

Ohrfeige, Abbas Khider
Translated by Philip Minns (p. 127-147)

DEAR FRAU SCHULZ, it was on a rainy day in April that I learned that my time in Bayreuth was up and that I had to move on. I was sitting in our room feeling bored and was leafing through a women's magazine that I had picked up in the Caritas office. It's full of pictures of skinny, half-naked women with lovely skin. Even the men who sometimes appear in the photos look absolutely perfect, like Greek gods on Mount Olympus. Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. It was Azrael, our caretaker angel. He handed me a letter.

The envelope was green. I thought at first that it was the answer to my asylum claim. But there were only a few lines with a stamp and a signature. I didn't understand a word of it, so I rushed out to find Rafid to ask him to translate it for me. He was standing around outside the kitchen with Salim, Ali and a few other Iraqis.

“Aha! A green letter: the colour of the Prophet Mohammed and the almighty German authorities. Let's have a look!”

It looked as if a lot of us had received the same letter. It said that we should pack our things because at nine the next morning, we would be transferred

somewhere else. It said nothing about where and no reason was given for the move either. I wanted to go straight to Caritas and ask them where I was going next. But Rafid said he had already tried to find out and that there was nobody there.

“This may be our last evening together in Bayreuth”, Salim said. “Let’s cook a meal - our last supper in Bayreuth. Who knows, maybe we’ll be going to different hostels tomorrow. Let’s have a farewell party. With rice and tomato sauce!”

Salim loved cooking. Every week when we got our food parcels, he would try and swap a few things with the Yugoslavs or the Kazakhs, because there was a lot in our parcels that we didn’t eat: salami, pasta, ready meals and tinned soups, coloured boiled eggs and those funny yellow things they call fish fingers. Salim would swap them for beans, rice and vegetables. But he never managed to get any red or white meat– that was a real luxury and we had hardly eaten any of it since we had fled our countries. Only once in the last few weeks had we found some minced beef in one of our food parcels. But it was no longer red and had turned a brownish colour. Even so, Salim was able to conjure up no less than three fabulous dishes from the small amount of mince: meatballs, meat sauce and another minced meat invention of his that was so unusual that I can’t even begin to describe it now. But that was the last we saw of the meat we all longed for and we remained involuntary vegetarians.

Salim was capable of knocking up a really tasty dish from next to nothing. His cooking skills came with a story that he told over and over again, and all the new arrivals on our floor had to listen to it. It was the only aspect of his life that he was willing to talk about in any detail. Otherwise, he was quiet and placid. We called him Salim the Silent.

He had left Iraq at the age of twenty-five because, after graduating with a degree in economics, he was unable to find a job. The country was under a trade embargo and on top of that Salim was under the thumb of his father and he was sick and tired of it. The government charged two thousand dollars for a passport, so he went for a cheaper solution and set out, with the help of the Kurds, to cross the country's northern border into Syria. Even that set him back five hundred dollars and he only just managed to scrape it together. When he got to Damascus, he couldn't even make himself a cup of tea or fry an egg. Not because he had run out of money, but simply because he didn't know how. In Baghdad, there had been too many women in his family. Salim had his four sisters, as well as his mother, grandmother and sisters-in-law, so he had never in his life washed a dish, ironed a shirt, cleaned his shoes or made himself a cup of tea. Until then, he didn't even know what the word "pepper" meant, or what yogurt had to do with yogurt soup, although he loved both and ate them every day.

Salim found a job in a toy factory where he took care of its finances. However, compared to the local employees, he was paid a very small salary, what they called a “foreigner’s salary”. He managed to survive during this difficult period by eating cheap food from street vendors, like Falafel, Humus and Ful or Makali and at home almost nothing but beans, fish and other foods out of a tin, simply because he wasn’t able to do much else.

A few months later, he found out that there were two countries willing to grant visas to Iraqis and even guarantee them a job. You know, Frau Schulz, even back in the early nineties, we Mesopotamians were unwelcome in almost every country of the world. With the exception of Yemen and Libya. Salim applied to an employment agency specialised in finding jobs for Iraqis and was offered a position as financial manager of an oil company not far from Sanaa. Once he got there, he stuck to his fast food, to start with at least. But later, he met some fellow countrymen. There were six Iraqi families in the area, everyone knew everyone else and they formed a tightly knit community. As the only single man, Salim was often invited over for a meal. It was the best thing that could have happened to him. He loved children, played with the cute little kids and was treated to Iraqi delicacies, just like he had been at home in Baghdad.

One day, one of his hosts joked that Salim should

stop eating his family out of house and home and learn to cook for himself. Everybody laughed and even Salim smiled at the idea. But one of the ladies present took the remark seriously and made a suggestion:

“We women get together once a week to cook. So if Salim would like to join us, he can learn all about Iraqi cooking”.

Surprisingly, Salim agreed immediately, although he had no idea what he was letting himself in for. But he considered the offer a great honour and a mark of trust because men are usually banned from the kitchen.

So that's how Salim learnt how to cook. From the outset, he played around enthusiastically with spices, vegetables, flour and meat and eventually became so passionate about the whole thing that he started inventing his own recipes, which he named after himself and numbered.

Salim's One to Twelve were famous in the refugee hostel, although he didn't always have the Iraqi ingredients for some of the recipes and used whatever he could get his hands on. My personal favourite was Number Seven: potato wedges with onions, lemon juice, black pepper and olive oil, with a feta cheese topping and baked in the oven.

When his contract with the oil company in Sanaa wasn't renewed after a year, he left Yemen and set out to look for a new home. After an odyssey through several countries he ended up in Germany and became our chief cook in Bayreuth. He didn't think of it as a real job, but then it wasn't the end of his travels though the world's kitchens either. He always used to say that he felt like a sultan when he was standing at a stove. Cooking, he would say, is not a profession, nor a hobby but a way of life.

In spite of our efforts however, our last supper in Bayreuth felt more like a funeral reception than a farewell party.

Nobody said very much and we ate in silence, absorbed in our fears and hopes. Our biggest fear was that we would be dumped in the middle of nowhere. On a mountain for instance, like the one I had seen on my journey from Munich to Zirndorf. The hope was that we would be taken to a proper town, or even a big city where we would be free to move around.

When the bus left Bayreuth the next morning, we still didn't know where we were being taken. There were twenty-two men and three women on board, as well as the driver and an accompanying official. When we asked where we were going, they said that

they didn't know any more than we did, which was obviously a load of rubbish. They clearly didn't want to tell us, which just made us nervous. The two of them hardly looked at us and conferred a lot in low voices.

After a two-hour drive, the women were told to get off the bus in what looked like the back of beyond. We had arrived at their future home. As you would expect with women, they were the only ones with anything you could call luggage: four suitcases and a whole host of plastic bags and baskets that were so full, they looked as if they were about to burst open. We men just had tiny backpacks, and some of us didn't even have that.

Only a few hundred yards further on, again in a total wilderness, a Somali, an Albanian and two Pakistanis were told to get off the bus. We Iraqis were the only ones left. We drove on for quite a while and at one point I could make out a small town in the distance, surrounded by beautiful scenery with mountains.

“That's our destination”, the driver called out, “Niederhofen on the Danube”.

Most of the men, including Ali and Salim, got off the bus and went into a building in the centre of the small town. Three others, Rafid and myself however had to stay on board. We were driven to the edge of town, where there was another hostel for asylum seekers, in a building overlooking the river.

It was an ordinary, four-storey block with two flats on each floor. On the ground floor there was a small office where the caretaker was sitting. He sent Rafid and myself up to the third floor. When we walked into our room, we were surprised to find it furnished with a sofa, a table, two beds and a TV. There was even some crockery in the tiny kitchen. The people who had lived there before us must have been very tidy indeed.

After dumping our things, we left the building straightaway to explore our surroundings and walk into town. It turned out to be only fifteen minutes walk from our new home. In the pedestrian area in front of the town hall, we bumped into Salim and Ali again. We embraced as fervently as if we hadn't seen each other for years. Then we all went off together to look around the town.

Niederhofen on the Danube is a small town with a lot of nice places. A river with a beautiful riverside. A castle on top of a hill. Narrow, winding streets. Half-timbered houses. Tiny, exotic shops and large department stores. Nice cafés and bars. A university. Lots of young people. We even came across one or two doner kebab stands, which made us very happy.

Doner kebab stands were a good sign. Among us asylum seekers, there was a ranking of towns and cities for the whole of Germany. Anyone who could get any information, even if they had only heard it from others, could contribute to it. The doner kebab index showed if there were a lot of Turks and other foreigners who lived in the place and that was an important indicator to all of us as to how attractive it was.

Niederhofen was surprisingly high on the list. But the top-ranking city in the doner kebab index was Berlin, and that's why we all wanted to go there.

Rafid and I didn't get back to the hostel until that evening. We were both quite impressed by the pretty town but also by the fact that there were lots of students and young people there to liven the place up.

When we got upstairs again, we met our neighbours for the first time. They were standing around outside the communal bathroom and toilets. We all introduced ourselves. There were three of them, two Kurds and an Iraqi Turkmen. They became our first nightmare in what seemed like such a peaceful town.

It didn't take us long to nickname them the "H & M gang" although they also shoplifted from C&A. They wore lots of bling jewelry, large studded belts, slicked down hair, excellent Chinese counterfeits of American sneakers and dark, imitation

leather or khaki jackets. The three of them would hang around every afternoon from Monday to Saturday outside H&M and C&A, looking like Mafiosi caricatures from bad gangster films, grouped together like a band of conspirators and sizing up the passers-by with penetrating looks.

Hewe, Foad and Sargon were the “tough guys” of our hostel. Their gang was better known than the German flag and a lot more visible. Everyone in the town, including the homeless, students, potheads, alcoholics and reckless youths knew who they were. I’m sure you’ve seen them too, Frau Schulz. And Rafid and I lived on the same floor as them and farted on the same toilet seat.

There was always an awful lot of noise in their flat. They often threw parties, drank too much and there were people coming and going all day, as if they were running a brothel. Whenever they were in their flat, they were nearly always noisy. It was only in the morning when they went to bed that we got some peace and quiet.

The three of them had marked out their gang’s turf around H&M and C&A. I don’t know how they got away with it as they were always loitering conspicuously in the area and all the items in the shops had protection tags, but they managed to lift stuff regularly and

then flog it for half the price on the streets outside. None of them had a work permit but they all seemed to have loads of money. Rumour had it that they were protected by a powerful German-Polish gangster boss who was a drug dealer and that they were somehow involved in that too. Anyone who didn't go along with their little game or who trespassed on their territory by trying to muscle in on their business was beaten up. It happened to a Moroccan called Mohammed, who lived in the hostel for the homeless. He had tried to steal a shirt from H&M but was caught by the store detective. The three street gangsters knew about in no time at all. As soon as the police had let him go, they beat the shit out of the poor devil. Even though he just wanted to keep the shirt for himself and not sell it, for the H&M gang, he had trespassed on their turf.

Hewe was their ringleader. He had already been arrested several times. Once he broke the nose of a young guy in a bar for making a pass at his girlfriend, Claudia. As a result, he had to spend a few days behind bars.

Claudia, Anna and Birgit were the H&M gang's girlfriends. All three of them went to the vocational school in Niederhofen where they were doing some kind of training course. They were more or less permanent fixtures on our floor; anybody would have thought that they lived in the refugee hostel. Claudia was blonde, didn't say

very much but always had a friendly smile on her face. Birgit on the other hand was dark, very fat and her legs were far too short. Anna too had a disastrous figure: she had almost no neck and her head just sat on her shoulders. She also had an incredibly large backside, a bulging belly but a flat chest. Their parents all came from somewhere in Eastern Europe. I'm not quite sure where, probably the Czech Republic or Poland. But all three of them had been born here and were therefore genuine citizens of Niederhofen.

I don't know any more about the three girlfriends because my German wasn't good enough to be able to talk to them. And even if it had been, it would have been pretty impossible to find out more. Every evening and every weekend they would hang out with the H&M gang. Sometimes they would even bring other girls to the flat with them to party or to smoke joints.

I must admit, Frau Schulz, that I was often jealous of those guys. After all, they had money and they had girls and I was a miserable failure in both areas. But that was basically due to the situation I was in. How could I start chatting up a girl without at least a working knowledge of German and without any money to invite her out? I never got inside any of the four clubs in town. I tried a few times but I was always turned away, so I gave up trying. On the one hand, I didn't want to be treated like dirt by the bouncers and on the other, I was always worried that as soon as I started dancing, my breasts

would jump up and down. I had to be careful everywhere. Even at home in the hostel. In Niederhofen, there were no doors to the shower room. So I used to creep into the bathroom like a thief, have a shower in double-quick time and hope that nobody would see me.

There were regular outbreaks of fighting in the building. Hewe, who could fly off the handle at a moment's notice, was well known for his aggressive behavior. If he said anything at all, it was usually some phrase he had picked up on the street like:

“Actions count, not words”

And more often than not, his actions involved his fists or his favourite toy, an army knife.

Once he got into a quarrel with a girl who had some connection with the local Serbian gang. She complained to her clan and there was a fight. Hewe beat up three of the Serbs right in the middle of the pedestrian area and then pulled out his knife, which only made a serious situation a lot worse. The Serbs ran for it. But Hewe just stood there as if paralysed and, with the tip of his knife, cutting through his jeans, he inflicted a few scratch wounds on himself around the groin. The onlookers had long since called the police and Hewe offered no resistance to arrest. The next day there was a picture of him in the local newspaper. He was mighty proud of himself and stuck the article to the wall above his bed.

That little incident cost him four weeks in jail. I suspect, Frau Schulz, that Hewe pretended to be an Iraqi Arab when he applied for asylum. That was the only explanation I could find. Otherwise, as a Kurd, he would have been deported to Northern Iraq even before the fall of Saddam Hussein, as he was constantly breaking the law. But then, you know more than I do about how your funny old laws work.

After his release, he threw a party in his room and everyone in the hostel was invited. There were a few things to eat and a lot of vodka. I was surprised to hear that Hewe's German was much better all of a sudden. Before his spell in prison he had spoken it only haltingly. Now he was pretty fluent. Hewe told us that the other inmates of the jail were all German.

"It's a great place to learn German", he said. "Here in the refugee hostel, I'm surrounded only by idiots like you lot!"

It sounded absurd, but as I looked around at the faces of the other asylum seekers, I couldn't help feeling that we'd all like to go to prison for a few weeks - just to have a crash course in German.

COMPARED TO BAYREUTH, the local people in Niederhofen played a much greater role in our lives. You, Frau Schulz, were one of the first people we saw on a regular basis.

I don't know why but you always look irritated and stressed out. As if it's always the wrong time of the month and you're constantly suffering from period pains and everything that goes with it. The mere mention of your name was enough to put us all in a bad mood. That's probably because you're responsible for everything that can make our lives easier or more difficult: residence permit, ID card, work, deportation order, the eighty marks, later on forty euros of pocket money, as well as medical certificates.

The only person we really like in your administration is Frau Richter. We all know that her office is best place to go. Even though she never leaves her desk, she really goes out of her way to try and solve our problems. With you and the other officials, on the other hand, all we ever hear is "That's the law!" or "Come back next week!"

Have you any idea, Frau Schulz, what office roulette is? Office roulette is a game that starts when you take your number in the queue and ends when you are called into one of the offices. Depending on the official you end up seeing, things get settled ...or they don't. So, if one of your officials has had a row with his wife or got out of bed on the wrong side that morning, it makes life very difficult for us foreigners. Any visit to your offices is just as much a gamble as throwing a dice.

And you, Frau Schulz, are one of those people who ties up even the smallest matter in reels of red tape, whereas Frau Richter, in very little time, manages to sort most things out. Every time I was standing at the information counter here in the immigration authorities' offices, I could see all the others fidgeting nervously on their seats and saying a quick prayer to Allah so that they wouldn't be called to your office. Frau Richter on the other hand gives us a nice smile when she's talking to us and she has something that neither you, nor any of your male colleagues have: empathy.

But I'm getting too worked up. I must roll myself another joint. Is that OK with you?

Another German we saw quite often, because he would turn up in our building twice a week, was our new Azrael, the caretaker. Like his colleague in Bayreuth, he would bring us our mail and the weekly food parcel. He never stayed a minute longer than four hours and then cleared off again. Sometimes he would try to repair something in our old and run-down

building, but quickly abandoned the job to look around for another one, and then, after exactly four hours, he would put away his tools and go home.

Various policemen would often come to the building too. Whenever something was stolen in town, they would start their search at our place.

The most important people in our lives however, were not you, Frau Schulz, or Azrael, or the cops. No, the most important people were the weekend visitors. Every Saturday and Sunday they would either post themselves right in front of our main door or stroll along the riverbank to see if one of us would venture out. If a refugee did leave the building, they would size him up with expert eyes, as if he were a juicy and tasty piece of meat in the window of the local butcher's shop.

The weekend visitors are rich. They are generous, regularly dine in restaurants or have fun in cocktail bars. They wear Italian shoes, the most expensive French perfumes and their clothes are luxury brands like Chanel. They go on holiday to far away places, and their homes are as magnificently decorated as one of Saddam's Hussein's palaces. Inside, they have everything, including piles of canned food and drink stored in a special pantry. They don't only have a shower but also a bathtub and a guest toilet. In their bedroom is a King size bed, big enough for my whole family to sleep in. Some of them even have statues of Buddha and Persian carpets and are constantly going on about Mediterranean atmosphere.

I never got involved with any of the weekend visitors and only know all this from what I was told. As early as my first weekend in Niederhofen, I had no doubt about what these men and woman wanted from us and why they were hanging around in the area. There were three different species. Either they were drug dealers looking for new runners. Or they were elderly women and men looking for young foreign men to have a good time with. Or they were pimps looking for fresh produce for their regular customers.

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Khaled, one of the other residents of our hostel, whom we called Khaled the Loverboy, was one of the most popular toy boys with elderly men and women in Niederhofen. When I found out about it, I understood straightaway why he was so often out at night, why he had so much money and why he didn't want to have anything to do with the rest of us. Sometimes, when he was inside a café and saw us hanging around in the street outside, he would look the other way, probably because he was afraid we might spoil his little business. Khaled was doing all this for love. Not of old ladies but of a young girl who was a cultural studies student and who he said was the love of his life. But it was a very expensive love affair: he would take her out for a pizza, pay for her drinks and buy her clothes and jewelry.

Then there was a Libyan called Musa, who was also one for the ladies. One Saturday, he went out with a German lady visitor and didn't turn up

again until the following Tuesday. We couldn't believe our eyes. His hair had been nicely cut and he looked really smart with a leather jacket, new jeans and black Italian shoes. He said that he'd had sex with the woman and that hadn't been the easiest part, but it could have been worse. All he had to do, he said, was to close his eyes and rotate his hips. He said he'd be quite happy to do it again.

"And I wouldn't even mind living with an old bag like that", he said. "Far better than rotting away here in a hostel for refugees".

After that we didn't see much of him at all, as if he had moved out for good. He also had quite a reputation as a lover; ladies would come by regularly to ask if he was around.

Apart from Khaled and Mousa, there were six other guys who had dealings with the weekend visitors. It wasn't difficult to guess who they were. Those of us who could afford a beer or a doner kebab a few times a week, could only have made a bit of money like that. Or they had been stealing. There was no other explanation.

I would never have thought that even I, one day, would have a strange encounter with a weekend visitor.

It started in the summer when Khaled was given his residence permit and decided to drop his weekend visitors and his cultural studies girlfriend and move to Nuremberg in the hope of finding a proper job. He said goodbye to me, gave me his mobile number and said I should come and visit when I was able to travel. I thanked him but was a little surprised. After all, we didn't know each other all that well.

A few days after Khaled had left Niederhofen, a car suddenly pulled up beside me. I stared at the shining bodywork as I had never seen such a fabulous car close-up before. It must have been a real Ferrari. A man was sitting behind the wheel and a small cat in the passenger's seat was gazing at me suspiciously. Its thick white coat looked as if it had been combed by hand and it shone as if it had just been oiled. The collar, that could only just be made out under the long hair was made of bright red leather and set with precious stones. The creature was sitting on a rug and looked incredibly lazy and bored. I found out later that it was a longhaired variety of a British Shorthair. That sounds like an English Lord and the cat looked like it was treated like a lord. Judging by the way it was staring at me, it seemed well aware of it.

"It's me, get in!"

"What ? Who you are?"

The pale looking man had rouge on his face. I couldn't make out whether his cheeks were chubby or sunken. It was difficult to guess his age, but he looked surreal, with a set of perfectly white porcelain teeth. His hair was blonde, almost yellowish and backcombed. I couldn't decide whether he was wearing a wig or had perhaps had implants. His beard and

eyebrows didn't look very genuine either.

He was wearing a white suit made of the best glossy cloth, its different shades shimmering in the light and under it, a black shirt. He had folded a pink silk square into the breast pocket. He was not very tall and not exactly fat, but definitely looked overweight. His neck seemed to be imprisoned in the collar of his shirt and I wondered how he could possibly breathe with all the buttons done up. A large number of diamond-studded rings cut into the flesh of his pudgy fingers.

"I've paid for a meeting with you."

"I not understand German well. What paid for?"

"Khaled". The man removed his reflecting pilot's glasses and looked at me with ice-cold blue eyes.

"What Khaled?" I asked.

"The night?"

"What? I not understand."

I walked off. The man stayed in his car and followed me at the same pace all the way back to our hostel. In front of the main door, I turned round and saw him parking the car.

I ran up the stairs to our floor and looked for Khaled's mobile number. Once I had found it, I went straight to the H&M gang's flat and barged in without knocking on the door. Only Hewe was there. He was rehearsing poses in front of a mirror.

"Hey, what's up?"

"I need to use your phone!"

"Why?"

"Khaled's landed me in the shit! Please!"

I held out the piece of paper with the number on it. Hewe dialed it and handed me the phone.

"Just don't bugger it up, or I'll do you in! And keep it short, I'm not Caritas!"

I put the phone to my ear, went back to my room and threw myself on the sofa with my heart racing.

"Hello?" At last I heard Khaled's voice at the other end.

"Hi, it's Karim from Niederhofen, there's a man here who's been following me. He says he paid you!"

"The guy with the Ferrari?"

"Yes."

"That's Wolfram Maria von Richthausen. Everyone knows who he is. He's

stinking rich.”

“I couldn’t give a shit! What does he want from me?”

“Karim, I’m really sorry but I needed the money. He saw you in the street once and since then he’s taken a real fancy to you. I sold you to him. For a hundred marks. Sorry. But for a hundred marks I would have sold everyone in the refugee hostel!”

“Khaled I’ll kill you!”

Richthausen followed me all over Niederhofen for almost another six weeks. He turned up everywhere in town. He would follow me in his car just a few yards away, would call out something or beckon me over. I was scared of him. On the one hand, I was stronger than he was and could easily have pulled him out of his car and beaten him up. But on the other hand, I was afraid to do anything like that because he was undoubtedly well connected and I was just a refugee. So I put up with it and took no notice of him. And then, from one day to the next, he left me in peace.

The next time I saw him, Frau Schulz, was just four months ago. On the front page of a newspaper there was a big picture of him and the famous cat, and a picture of Khaled next to it. I stared at the headline in a state of total shock: “Iraqi confesses Richthausen murder”.

I quickly read through the short article. The two of them had apparently had an argument in Richthausen’s villa near Nuremberg about sexual services that Khaled had provided but hadn’t been paid for. Probably in a fit of rage, Khaled had then stabbed Richthausen with a kitchen knife.

I couldn’t believe that the fun-loving Khaled was capable of doing such a thing. Over the next few days, all the papers and TV stations were full of reports about him and his abominable act. I’m sure you’ve heard about it too, Frau Schulz. You knew Khaled, didn’t you?