

Birgit Eckelt, BR Kulturmagazin Puzzle, 28. August 2008

The odyssey is broken down with great narrative skill. Each chapter starts anew in Baghdad and the refugee's journey is recounted again and again from new angles, in a light, almost jaunty tone. Women. Writing. Stealing paper... Only once we reach the chapter »Miracles« does the tone change and the dark undercurrent come to the fore. »Faces« haunt the author: fellow prisoners, fellow refugees and family members who never succeeded in doing what he did: surviving, finding asylum and laughing.

Sibylle Mulot, Spiegel Special 2008

The novel can be also read as a moving plea for empathy, understanding, and respect for human dignity. A literary work of art...

Maria Panzer, Lesart Zeitschrift, Autumn 2008

What a deeply sad book – yet every single page makes the reader happy. The sadness is the reality it recounts and the happiness is for the refugee who has survived this reality and created an artistic treasure.

The western reader is humiliated by the succinct way in which Khider describes brutality and neglect, without losing his sense of self or becoming violent or cynical. One cannot help but suspect that as well as being a personal quality, this strength must also draw from a culture that the West dismisses as backward.

Renée Zucker, rbb Inforadio, 19. October 2008

The author is a master of grotesque satire, navigating elegantly between laughter and tears.

Evi Chatzi, SWR International, 28. October 2008

»Der falsche Inder« is a novel, fairy story, tale from 1001 Nights, short story and autobiography all in one... »Der falsche Inder« is also the work of an artist. The fact that the Arabic manuscript, which attempts eight times to recount the horrors of the life of a refugee, appears both familiar and alien to the German-speaking narrator, is evidence for Abbas Khider's stylistic capabilities.

Jörg Plath, Deutschlandradio, 02. February 2009

»Der falsche Inder« successfully combines social satire, autobiography and political prose of high literary quality.

Gerd Bedszent, Ossietzky Magazin, March 2009

A short novel which draws together big issues, Oriental adventures, eroticism and wit with a true story, since Abbas Khider has used much of his own biography for this book. Impressive.

Literaturkurier, 26. January 2009

In some parts, the novel »Der falsche Inder« resembles a factual report because of Khider's dry tone. Mostly however, Khider's first-person narrative sounds almost like a fairy tale – poetic and full of wonderful happenings. The ease with which the author moves through time and space also gives the impression of a fairy tale... Khider does not dwell on the horrors of his flight, and even recounts funny and ludicrous encounters, yet the reader still senses the gravity and cruelty of the fight for survival.

Martina Sulner, Hannoversche Allgemeine, 5. January 2009

In his debut novel »Der falsche Inder«, Khider describes an odyssey in search of supposed freedom. He does this however with a most artistic flourish: an Arabic manuscript on a German train. It recounts eight times in different ways the life-story of the person who finds it. Complicated? Maybe. But also humorous, sad and strong.

Szene Hamburg Magazin, January 2009

Thrilling for everyone, including younger readers, who want to grasp what it means to be a refugee.

Greenpeace Magazin, January 2009

The author masterfully uses closeness to and distance from the events and the reader's feelings, and yet at no point does the reader feel emotionally exploited. It's a thrilling, almost unbelievable but at the same time very credible story, which subtly evolves over the 150 pages. Khider takes the reader with him every step of the way until the very last page. He proves with this book that he's not only a lyricist, but also an outstanding narrator, who commands words and form like a virtuoso. We eagerly await his next work.

Sabine Seip, Media Mania, December 2008

Because Khider entertains us and because his concise style does not allow for pity, his story moves us all the more and gives us a new perspective on ›refugees‹: they become individuals again.

Ines Kappert, Die Tageszeitung, 29. November 2008

At the end of Abbas Khider's novel we are back at the beginning. Between the two there is a story worth reading and discovering which does not resort to tugging emotively at the

reader's heartstrings because the author knows that the struggles inflicted on a large part of humanity by modern times do not need judgmental commentary in order to move us.

Andreas Pflitsch, Lisan Zeitschrift, Autumn 2008

Abbas Khider, 35, an Iraqi living in exile in Berlin, narrates light-heartedly and ironically his dramatic journey again and again, each time from a new perspective: sex, miracles and disasters. It takes time to get used to the structure, but it doesn't matter because he's the all the more successful in turning a relevant issue into reading material that is entertaining and free from sanctimony.

Marianne Wellershoff, KulturSPIEGEL, November 2008

Reading »Der falsche Inder«, it becomes clear very quickly that Khider knows how to tell a story... Although the refugee's flight is only one thread of the book, it is the strongest in literary terms because Khider manages to narrate it with brutal honesty yet humorously at the same time.

Timo Berger, Junge Welt, 15. October 2008

»Der falsche Inder« is a surprising work in many ways ... The structure of the text is remarkable. Khider doesn't narrate chronologically, instead he tells the story of his escape several times and each time from a different perspective. Eight times from Baghdad to Munich, from the temple to Sara's suitcase. By writing with concision but also with Oriental colour, he succeeds in creating a work of art and in portraying a difficult theme with the lightness of distance.

Thomas Bruhn, Neues Deutschland, 14. October 2008

Complex and, what's more, very real. A novel of our brutal times and an author with admirable force.

Mona Naggar, BR2 Büchermagazin, 20. September 2008

Abbas Khider has arrived. In a country whose language he now masters. So well that he has written a book about the stony path of his odyssey, which finally led him to Berlin... Khider narrates his life story with a stylistic slalom between existential misery and lurid humour.

Jens Mühlhling, Tagesspiegel, 19. September 2008

Khider works with an extremely vivid, and often sparse language, which is steeped in gritty humour. No trace of leaden sanctimony, which would weigh heavily on the reader. No, »Der falsche Inder« is a radically unsentimental report from hell. The horrors of the flight are always present, but are never exposed explicitly. There remains enough space for his contagious zest for life and for many small observations that are both precise and revealing.

Dominik Schweighofer, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 16. December 2009

An impressive portrayal of the ›daily‹ life of ›illegal‹ people... »I have divided countries into two groups«, writes Khider. »The first category is made up of countries where the only

images and posters are those of their leaders and their banal slogans. The second category comprises countries where this is not the case. That's where I wanted to get to.« It is a stroke of luck for German literature that he made it.

Wolf Dieter Kantelhardt, ef-Magazin, November 2009

The reader feels firsthand the confusion, guilt, and memory of ever-recurring, cruel events that rage in Khider's soul. A moving work about the fate of a war refugee.

Nasner Sigi, Draußen Magazin, June 2009

With clear and blunt language, a sense of suspense and irony, and sometimes irritating lightness, »Der falsche Inder« depicts chapters in the life of a refugee from various perspectives, which only seem bearable through humour, unwavering optimism and the will to live. The tragic and the comic lie closely together in Khider's sparse, unsentimental narrative style, which moves, without begging for pity. The response to »Der falsche Inder« proves that Khider has chosen a most promising literary path.

Dieter Ungelenk, Neue Presse Coburg, 29. May 2009

Press release,

2010 Adelbert von Chamisso Prize

Promotional prize awarded to Abbas Khider

Abbas Khider has been awarded the Chamisso promotional prize for his first novel »Der falsche Inder« published by Edition Nautilus in 2008. In ever-changing storylines, his succinct and unsentimentally narrated novel tells the story of young Rasul Hamid and his adventurous escape from Iraq under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. He manages to eke out a living in a number of different North African and European countries, working as a tutor, casual worker and waiter. Rasul Hamid, who meets numerous other refugees from all over the world and learns about their often bizarre fates, seems himself to be doomed, yet he is saved time and again in many miraculous ways. Abbas Khider's tragic, comic, often even burlesque novel is a realistic, modern-day refugee fairy tale about a serious and moving political issue, which has been relevant for many years.



Sample translation of the first chapters

I

“The Intercity Express 1511 from Berlin to Munich, calling at Leipzig, Bamberg, Nuremberg and Ingolstadt, is scheduled to depart at 12:57 from platform six”. The voice from the loudspeaker is unpleasant and tinny. A quick glance at the big clock on the platform: 12:30. Nearly half an hour to go. I put down my newspaper and coffee on the bench. I cast my eye again over Berlin Zoo Station.

Completely empty. For a moment I have the feeling that I’m all alone in this station. The people have disappeared. Or maybe they were never there at all. Completely empty. All light and clean. No trains, no passengers, no loudspeakers. Nothing. Just me and the empty Zoo Station, endless nothingness around me. Where am I? What am I doing here? Where is everyone else? All these questions pound through my brain like drums at an African festival. Completely empty like a never-ending desert, bare mountains or clear water. But also eerie like a forest after a violent storm. And my questions, loud and yet quiet, resonant and yet voiceless.

This feeling lasts a few minutes – or was it longer than just a few minutes? It’s not the first time I’ve lost my bearings. I’ve been experiencing this insanity for a few years now. Sometimes I worry that one of these days I won’t be able to go back from this desert in my head.

Thank God the station concourse is still there and the graffiti on the walls, too: “My joker has flown away...” “Simone is my mouse.” The Curry-Wurst and hotdog stands are still there, the people too...

12:40. Another look over the station, but this time without the accompaniment of the African drums. The platform is full. Passengers are getting on trains or looking for the exit. Some are running to make their connections. A group of boys and half-naked girls with shorts and strappy tops stroll slowly along the platform with their rucksacks. Almost like a school group. The girls are laughing and their clear, loud voices ring out over the station. The group ahead of them is made up of a few older people. Probably the teachers. With serious faces. Nearly all of them are pulling black wheelie suitcases along behind them.

There are pigeons all over the station. They’ve even made their nests in the eaves of the station roof. A male pigeon is seducing a female one. The male spreads out his feathers, pulling them along the ground behind him, swaggering around the female, flirting with her: “coo-coo, coo-coo”. The female struts around him like a queen, her head held high. Sometimes she moves slowly, sometimes quickly, driving the male crazy. Not far away from the male pigeon, one of the school boys is trying to chat up a girl. The object of his affections smiles and he swaggers around her. She marches straight towards the exit; he follows blindly along behind her. “Lukas, come back”, one of the teachers calls after him.

12:45. The train pulls into the station. I quickly find my reserved seat in the smoking compartment. I put the rucksack between my feet. I put a notepad, a book, a packet of cigarettes and a lighter on the table and light a cigarette...

13:02. The train pulls out of the station, slightly delayed. I notice a big, fat envelope on the seat next to me. There seems to be a stack of papers inside. "Memoirs" is written on the outside in flowing Arabic script. My neighbour has probably nipped to the toilet or the buffet car. He'll be back soon, I'm sure. It will be nice to be able to chat to someone in Arabic. And he might even be a poet, or at least someone who is interested in reading and writing.

13:30. My neighbour is still not back. Surely he'll be back soon. His envelope can't just stay here forever. Where might he be from? There are so many Arab countries. Hopefully it will be one I know well. Then we'll have a lot to talk about. 14:16. The train arrives at the next station. "Next station Leipzig," the loudspeaker intones. The envelope is still there. A few people get off the train and others get on. A girl sits down opposite me. She's got her headphones on and is enjoying the noise from her MP3 player. A boy plonks himself down next to her and switches on his laptop. A lady with short, blond hair, her mobile to her ear, gets ready to sit down right next to me. She snatches up the envelope, looks at me reproachfully, puts the envelope on my lap, drops nonchalantly down into the seat and carries on her phone conversation, oblivious to the world around her.

What's that all about? Silly cow! This inconsiderate behaviour from some people is strange. Should I tell her that the envelope doesn't belong to me? My God! She's still on the phone! She's probably about fifty. She looks like a lot of women in this country. A trace of lipstick, a skirt and blouse, a tiny, mini-handbag, that looks like it would suit a queen bee better. And black, high-heeled shoes. Women like that are a bit unpredictable. Best to keep quiet.

14:20. The train trundles on. Carefully, I take the envelope in my hand, leave the compartment and look for the buffet car. The young, pretty waitress quickly serves me a large coffee. The envelope lies in front of me on the small table. A tricky decision. Should I give it in to the train staff as lost property? But my curiosity is too great. I decide to open the envelope and read its contents, before deciding whether to hand it in or not.

The landscape glows bottle-green in the sun as it rushes past the train windows. I slowly sip at my coffee. I light a cigarette, eyeing up the waitress. She's young, between 18 and 20. Her hair is dyed red, she's wearing a German Railways blue jacket, with jeans underneath and a white t-shirt that says "Sexy Girl". Small, firm breasts bulge out from under the writing.

I take my coffee and the envelope and go back to my seat in the compartment, where the woman is still on the phone, the boy is still tapping away at his laptop and the girl is still listening to her MP3 player.

14:45. The train travels on.

I open the envelope.

1 The Mistaken Indian

When Caliph Al-Mansur travelled through the never-ending expanse of the Orient in the year 762 on his quest for quiet and relaxation, his glance fell upon an idyllic landscape between two rivers. Without hesitating, he ordered his soldiers to dig a large ditch around this piece of land, to fill it with wood and to light a fire at dusk. As it blazed, he looked out from a nearby hill and announced, "My city shall be founded here". And he named the city Madinat-A'Salam, the city of peace, which we

now know as Baghdad. Since then, the city of peace has never known peace again. Time and again, yet another ruler has stood on the hill and watched as it burns.

I was born in this fire, in this city, and probably that's why my skin is the colour of coffee. I was thoroughly grilled over the fire like a ram. The ghosts of the fire stayed with me all my life; I saw the city burning again and again. One war embraced the next one; one catastrophe chased the previous one away. Each time, Baghdad, or the skies and earth of the whole of Iraq burned: from 1980 to 1988 during the first Gulf War; from 1988 to 1989 during the war that the Al-Baath regime waged against the Iraqi Kurds; during the second Gulf War in 1991; during the Iraqi uprising in the same year; in 2003 in the third Gulf War and all the time in between in hundreds of small fires, fights, uprisings and skirmishes. Fire is this land's fate, and even the waters of the two great rivers, the Euphrates and the Tigris, are powerless against it.

Even Baghdad's sun is a friend of the flames. In summer, it never wants to go down. It waltzes aggressively through Baghdad, as though it were a carriage of iron and fire, it tears up the face of the horizon and pushes itself aimlessly through the streets and houses. Maybe this merciless sun is the reason for my burnt and dusty appearance. But my birthday is 3rd March and therefore a long time before the hot Baghdad summer when the temperature reaches 50 degrees. That's why I think the heat of the kitchen is responsible for my dark colour. If I really did fall out of my mother's belly in the kitchen – as she herself always maintains – then I must have spent many hours there as a newborn, right next to the gas stove, where black beans and aubergines were always cooking. I also suspect that the stone oven, in which my mother baked our bread, had its role to play. How I loved to watch my mother when I was still a child, as she took the finished bread out of the oven, throwing the fresh flat loaves into a large dish made of palm leaves next to her feet. Every time I would sneak straight to the hot bread. And every time I would feel the irresistible urge to grab it, only to come away crying because I had burnt my fingers again. And every time I would sit very close to this captivating stone oven.

So I have several possible explanations for the dark colour of my skin. The fire of the rulers and the Baghdad sun, the heat of the kitchen and the glowing embers of the stone oven. Thanks to them I make my way through life with brown skin, deep black hair and dark eyes.

But if these four factors really are responsible for my physical appearance, then shouldn't most of the other inhabitants of the land between the two rivers look similar? Many of them do but I look so different that people doubt I'm Iraqi. In Baghdad, the ticket sellers on buses often used to address me in English. I mostly just laughed and answered in southern Iraqi dialect, which made them stare at me, dumbfounded, as though I were a ghost. The same thing used to happen at police checks. Every time I would have to answer a long list of questions, like "What do Iraqis like to eat?", "What children's songs do Iraqis sing?", "Give me some names of the best known Iraqi tribes". Only when I had answered them all correctly and my Iraqi background was seen to have been proved would I be allowed to carry on my way. The lads in my area used to call me "The Red Indian" because I looked like the Indians in American cowboy films. At middle school the Arabic teacher and my schoolmates called me "Indian" or "Amitabh Bachchan", after a famous Indian actor, a tall, thin, brown guy; I did in fact look a bit like him.

My father was the only one who had a completely different explanation for my appearance. His claim was quite unsettling. One day when I must have been about fifteen, he took me to one side. "My son", he said, "your real mother is a gypsy. That's why you don't look like your brothers." He didn't say much, but I understood that a while back he had been with a gypsy woman. It was just an affair. Her name was Selwa. "She was the most beautiful woman in the world", he claimed, proudly. "If a butterfly had landed on her body, it would have wilted and faded because of her beauty." The whole

story began in Baghdad, in the Al-Kamaliya area, near us. She was a dancer and a woman of the night. And my father was her best client. She loved him and wanted a child by him. Her wish was fulfilled. But my father didn't want a gypsy to be the mother of one of his children. So he and the men of our tribe decided to drive her and her whole family out of our district and to take the baby from her. No sooner said than done. I was taken in by the tribe and the gypsies were chased away. Later we heard the rumour that the gypsy woman had moved to northern Iraq with her clan, but had then left her family and had gone to Turkey and on to Greece alone. Apparently she worked for an Egyptian in a dance club there before finally killing herself. My stepmother never spoke about it. She brought me up as though I were her own child.

The funny thing about the story, though, is that both of my mothers had the same name: my gypsy mother was called Selwa and my non-gypsy mother is also called Selwa. My non-gypsy-Selwa said my father was a liar and she was my natural mother. Once she even brought an old lady home who claimed she was present at my birth. She swore on all the saints that I was born of my non-gypsy-Selwa in the kitchen. I only ever heard the gypsy story from my father. I even went to the Al-Kamaliya area once, which is also known as the "Whore and Pimp District", where there really were lots of brothels. I asked after the gypsy woman named Selwa and her people but no-one had the faintest idea. And that's why I doubt that there's anything to this story. I suspect my father just wanted to punish me because I couldn't stand him.

But I didn't see this story as a punishment at all. Why should I? What was wrong with the gypsies? Beautiful women, full of fire and passion, desired by all men. When I was still a child, the boys used to fight over who got to watch when they danced half-naked at weddings and parties with their skimpy, colourful skirts. I remember how all the men devoured them with hungry, transfixed eyes. The male gypsies were also so handsome that the men in our area thought it necessary to lock their doors, so that the gypsy men couldn't smile at their women. I still believe that when gypsies had been at a wedding of ours, the women in our area indulged themselves for weeks on end remembering the black hair, the deep, big bullish eyes, the hard muscles and brown sweaty bodies glistening under the spotlights of the wedding party; and they hoped that they would find them under their bedcovers at night, as they tried to still their unfulfilled desire with their hands. And it was just the same for the men as they thought about the exuberant and vivacious gypsy women.

I really was one of the most handsome boys in our area. Maybe I inherited my looks from my gypsy mother. And maybe also the colour of my skin, my long, dark curly hair and my large black tender eyes. After all I loved the gypsies and their songs. For a long time I kept a picture of a dancing gypsy woman in my trouser pocket. But I nevertheless decided to accept my non-gypsy mother as my "real mother". She was my guardian angel. She loved me more than all my brothers and sisters, her natural children.

The question of whether the gypsies really were from India, as some experts claim, has always interested me passionately. I secretly hope that this theory is true. Because then I could identify myself as an Indian-Iraqi. And put an end to all the existential questions! If not, then there must be another more concrete relationship between me and India, because the land has pursued me relentlessly and has always played a big role in my life.

When the Shi'ites revolted against the regime after the second Gulf War in March 1991, the Iraqi government claimed in its press that they were not real Iraqis, but Indian immigrants. They were supposed to have come to Iraq in the eighteenth century and stayed. The problem was that this theory had been rejected by all notable historians because there seemed to be no scientific proof for it. But then they didn't know me, the living proof that the Shi'ites maybe did come from India.

In my early twenties I fled the endless fire of the rulers and the merciless Baghdad sun. My path led me through many countries. I lived for a while in Africa, mainly in Libya; so many words of Libyan dialect became mixed up with my Iraqi dialect. And that led to the next problem: I stayed in Tripoli for a while, where I met a few Iraqis in a café on the beach promenade. When I introduced myself, they reacted angrily. "Do you think we're stupid? You're not Iraqi! You don't look Iraqi and you don't sound it either." Later, when I went to Tunisia, it was very different. In the capital I noticed from the very first day that the women followed me like bees around honey. In the centre, on Avenue Bourguiba, many girls looked at me coquettishly and called to each other uninhibitedly, "Hey, look at the handsome Indian!" For a whole month I had lots of fun with the prettiest women in the streets of Tunis. I claimed to be an Indian tourist, looking for a tour guide. And that's how I found love for a short while. She was called Iman and thought my hair was the eighth wonder of the world.

In Africa, no-one had a problem with my appearance. I wasn't blond and the children didn't crowd around me and clap, like they did for European tourists. In Africa the colour of my skin was an advantage. Compared to the locals, I was even regarded by some as being white. But nothing else, not even life itself, was easy there, so I soon planned a journey towards Europe. But it was only possible via illegal routes.

In Europe my appearance brought about problems again. It all began in Athens. Fortunately, at first, I didn't have any great problems there. I didn't really need to worry about being arrested by the police. There were so many refugees in the country, that they would have needed hundreds of prisons to lock us all up. Nevertheless, from time to time the police gathered up a few, probably to look like they were doing something about the refugee problem. Once they caught me too. I sat in prison for a few days until they had made a refugee ID card for me.

Then on the last day something tragic happened. I needed to go to the toilet. A policeman accompanied me. When I wanted to leave, he barred my way and began to lay into me, full of anger. I didn't understand what the problem was and began to shout with all my might. A few other policemen heard the noise and ran over and saved me from the beatings of my wild escort. A few shouted and argued with him. It was a real Greek commotion. I didn't understand a word, but suspected that they were angry with him because he had beaten me up. Suddenly the angry policeman who had beaten me cowered on the floor and began to beat himself in the face and to cry out. It all seemed absurd to me and I couldn't make any sense of it. A blond policeman brought me back to my cell. I sat there, fed up with the world and completely distraught. I couldn't believe that you could be kicked and beaten by the police for no reason here in Europe too. I had never imagined that. What an unpleasant surprise. In the evening, the door opened and an officer in smart uniform came into my cell. He had lots of stars and other insignia on his chest and shoulders. He spoke English and explained that the angry policemen had lost it because he thought I was a Pakistani drug dealer, whom the Greek police had been after for a long time. The angry policeman had lost his youngest brother – an overdose. And because he thought I was this drug dealer, his rage had boiled up and he lost all self-control. The officer showed me the photo of the dealer. Incredible! Really unbelievable. He really looked just like me, like two peas in a pod. Even I was confused.

After half an hour, the policeman came back. He wasn't angry anymore and he pointed at me.

"Are you from Iraq?"

"Yes."

"Sorry."

He closed the door and went. Fifteen minutes later another policeman came in, gave me a piece of ID, took me to the main door and said, "Go!"

I left Greece together with its police force and fled to Germany. But in Germany it was the same as in Greece, just in a different way. Because of the over-zealous dedication of the German police, my illegal journey came to an abrupt end, in the middle of Bavaria. I actually wanted to carry on to Sweden – I had heard from many refugees that in Sweden you got support from the state to learn Swedish and to study at university. There was nothing like that in Germany. When I wanted to travel by train from Munich to Hamburg, and from there to Sweden via Denmark, the train stopped in a small town named Ansbach, where two Bavarian policemen got on. They didn't ask any of the numerous blond passengers for their ID, they just came straight to me. Was it because of my Indian appearance?

"Passport!"

I said, "No."

They arrested me. In the police station, my appearance caused yet another drama. The policemen simply didn't believe I was Iraqi. They thought I was an Indian or Pakistani who was claiming to be from Iraq to be able to apply for asylum here. A fraudster, so to speak. Iraqis were allowed to claim asylum at that point due to the dictatorship in their country. Many citizens of other countries couldn't, for example Indians or Pakistanis. It took a long time until a translator and a judge from Nuremberg came to test me with a vast range of questions. Among other things, they wanted to know how many cinemas there were in the centre of Baghdad, and I had to name some of them. The answer was child's play to me, and my Iraqi background was soon confirmed. I had to give up on my goal of reaching Sweden though. The German police had taken my finger prints and explained to me that these would now be sent to all other countries offering asylum. Therefore I wouldn't be able to claim asylum anywhere else, only here in Germany. Any attempt to leave Germany would be a criminal offence. So since then I've been hanging out here.

If it was confined to just this, then life really would be bearable. But worse things happened. Many people were simply afraid of me. Yes, afraid! I hadn't beaten anyone up, or joined Al-Qaida or even the CIA overnight. It began with 11th September 2001. From that day onwards Arabs living in Europe lost their smile. The media spoke of nothing else but evil from Arabia. During this tense time I flew from Munich to Berlin for a few days. The old lady sitting next to me, whose accent made it very clear that she was from Bavaria, smiled at me.

"Are you Indian?"

Smiling back at her, I answered, "No I'm from Iraq."

The smile on her lips froze and transformed itself into a grimace, distorted by fear. She turned her eyes away from me. For the remainder of the flight, she was glued to her seat, colourless and silent. It was as though she had just seen the devil himself. Another sound from me and she might have had a heart attack!

Looking back, whatever names I was given because of my appearance, in the East or the West, it always seemed to have something to do with India. India – somewhere I've never been and don't know at all. The Arabs called me the "Iraqi Indian", to Europeans I'm just "Indian". It's bearable to be a gypsy, an Iraqi, an Indian or even an alien – why not?! But it's unbearable that still today, I don't know who I really am. I only know that I have been "burnt and salted by many suns of the earth" as my Bavarian girlfriend Sara always says, and I believe her.

In the meantime I've realised that there really might be a relationship between me and India, through my grandmother. And that has an historical background. When the English came to Iraq at the beginning of the twentieth century, they were also the colonial power in India. So they brought lots of Indian soldiers with them, who built their camp in the south of our country with its extensive palm forests. Who knows, maybe my grandmother, who's from the south of Iraq, once met a soldier in the woods. So maybe I'm the product of the union of two English colonies.

6 Miracles

I swear on all of creation, visible and invisible, that I've got nine lives. Like a cat. Actually, no, twice as many. Cats would be green with envy. Miracles always occur in my life at the last minute. I believe in miracles. In these rare one-off incidents – you couldn't give them any other name. They're one of life's secrets. Miracles have a lot in common with coincidences. But I can't call them coincidences, because a coincidence can't happen more than once. A coincidence is just a coincidence, as banal as that may sound. You can talk about one coincidence in life, or two at the most, but not about this number of coincidences. There are events which are miracles, but not coincidences – that's how I like to think about them, without following Aristotelian logic. I'm not a superstitious person and I don't believe in other-earthly beings. Throughout my life I have, so to speak, developed my own belief system, one which suits me alone. It's completely individual. To this day, for example, I worship car tyres. Yes, car tyres. To me, they're not just a car's feet, but guardian angels. I know that that doesn't sound terribly intelligent because lots of people lose their lives under car tyres. But car tyres can also save lives. And that's how the first miracle began.

I was in prison in Baghdad. Being in prison in Baghdad is no miracle; in the 1990s it was completely normal. During my time there, the day of the unexpected journey came. An unforgettable journey. The guards gathered all the prisoners together, bound their hands, blindfolded them with pieces of black cloth, and put them in several cars. The vehicles moved slowly. Everything was dark. All I could hear was the breathing of my fellow prisoners and my own heart thumping. All I could smell was the others' sweat and their old, damp clothes. After what felt like half an eternity, an endless babble of voices and the roaring of engines struck my ears. At last I could once again hear the everyday life in my home city. Children yelling, music shops blaring out loud music and the street dealers crying out: "fresh tomatoes, salad, fruit and vegetables, all fresh..." After a while I could hear only the wind lashing against the sides of the car, as if to greet us. Suddenly there was a bang. The car stopped. The prison guards' voices came nearer. Slowly the door opened, with the order: "Get out!" I moved in slow-motion so that I didn't fall. Another order: "Sit on the ground!". I breathed in the air. It was cold, pleasantly fresh. I knew this air. We were in the desert. But what were we doing here?

The prison guards were talking to each other.

"We have to change that damn tyre as soon as possible. We need to get the other one on."

"That's just not possible. We don't have a spare... We'll have to fix it."

"How long will it take?"

"Half an hour maybe?"

"Shit! They'll kill us. Do it quickly."

Deathly silence reigned for half an hour. The guards only exchanged a few words with each other. Then a new order was barked out: "Get up. Get in. And look lively!" The vehicle drove off, but soon afterwards suddenly stopped again. Incomprehensible noises came from outside. About a minute later we drove off again. For a while I could still hear the strong desert wind, but then voices and the noises of countless cars again. Maybe we were back in town. We continued for a few more minutes, and the car stopped again. The voices of the prison guards approached again. The door opened slowly once again. And again came the order: "Get out!" I recognised the distinctive smell of the

prison again, the smell of damp, the smell of weakened flesh of captive people. Was it the same prison? Had we just gone on a day trip?

The guards removed our handcuffs. I was back in the large section of our prison. There were only about twenty of us now. Where were all the other prisoners? The section had been full of people, nearly three hundred. No-one knew a thing.

In the evening a guard came and looked at us surprised, his mouth gaping open.

“Do you realise that you’re blessed?”

“What?”

“You’re still alive.”

“What do you mean? Does that mean that the others...?”

“Yes, they were killed in the desert. That tyre saved you.”

I swear on all car tyres, the next miracle followed soon. In Iraqi slang, we call prison “behind the sun”. It seemed clear to me that I would never reach life “in front of the sun” ever again. To walk out from the dark side into the brightness of light bulbs seemed to belong to the realm of impossibility. But the day came when the government called an amnesty of all political prisoners. Because my charge was so minor and insignificant, along with all the other minor, insignificant prisoners, I was allowed to see the light of the sun once again. The significant, major prisoners had been killed a long time ago. I waited a month for my release. It was such a long month, longer than a decade. But at long last I was again, “in front of the sun”. I got in a taxi and shortly afterwards was standing in front of the door of my parents’ house. I knocked. My mother’s face appeared.

“Yes?”

“Hello!”

“Hello.”

“How are you?”

“Fine, and you?”

“Fine, thanks. Don’t you recognise me?”

“No, who are you? Are you looking for one of the boys?”

“Do you really not recognise me?”

“No!”

“It’s Rasul.”

She looked at me speechless, took a deep breath and fell unconscious to the floor. She didn’t recognize me! I’d left with a dark brown tan and a good weight of 85 kilograms; I’d come back

weighing 55 kilos, as soft as a piece of Gouda cheese. A year and a half of hardly any bread and no sun had changed me beyond recognition.

I swear on the amnesty that this miracle brought yet another miracle, which really and truly saved me. This miracle was to be able to flee Iraq. As expected, the gods and devils of the government still harboured the desire to see me behind bars again – or better still hanging from the ceiling in the place of a fan. They sent me an official letter, which demanded that I end my studies and report to the military. In addition, I was to report to the security police. So I decided to flee. I had absolutely no desire to be “behind the sun” once more.

I left my family’s neighbourhood and lived in hiding with relatives in another district. There were so many policemen on the streets that you might have thought they were their own species. But thanks to a friend called Abba, I could remain in above ground. In the space of a few months, he supplied me with more than fifteen fake ID cards and as many different names and jobs. Each time I had to learn my new name and the details that went with it by heart. I still wonder today which one of them I actually was, and above all, who they all were.

Finally the day came when I could leave all those names behind me to sail with my own name across the world’s oceans. It wasn’t easy getting a passport in Iraq, but I managed it. You had to provide two official documents: one confirming that you had completed military service and one confirming that you were not subject to a travel ban. On top of that, the whole undertaking cost one million Iraqi Dinars in the form of 1000 US Dollars. With the best will in the world, I couldn’t fulfil all three conditions. Of course I was of course subject to a travel ban, of course I hadn’t registered with the military, and of course I didn’t have a million Iraqi Dinars to hand, let alone any American Dollars.

An acquaintance of my older brother was a policeman and had many contacts with the different Baghdad authorities. He offered to change my data at the authorities and to get me a passport with which I would be able to flee to Jordan. But he needed 2000 Dollars to do it. 2000 Dollars! Where could I get so much money from? This time the women in the family were the ones who saved me. My sisters sold their jewellery and my mother sold her part of her father’s house to her brother. So I got the money together, although my family had hardly enough to live on.

In the space of a week, this acquaintance of my brother managed to change all my data. One and a half years of imprisonment for political reasons turned into one and a half years of military service and a fleeing beggar turned into a student at the Art College. Finally, I had in my possession a passport with my real name. Even the travel ban disappeared from the computer for 48 hours, which meant I had a window of two days to reach Jordan. After all the bribes were paid, there was exactly 30 Dollars left over. The acquaintance gave them back to me as an helping hand for my journey.

I said goodbye to my family and got on the bus. It left the Iraqi border behind and travelled on towards Amman. Even today I still cannot believe that I actually managed to leave Iraq. Years later I was still pursued by a horrible nightmare that the Iraqi police had arrested me at the border, and in tear I was begging them to release me again.

On the other side of the world, in Jordan, two men in uniform suddenly got on the bus. They sat down behind me. Oh God, no! What do they want from me? They’re armed. Damn it. Should I get off and run away? They’re only Jordanian soldiers. But soldiers are soldiers. Maybe the Iraqi government has set them on to me!

I spent the long hours until our arrival in Amman with these and similar thoughts. I grabbed my bag, got off the bus and ran. I ran like a world champion sprinter. After a while, I stood still, sweat pouring

down me, and turned around. No-one was behind me. People on the street were looking at me, as though I wasn't quite right in the head. An old man stood in front of his food shop and beckoned me over to him.

"What's the matter, my son? Why are you running like that?"

"Nothing!"

"Where are you from?"

"I'm Iraqi."

"Ah. Come and have a drink of water."

He gave me a glass of water and a slap on the back.

"Don't worry. It's not Iraq here, you're in Jordan."

I swear on all forged documents: I didn't plan any of these miracles, they just happened, after long cruel times.

When my feet landed in Africa, I lived there for years without one single miracle. All of my attempts to cross the Mediterranean failed. I took on any old job just to survive, until the day came when I met Miriam. I can still remember her smell. The smell of the sea on the beach in the evening. She must have been in her early twenties: a round, white face with red lips, as though coloured with chilli. We met for the first time in the "Grand Tourist" Hotel in Omar Al-Mokhtar Street in Tripoli. She had a job as chambermaid. Every morning she came into my room with a friendly greeting, "Welcome to the Grand Tourist Hotel!", smiled, emptied the bin and then left. Was she joking? An old building, six or seven stories high, the hotel had nothing at all to do with tourists: the guests were almost exclusively foreigners, gays, whores, alcoholics, dealers and thieves. And there were huge amounts of rubbish, too. And a toilet in the corridor, perfectly suited to all manner of things, except for going to the toilet.

Miriam wasn't just a chambermaid, but also a whore. I paid her for the first night and told her that I only wanted to talk, not screw.

"Why?" she asked, surprised.

"I've never paid for sex."

However, we did sleep together that night. The second night she gave me the money back. Suddenly it was something like love, like those unique feelings which you don't expect and can't understand. We were together for a month. She even wanted to pay for my stay at the hotel, because I didn't have much money left. And although a night at the hotel only cost one dollar, I couldn't afford it. She explained to me:

"With the others, I'm just doing my job, but I sleep with you because I want to."

She never would tell me why she sold her body. The only thing I learned about her was that she was from Morocco and had been working in the hotel for two years. The hotel belonged to a police chief,

who was well-known in Tripoli as a pimp. “Policeman or pimp – there’s not much difference here”, she said, shrugging her shoulders.

She also had to hand over a share of her earnings to the pimp.

“There are things it’s best not to know, because they can be dangerous. But believe me, there’s a sad story behind every whore and every nun.”

During that time I tried again and again to find a job, but could only find odd jobs like construction work. I was worried about my passport too, because it was only valid for another month. Getting it extended at the Iraqi embassy was out of the question. I knew what to expect there. The next few weeks were difficult and worrying. The Libyan police could deport me to Egypt at any time. And then the Egyptians would send me back to Jordan, and the Jordanians to Iraq. Then came the night that changed everything.

I was walking along the beach promenade one evening and was watching the boats and the ships before returning to Omar-Al-Mokhtar Street, to get something to eat. I crossed Green Square and ambled along towards a falafel stand. Suddenly five men barred my way. I couldn’t see their faces clearly. They started beating me and didn’t stop until I was lying motionless on the floor. What on earth was that? What happened? I had absolutely no idea what it was about, until one of them hissed:

“You piece of Iraqi shit! If we see you once more with Miriam, you’re dead.”

I lay there on the ground, looked up to the stars in the sky and couldn’t hold back my tears. With great difficulty I stood up and tried to go back to the hotel. My whole body hurt. I dragged myself through the piles of rubbish that the street sellers had discarded. Outside the hotel there was a man with my bag. When he saw me, he threw it at my feet and disappeared behind the door. I took the bag and went to the beach promenade, lay down on the ground and put my head on the bag. And so I fell asleep, utterly exhausted.

Never-ending nightmares tormented me, but then suddenly I saw Miriam’s face. Except it wasn’t a dream. The sun was shining and Miriam took me by the hand. We got into a car. The driver didn’t quite look Arabic. Miriam didn’t say a word; instead she kissed me non-stop. The driver was Turkish, as I later learnt. He dropped us off outside a flat in the centre of town. Miriam took my passport and gave it to the Turk. He promised to return as quickly as possible. Miriam fetched a damp towel and began to wash my wounds. Afterwards she took a packet of Marlboros out of her hand bag and put it on the table in front of me. Then she went into the kitchen to make some tea. With a cup of tea in her hand, she told me that the Turk was arranging a visa for Turkey for me.

“But that’s impossible! My passport expires soon and the Turks will never give an Iraqi a visa just like that.”

“You don’t have to know about the details. But you’re going to Turkey today.”

“And what about you? Are you coming too?”

“I can’t. It’s my fate to stay here.”

“But if you can get a visa for me, then you must be able to get one for yourself too.”

“You’re like a child. You’ve no idea what goes on out there in the world.”

After I’d drunk some tea and smoked a cigarette, we got into bed and I fell asleep. I woke up and I could hear Miriam. “So?”

“I’ve got the visa and the ticket. The ship sails this afternoon at four”, answered the Turk.

Miriam looked at the clock on the wall. “We’ve got two hours.”

I boarded the ship. Miriam stood on the harbour. With one hand she waved at me, with the other she wiped away her tears.

Since then I’ve heard nothing more from Miriam. In the space of one year I sent her six letters. I posted them to the hotel. But not once did I get a reply.

I swear on Miriam that I myself can hardly believe what I’m writing here. What happened after that wouldn’t even happen in a fairytale. For example, what happened in Istanbul. I was sitting with twenty Kurds in a two-bedroom flat on the top floor which was barely thirty square metres.

There was also a Turkmen from Iraq. Ahmed was his name and he was very handsome, and dreamed of going to Germany and becoming a great artist there. The flat belonged to the people smuggler, who was supposed to get us to Greece soon. The smuggler had run into me on Taksim Square. He came straight up to me and asked me in broken English:

“Greece?”

“What?”

“Are you Iraqi, Iranian, Pakistani or Afghan? Greece?”

“I’m Iraqi.”

“Me too, but I’m Kurdish.”

“Great!”

“Do you want to go by foot or by car?”

“What’s the difference?”

“By foot it takes nearly twenty days and costs 500 Dollars. By car it only takes two days, but it’s 1500 Dollars.”

“I haven’t got much money. So by foot please.”

“Come with me.”

People smugglers know their clientele very well. A refugee doesn’t walk around the streets like a normal person. He thinks everyone around him is a policeman. He’s suspicious of everyone. He’s not interested in the shop windows, or posters, or even women. He only observes people’s faces and his eyes wander here and there anxiously. Like a clock that’s gone mad. He’s constantly turning around

and his fears are projected on his face. I probably exhibited these symptoms very clearly and I was easy to recognise. Later I learnt that many of the smugglers have this ability; people call it the Smuggler's Seventh Sense.

None of the residents in the flat had a passport. All of them had entered Turkey illegally from Iraq. My passport had also expired in the meantime, and so was unusable. That meant for all of us that we had to stay in the flat the whole time so as not to fall into the hands of the Turkish police. There was a very clear arrangement: the door could only be opened after three knocks. But one afternoon, someone hammered five or six times on it. We all stood there, paralysed with fear. Fear had completely demoralised me. I could only think about being deported to Iraq and landing in the hands of the Iraqi police again. As quick as a flash the door was broken down and three policemen stood before us. They were shouting at us wildly and pushed us up against the wall. A fat policeman with a mole on his nose kicked a Kurd in the stomach. He fell to the floor and began to throw up. Having seen that, my gaze fell on the open window of our small room, which led directly on to the roof of the building next door. The two other policemen were trying to get the Kurd back on his feet. The one with the mole was looking on. I pushed myself off forcefully from the wall, ran like lightning to the window and jumped out. Behind me I heard a shout. Someone was following me. The buildings were high, about ten stories. I ran and ran and could hear women on the street and on the roofs opposite. They were yelling with all their might: "hırsız, hırsız, hırsız – thief, thief, thief".

I reached the fifth building. All the others were separated by an intersecting street. Just my luck. I stopped and turned around. Behind me I could see Ahmed the Turkmen and one of the three policemen, who was watching us through the window. Unfortunately there was no door on the roof of the last building. I looked down. Three stories below I could see a balcony. My eyes searched left and right. Only a gutter and several window sills. I jumped and landed with one foot on the gutter. I leaped again onto a windowsill. Ahmed was right behind me. The window sill broke under our weight. We landed on the balcony. Once I'd managed to stand up, Ahmed was already standing at the door into the building. Damn it, locked! We looked at each other, helplessly.

"Now we're in the shit."

All of a sudden, we heard a voice: "Gelmek – Come!" The voice was that of an old man, leaning out of a window. He waved us over and made clear hand signals that we should climb through the window. Ahmed clambered in first with me following him.

The man offered us a seat and began to question us. Ahmed spoke good Turkish, like all Iraqi Turkmen. He translated for me. After we had got him to understand that we weren't thieves but Iraqis who wanted to go to Greece, the man asked:

"Are you Shi'ites?"

Ahmed answered, "I'm not, but my friend Rasul is."

The old man smiled. "My name is Ali and I'm an Alevi. We Alevis have a lot in common with the Shi'ites. The Turkish government makes our life hell here, too."

He stood up, shook my hand, hugged me and kissed me and called me "Brother Rasul".

He brought us food and drink and spoke with Ahmed the whole time about Iraq. Ahmed asked me things from time to time and translated for me in a few places. After a couple of hours, Ali said he

would go down to the street and see if there were any policeman. A few minutes later he was back. "All clear, no police to be seen."

The old man offered us a bed for the night, but we decided to go. We thanked him and said our farewells warmly. I've never seen Ali again.

Ahmed knew other smugglers. He found me a Kurdish one, he himself went with a Turkmen. I met Ahmed again later in Athens in Omonia Square. He didn't recognize me. He was standing next to a smuggler, who had several unsavoury-looking bodyguards with him. I greeted him. Ahmed looked at me. But his blue eyes looked empty and had huge black circles in the middle. He wasn't as good looking as he had been back then in Turkey, he looked a wreck. A few refugees told me he had become his smuggler's "sex-slave". Apparently he had got Ahmed hooked on drugs and now he accompanied the smuggler as his "wife".

I swear on Ali and all the Alevis: I didn't want to need any more miracles. Of course I didn't; what kind of fate would that be? But I didn't have any choice. The next miracle came completely unexpectedly too. This time I was with a smuggler and twenty-three other refugees, already on the Greek side of the Ebrus river by this point. We had been walking for nearly three weeks from the Turkish border near Edirne, past Komotini, as far as Xanti, the last station. During the day we slept in woods or in the mountains. We walked, or rather we ran, from six in the evening to five in the morning along the hidden paths through Greece. From Xanti it was impossible to walk any further. There were only impassable mountains or the sea, as the smuggler explained. We had to wait for a lorry, which would take us as far as Thessaloniki or Athens. We waited behind a hill for a whole week, near an old, deserted factory. There were only small fields and dusty earth around us. The lorry never came, but bandits did instead, one afternoon, shortly before sunset. We heard only the shots being fired. The smuggler suddenly jumped up. I and five other men fled with him. We ran as fast as we could and didn't look back. But we could hear the shots going past us to our right and left. I fell several times, but each time got up and ran further. We headed straight for the factory and hid. No-one followed us. The smuggler looked at me, questioningly,

"Rasul, are you injured?"

"What?"

"Shit, you're bleeding! They got you."

I hadn't noticed anything at all and I couldn't feel any pain. But I had indeed been hit. One bullet had gone straight through my right hand while another was lodged deep in my left calf. The smuggler examined me more closely.

"Those aren't real bullets. They look as though they're for animals. So they weren't real policemen."

We waited another two hours before going back to our camp. That's the way all smugglers behave: after two or three hours, they go back to the beginning. When we arrived, all our group was there. They told us that the men wanted money. And they got it. There were seven of them, all armed and they were wearing masks. No-one knew if they were policemen or simply bandits. The smuggler decided to stay there and spend the night. He wanted to find a solution the next day. But in the night, my leg began to hurt. A really intense, throbbing pain. The next morning, the smuggler turned to me:

“You have to travel on your own by train. Our lorry won’t come for another three to five days at least and you won’t last that long. In three days’ time you’ll be a dead man. I’ll buy you a ticket and then you can travel to Athens by train. When you arrive, you’ll be saved. And if the police catch you, you’ll be saved too because they’ll take you to hospital.”

I agreed. A Kurd named Imad said he’d had enough and he wanted to come with me. Shortly before midday our smuggler arrived with a car being driven by a Greek. The smuggler gave us both tickets and explained to us that the Greek would take us to the station.

We shaved and put clean clothes on, clothes that every refugee has in his rucksack for such occasions. Then we got in the car. The Greek didn’t say a word. He drove us through a small town and then stopped next to a low building, on which there was a sign saying : “Xanti Station”. He left straight away. Two minutes later he came back and accompanied us to the platform. Five minutes later we got into the train and he said good bye with a quick “Yassu – Bye!”

The train travelled on. After a while the ticket inspector came up and checked our tickets. He said: “Passport.”

I said: “No.”

He brought us right to the front of the train, near the engine and tried to make us understand that we should wait there for him. He went into the driver’s compartment and picked up the telephone. Imad and I looked at each other and didn’t make a sound. Of course, we understood what this meant for us. The train began to travel more slowly. There seemed to be a small town nearby. The inspector came back out of the driver’s compartment and took us towards the middle of the train. The train stopped, the doors opened and passengers got off. Imad looked at me and whispered: “No police.” Without hesitating we jumped out of the train and ran down the street. It was dark and no-one followed us.

We ran as far as a large park. There were lots of people there, eating or chatting.

“Man, it’s just like in an action film!” Imad grinned.

“Yes, you’re right, an action film based on a true story.”

Fortunately, I wasn’t under any pain, bearing in mind there was a bullet in my body. We spent our time in the park observing people in the street and admiring the beautiful Greek women. Time went by quickly and we didn’t really know what we should do. In the park I spoke to a young lad, who had a bottle of beer and some peanuts beside him.

“Hello, can you help me? I would like a ticket to Athens. I have money. Can you buy for me?”

Exactly where we were and the name of the town was at this point of no interest to us. I was always of the opinion that we were in Kavala. However, as I learnt years later, there are no trains and therefore no station there. In fact, we were in Drama. You could hardly have found a name that better suited our predicament.

My English wasn’t great, but the young Greek’s English wasn’t much better. However, he gave the impression that he was enjoying our little conversation. And so it seemed that our tragic drama in Drama had found a solution. I told the Greek that we were Iraqis and didn’t want to buy our tickets ourselves. He accompanied us to a small park next to the station building. Then he went in alone. A

short while later he came back and told us that a ticket to Athens cost 20 Dollars and the train left at one o'clock in the morning. Imad quickly gave him 50 Dollars. The boy bought the tickets. He changed the rest of the dollars into Drachma. Imad said he could keep the money. He looked at us and smiled and put the money in his pocket. Finally he pointed out the clock over the station entrance: "You have only thirty minutes." He said goodbye and we thanked him.

We waited. It was a very long half hour. Imad thought that every single person in the vicinity of the station was a policeman. I tried to calm him down, even though I had the same feeling. But he swore on all his saints that they all looked like policemen. Despite that, we slowly moved in the direction of the station concourse. Shortly before we arrived, a bus stopped outside the entrance and a group of Africans, led by blonde Greeks, got out. Within in a short while the small station began to reverberate with all the noise of a Turkish bazaar. Everywhere a happy "Hello Africa!" was to be heard. I quickly grabbed Imad by the arm and we mixed inconspicuously with the group of Africans, under whose protection we could board the train unnoticed. Imad though it was better if we separated. "If they arrest one of us, they might not go looking for the other one."

So he went right and I went left. I sat opposite an old lady. She was probably about seventy years old and was the image of my grandmother, who had died while I was in prison in Baghdad. I even thought that I recognised the smile on the old lady's face. I rested my head on the headrest and closed my eyes.

Suddenly I felt a soft hand on my right hand. My eyes shot open in fear. The old lady had leant over me and was looking at me with concern. She was examining my wound which had become inflamed during the day and was now looking quite bad. She spoke to me in Greek. I could only answer: "I am from Iraq."

She only knew a few English word. She said: "Ticket."

I held it out to her, and she took it from me. She whispered to me, soothingly, "it's okay!" and tried to make me understand with her hands: "Sleep in peace. I'll look after everything else."

I think that the word "Iraq" was enough for her to understand the situation. During the whole journey she was my guardian angel. When the ticket inspection happened, she showed both of our tickets and I am almost sure that she told the inspector that I was with her. She even bought cheese, bread and a coke for me. I slept like a baby. A couple of times I briefly woke up, but then went straight back to sleep and slept until the next day when the train arrived in Athens. She took me to the Red Cross, where she left me in the care of a nurse with a friendly "bye bye!"

I don't exactly know whether this old lady was a Greek goddess in my deliriousness or in reality. I only know that in the train severe pain took hold of me, pain that I hadn't been aware of until then because of the stressful journey. I probably wasn't aware of everything because of that, but the old lady's face, full of love, has stayed in my memory until today. I didn't have the faintest idea where Imad was. And the doctor at the Red Cross told me, "It's a miracle that you're still alive".

I swear on the old Greek goddess, I can hate and love the world at the same time and the people in it, just the same. There are always murderers and saviours, haters and lovers. But I decided early on to take the world as it is. I know that at some point a miracle always occurs in my life. That is my comfort in this world. The next small miracle happened quickly. A few days before New Year. I was in Patras. This small, unassuming town had a beautiful big harbour, from which many ships sailed for Italy. There were refugees staying all over Patras, in old houses, in old factories, in the park. I camped with them for weeks too. I heard that the police wouldn't operate such strict checks between

Christmas and the New Year. A whole group of refugees disappeared every day. There were noticeably fewer and fewer of them. But until that point I had always had bad luck in Patras. I had been arrested four times by the stocky harbour police. And each time I was ejected from the harbour with a hefty kick from an even stronger policeman.

On 29th December I was ambling gloomily along the harbour wall and watching the lorries, the ships and the regular passengers longingly. The sun had just begun to set. Suddenly a storm broke accompanied by a heavy shower of rain. The harbour became completely empty all at once. A lorry without a tarpaulin was next to a big ship, ready to sail. Instinctively I climbed the wall, jumped down on the other side, ran straight towards the lorry and hid in the back of it. I found a large black plastic sheet, threw it over me and lay as quiet as a mouse without moving at all underneath it. About ten minutes later the rain stopped. I heard the driver get in. He started the engine and drove straight onto the ship. Another twenty minutes later it started moving.

A long time passed before all the voices finally died away. I looked around the cargo deck. There were so many lorries that I was spoilt for choice. I decided to look for another lorry for safety reasons. I found a white lorry with writing saying "Italy" on the door. Why not this one? And so I got out my refugee equipment out: a small razor blade, a roll of sticky tape and a plastic bag. I made a cut down the side of the lorry with the blade and climbed through it. Cardboard boxes were piled up to the roof. But I still managed to find a good place where I could lie down. Then I used the tape to close up the cut from the inside. I used the plastic bag as a pee-bottle.

During the whole journey I heard nothing but the whistle of the wind, the roar of the waves and the creaking of the lorries which were rocking to and fro along with the ship. The voyage was very long. I had to remain lying down quietly in my spot for the whole time. Finally the ship stopped. The lorry set off with a roar. It was more than twenty minutes before it stopped again. I heard the driver get out and slam the door shut. I waited for about another five minutes and then I peeled the tape off the cut in the side, carefully peered out with my head and looked around curiously. The sky was completely dark. I looked down. I was in a harbour. In any harbour. Somewhere. I thought straightway, it could only be a European harbour. All the lorries and number-plates had writing in Latin script. There was hardly a person to be seen.

I jumped down to the ground and walked slowly to the harbour perimeter fence. Very high. On the other side I could see a brightly lit street, with lots of people. I had always heard from the smugglers that refugees could do whatever they liked in Italy, except for one thing: be arrested by the police within a harbour. In that case they would be immediately deported. To Turkey or anywhere else. Outside the harbour, you were allowed to stay in Italy whatever happened, because Italy is a land of asylum.

And so I ran the last bit like a horse straight to the perimeter fence and forced myself – I know not how – with a powerful effort onto the other side like an Olympic athlete. I looked behind me, but I couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. And so I tried to continue as inconspicuously as possible. How I managed this particularly daring jump, I can't explain. But fear gives you extraordinary strengths, if not the power of flight.

Once I had arrived on the well-lit street, I asked directions to the station and then for trains to Rome. I was now sure that I was in Italy. You could hardly miss the numerous pizzerias. But I was scarcely interested to know which town it was. My only concern was the next train to Rome. In the large station I bought myself a ticket and travelled that very same night, without police or ticket inspections, to the capital city. Much later I found out that I had landed in Bari harbour. In the early

morning I reached Rome, where I met my ever-faithful friends, the refugees, before I had even left the station. They had already set up house in all corners of the huge Termini Station.

At about nine o'clock in the evening, I joined a crowd of people, who led me straight to a big building in a huge square. A man was making a speech there, and judging by the applause he was well-known. Was he the pope? After many years and as many New Year's Eves, I learnt where I had celebrated my first New Year's Eve on European soil. It was the Victor Emmanuel monument, or the typewriter, as it was ironically known by the inhabitants of the imposing metropolis.

I swear on rain and on New Year's Eve, I don't want to have any more miracles. I had experienced enough miracles and I only wanted peace. But in spite of everything, another tiny miracle came my way. I had already arrived in Germany, in Bayreuth to be precise, in a home for asylum-seekers. The judge and my interpreter had listened to my whole story. They said that they could only grant me asylum if I could prove that I had been imprisoned for political reasons in Iraq. Proof! What did they imagine? How many Iraqi torturers would be so kind as to confirm to me in writing that they had nearly beaten me to death, or done who knows what else to me? But then, luckily, I remembered a day during my stay in prison, when we had been visited by a European organisation. After the second Gulf War the United Nations had demanded that the Iraqi government allow a few international organisations to inspect Iraqi authorities and prisons and to produce a report on them. These organisations had also written down lists of prisoners, a measure which I had then thought was insane and completely pointless. However, I did think it appropriate to tell the judge about it. She promised me that she would make inquiries of Amnesty International about me. A few weeks later I received a visit from my interpreter. He was grinning triumphantly and looking at me as though I was a hero: "Damn it, they really did find your name."

I swear on Amnesty International that I have wondered so often how on earth I am still alive. Why did all these miracles occur in my life? Why me? I don't think there is an answer to questions like that. But I have got my own, very personal saints: Amnesty International, the rain, New Year, the Red Cross, the old Greek goddess, Ali and the Alevi, Miriam, forged documents, my mother and my sisters, the amnesty and last but not least, car tyres. They are all a comfort to me in the storms of this world.

II

18:14. My girlfriend Sophie's child-like smile awaits me on the platform of Munich central station. Her eyes light up when she sees me and she waves to greet me with both hands in the air. I'm pleased to see her again after my disconcerting journey. After a heart-felt embrace, we get straight into her car.

Should I tell her about my experience during my journey? I mean, the whole thing with the manuscript? But what would I say? That I found a manuscript with my whole story in it, written by a stranger named Rasul Hamid? And that there was neither an address nor a telephone number on the envelope? Should I tell her I met a ghost called Rasul? It's all more than unrealistic, it's actually absurd. I can already hear the categorical order to "go and see a psychiatrist, for goodness' sake! How many times do I have to tell you?!" ringing in my ears.

Finally, after dinner, I make my excuses and ask her to give me some time to myself. I'm completely exhausted...

I lie on the couch and think about my experience during my journey. A horrible nightmare. What does it all mean? How can someone have simply written down my story and put it in an envelope right next to me? If someone stole my story, why would they have made sure I got it? And all the details from my life that no-one knows, besides me? How did they find them out? Even the handwriting is the same as mine, right down to the last dot on the last i. Small and practically illegible, and in pencil, too. Only a few names and descriptions of the odd event have been changed. That doesn't mean anything though. It's still my story, and mine alone. And then the idea and the construction of the story. It's exactly my style. How could they have stolen that from my head? I didn't tell anyone about it. OK, lots of people knew about my plans to write a book about my life, but no-one knew exactly how I wanted to do it, not even me myself until recently. I'd been brooding for a long time. I kept trying to find a way so that you could start reading it at anytime, anywhere. A beginning and an end in every chapter. Each chapter its only entity, and yet an integral and indispensable part of the whole. A novel, short stories, a biography and fables, all brought together in one work. Damn it! It was my idea and mine alone! And now, is one of the many demons in my life reappearing, wanting to take everything away from me: my life, my idea, even my soul?

I'd been harbouring the desire to write down my Odyssey, my journey on the ghostly boat. I'd never managed it. I had tried to start time and time again, for the last five years at least. And time and time again I stopped, because I wasn't convinced by it, or because I didn't have a good construction or simply because I wasn't satisfied. I always knew exactly what I wanted to write, but never how! Nearly a year ago, however, I'd had the stirring idea, but I just hadn't had time to implement it. So really, I should be pleased that someone else had taken it away from me and done it for me! The main thing, at the end of the day, is that now I've got my story written down, and I'm holding it in my hands... or maybe not? I just want to sleep...

The sun's shining into the room. Sophie kisses me and whispers in my ear: "Wake up, habibi, the weather outside is wonderful! Remember, you wanted to send your book to the publishers today. Get up!"

I look through the window at the green foliage on the trees and hear the birds. It's nearly idyllic.

"Really, what a beautiful day!" I get up, have a shower and make my way to the university. First of all I go to a lecture and then go to the computer room to read the news. At midday, I go to the university café. It's something I've only just started to enjoy; sitting in a café, reading, writing or just watching people.

Completely empty. For a moment I have the feeling that I'm all alone in this town. The people have disappeared. Or more accurately, they were never there at all. Completely empty. All light and clean. No students, no cars or buses, no fountains in Geschwister Scholl Square, no university buildings. Nothing. Just me and the wide, empty Ludwig Strasse, endless nothingness around me. Where actually am I? What am I doing here? Where are all the others? All these questions pound through my brain like drums at an African festival. Completely empty like an endless desert, bare mountains or clear water. But also eerie like a forest after a violent storm. And my questions, loud and yet quiet, resonant and yet voiceless.

I come back to my senses after a while. Once again, I lost all sense of bearings in my mind. But, thank God, as I look over Ludwig Strasse, I can't hear the African drums: everything's back, the old university buildings, the cars, the students...

I look around me again, more carefully this time. The girls and boys, ladies and gentlemen, are constantly on the move in summertime. They saunter along down Ludwig Strasse indulgently, and

then along Leopold Strasse until they come into the freedom of Munich. And there's hardly a seat to be had in the pavement terraces of the cafés. There are pigeons and sparrows everywhere.

Some of them have even made their nests in the eaves of the majestic buildings along Schwabinger Prachtallee. A male pigeon is seducing a female one. The male spreads out his feathers, pulling them along the ground behind him, swaggering around the female, flirting with her: "coo-coo, coo-coo". The female struts around him like a queen, her head held high. Sometimes she moves slowly, sometimes quickly, which makes the male go crazy. Not far away from the male pigeon, a male student is trying to chat up a girl. The object of his affections smiles and he swaggers around her. She marches straight towards the entrance to the underground station; he follows blindly along behind her. Another student yells out over the street, waving madly, "Jonas, wait for me!"

I go into the café and take a seat at a free table. I put the rucksack between my feet. I put a notepad, a book, a packet of cigarettes and a lighter on the table and light a cigarette...

14:16. I open my rucksack and place an empty envelope on the table. A few people leave and others come in. A woman with two adolescent children sits down at the next table. They're not saying a word to each other. The girl has got headphones on and is listening to music from a tiny MP3 player. The boy, next to her, switches on his laptop. The woman has her mobile to her ear. The waitress finally appears. She's young, between 18 and 20. Her hair is dyed red, she's wearing jeans and a white t-shirt that says "Sexy Girl". Small firm breasts bulge underneath it. I order a large coffee and a glass of tap water.

14:45. I open my rucksack, take the manuscript out, put it into the empty envelope and seal the envelope.