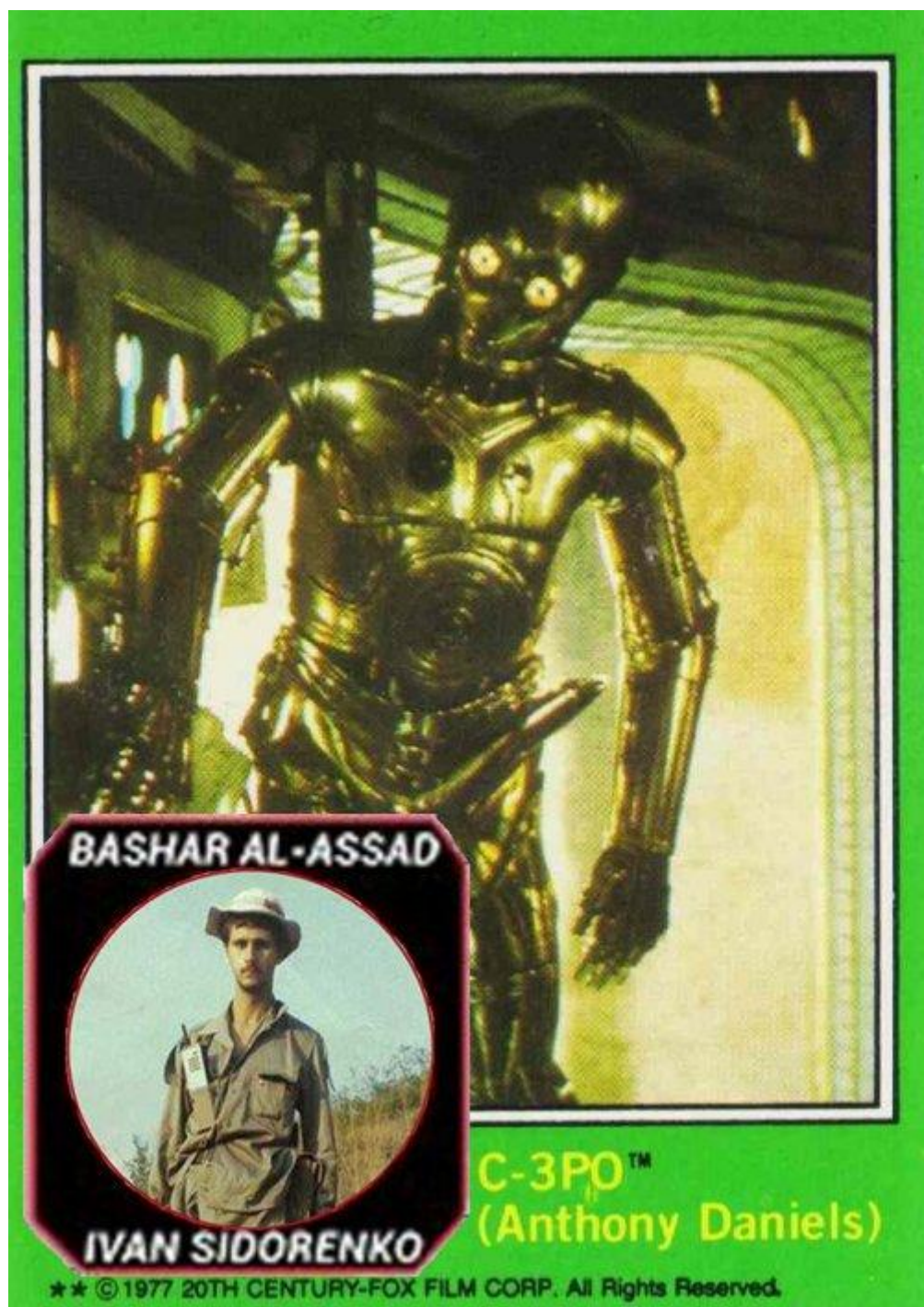




## HOTLINE DAMASCUS

By Mafi Mushkila



The walk through the halls of the presidential palace seemed to last an eternity. Even getting there from the airport was no simple affair. Checkpoint after checkpoint, passports examined and re-examined, the men from the Forza Nuova delegation assuring each NDF commander

that yes, indeed, everything was in order, that they were headed to the presidential palace, all questions are welcome, yes, yes, we are here in solidarity my brothers.

Squeezed into the minibus among some of Milan's more erudite fascisti, Navsteva could hardly wait for the coming moment. Years of deftly navigating some of the bloodiest trenches of Twitter had finally paid dividends, and what a king's ransom it would be. He had scars, and he had bruises. Service to the lion had come at a heavy cost. To sit in the same room, even breathe the same air — perhaps some of it had passed through his lungs, once — was an unparalleled gift.

More checkpoints, more diversions. He felt lost under the foreignness of it all, but sight of the palace gave solace and relief. Each second that passed was but one more in anticipation for the greatest moment, the singularity of his life. At its entrance the Italian blackshirts were ushered off to an impromptu meeting with an entourage of junior officials, some discussions about European solidarity and rapprochement, perhaps to make some overtures about the refugee crisis. Navsteva, though, was peeled away and escorted off separately, a group of men adorned with SSNP paraphernalia steering him through its grand entrance and into the halls of power.

"I'd like to thank you, my heroes," offered Navsteva amid a pall of silence as they trudged through corridor after corridor, lights flickering under the strain of a dozen diesel generators.

The tallest one leading him turned, slowly at first, bemused at the respect.

"Well, we try what we can."

"Do you have anything to declare before you meet the leader?" asked another, all notes of friendliness clearly absent. "We have to ask, you know, because the internal Jews are everywhere these days."

"I do have this," he said, scrounging around in his fanny pack, eventually pulling out a rolled up poster of seemingly incredible dimensions for his money belt.

The surly SSNP man quickly snatched it away and began to unfurl it.

"What the hell is..."

A picture of Lyndon LaRouche, the preeminent elder statesman of American politics, slowly emerged.

“It’s a gift for the fearless lion, a picture of one lion for another,” explained Navsteva.

“If we wanted to hang out with a bunch of fucking Trots we’d have stayed in Beirut,” said the SSNP man, tossing the poster to the floor and splitting it in half with a kick from his boots. They kept walking, a painful silence descending upon them. Navsteva could feel an uneasiness in his stomach, not unlike that experienced during his own ill-fated political venture eons before.

More time elapsed. They passed by another room, in the corner of which sat several blue barrels marked ‘C6H12N4.’

“Hmm, seems we have some new paint supplies,” one of the SSNP men said under his breath. Next they were lead through a revolving door (“Hezbollah,” quipped another SSNP man), rounded yet another bend and finally arrived at a large set of doors, the image of Hafez al-Assad emblazoned upon it in sterling silver.

Certainly this must be it, thought Navsteva.

Yet as soon as the SSNP man opened it, it revealed only another flight of stairs. Something was changing, though. The appearance was getting markedly nicer. And so it was, the final ascent. The moment of the great reveal. After minutes of zigs and zags, smoke-filled backrooms, at least two elevator rides, they had at last arrived at the chamber door. The office of the man, a maktab like no other.

“Here you are,” said the lead SSNP man. “You may enter.”

Life affords moments of ecstasy, of bliss like no other. The minutia and silent waves of a hundred days can explode in a second if it is bottled right, if the tremors and shake of the earth embrace its release and the tilt of the sun welcomes its issue. And so it was with Navsteva, standing before the lion himself, President Bashar al-Assad in his full gangly glory, standing proudly in the center of a great hall in an ill-fitting suit that seemed to say please, come in, have you seen our car selection?

He set down his copy of the Protocols.

“It’s so great to meet you, Nafsteba,” said the lion.

“Actually, it’s Navsteva,” an uncomfortable clarification. Certainly one shouldn’t get off on the wrong foot.

“Right, yes. Qassem’s dictation lessons have only gone so well.”

“Please, don’t apologize my lion,” Navsteva insisted.

“My voice, you see. It’s always been an issue. Perhaps I’m a little self conscious.”

“Why, my lion? Even Lincoln had a high-pitched voice. Behind airy throats sits many a great man,” a smile spreading thinly across his lips, a feeling of anticipation tingling in his loins.

The moment of awkwardness was quickly erased as a side door abruptly flew open and in sauntered Maher al-Assad, a queer scratching sound emanating from the imperial shag carpet as his peg leg dragged out of sync with his step like a misplaced anchor, July 2012 forever loitering at his keel.

“Ya Bashar!” he proclaimed, rising his arm in the salute of the Romans. “Some urgent news from the Mukhabarat.”

“Yes, Maher?”

“Fisk called. His taxi driver has a new lead regarding the very Nescafe that NATO used to agitate the youth of Benghazi. We believe it to credible.”

“Have you heard anything about this from Hersh?”

“We’re awaiting confirmation. I believe he’ll be visiting the circulation desk of his library later to see if this pans out,” he added.

“Should we call Cockburn?”

“I already did, but he’s on the sauce again. Let’s give him a few days to recover.”

“How troubling.”

“Yes, my lion. But there’s a saving grace. If the pound keeps falling, the people may not be able to buy it regardless. I’ll have all the usual smugglers check their wares, anyway, to make

sure nothing sneaks in. Meanwhile, I'll send some copy to Phil Greaves to push a counter-narrative."

Navsteva shuddered at the mention of the reclusive Stalinist's name. There had been moments of peace, mutual respect among them, even, for many years, only to be thrown asunder through a handful of ferocious disagreements over heterodox ideology. Among worse things on this earth there are few.

"Good. That should do for now. Anything else?" asked Bashar.

"No, my lord. I must return to division command to make sure we hold these advances made under the ceasefire."

"Excellent."

Another salute, a storm of excessively honorific paeans to one another, and Maher lurched out. The two were alone again.

"I've got a gift for you, my lion," said Navsteva, reaching once again into his apparently bottomless fanny pack. "Your faithful guards didn't agree with the other one, but I imagine you'll have no problem with this. It's been some time in the making."

Out came a CD jewel case emblazoned with half a dozen girly hearts, inked delicately in felt-tip pen.

"Some of the finest tracks of Moadamiyah and Darayya. I suspect you'll especially like this first one," said Navsteva, plopping his mixtape into a conspicuously old boombox nestled under a Manaf Tlass-themed dartboard.

He hit play. Soon, the screams of women, children, grown men watching their lines extinguish in front of their eyes, seizing, frothing, and spitting, filled the room. He turned the volume to 11.

"I have no taste for such things, in actuality," said Assad, pressing stop. "You may think I am a brutal man, but even I tire of it. My kids, you can't imagine how much they scream. Just like the little ones in Aleppo. Even their dreams are forever darkened," a tinge of sadness and remorse. "And Asma. She's changed so much. She hasn't touched me since 2012. In fact, if I listen to music, I prefer what the takfiri contras call 'nasheeds.' I developed an ear for them back when we hosted Zarqawi's leftovers in Zabadani and Raqqa. Something about the

cadence, it's peaceful. Either way, better than Right Said Fred. Sometimes even sour wines may have fruitful notes, Navsteva."

Navsteva brushed off the nasheed comment despite the tingling of unease radiating through his spine. But it wasn't the only sensation he was feeling. Overriding this was the sense of loneliness he could feel enveloping the lion, as if an aura of dark blue, of muted humanity and inconsolable nights, interrupted by so many meetings and phone calls, had taken an inhuman toll on the vaunted commander of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Lingering above it all, the sword of Damocles that never left his bedside, was Asma's absence. The rose of Damascus grown cold and withered, Bashar without the pleasure such a fearless commander needs to sustain himself. Navsteva knew intuitively there was a way he could help his liege, to provide him what Asma couldn't.

"So, Asma? Nothing, even now?"

"No. It is perhaps the coldest front of this entire wretched war. If I'd known the oasis would dry, perhaps I would have done things differently."

"What have you tried? Surely there must be some remedy."

"For a brief shining moment there was," said the lion. "But the time difference between here and Australia, while not huge, became cumbersome. Eventually it faded as many long-distance relationships tend to do. So here I am, aloof and broken."

"You know, my lion. It may not be ideal, but there are things that one may may do to another man. It is even permissible in certain circumstances," offered Navsteva.

"Are you suggesting what I think you are?" asked Bashar, a wry smirk appearing on his face not unlike the smile worn by old men who find too much enjoyment watching a preschool recital.

"When someone cuts off a gangrened leg, you don't call that person a butcher. You call him a doctor, and you thank him," Navsteva mused. "And my lord, I am both a doctor and a butcher. Ask anything of me and you shall receive."

"Very well," said Bashar, his smile growing so wide that any traces of his thin lips had completely vanished. "I hope it's not too much to ask, but I wish that you could give me what Asma once did. Just, the pleasure."

“I can only hope to be half as good as the rose herself.”

Bashar walked slowly over to a grandiose divan perched in the corner, cuing up some mood lighting at the click of a remote. He reclined onto the sofa.

“Now, Navsteva, you will soon see how this works. But I want you to discover it for yourself.”

“Discover? My lord, were you the New World herself I would walk forever on your terra incognito.”

A smile on Bashar’s lips, somewhere in the room, no doubt, a flight of angels.

Navsteva dropped to his knees, slipping off his Care Bears muscle shirt in one fluid move. Then he went for the good doctor, the Syrian presidency himself. First he planted a handful of kisses just above the waist, almost touching the tip of Bashar’s too-short-tie, the terminus of which dangled at his midriff. Navsteva flicked the tip of his tie a few times in his mouth, his pulse elevating as he imagined what was next.

“Please, Navsteva. I’m made of meat, not of cotton,” said Bashar, who then giggled at his own warped sense of humour.

“If you say so, my lord,” said Navsteva, needing little encouragement to send his hand charging toward the cock of the Syrian presidency, the cock of al-Watan, the cock of all lions. But under his pants he felt something odd. Something more than just alive, something writing, something primeval.

“You must unfasten it to understand,” said Bashar.

And so he did.

After relaxing the zipper and prying open his boxers, he saw the treasure below, tugging inch after inch to reveal it in its entirety, at least two feet in total, this infernal serpent unwinding in front of his very eyes, a miasma of blotted skin colors, small holes gushing with steam, a vague whirring sound throbbing from somewhere within the mealy tubing.

“What is this...” marveled Navsteva.

“It is my own creation,” said Bashar, ripping open his shirt with his bare hands to reveal a smooth, boy-like chest covered in nipples, each one a different color and size, each one emitting small tufts of steam.

“I have become more human than human, Navsteva. You see, many years ago it was assumed I was merely studying ophthalmology, but that was hardly the case. Such an excuse was only to deceive the Zionists and their Jew spells. In reality, I was learning the art of making men. Perhaps you have heard of my best creation, a slippery chimera like none other.”

“Creation?”

“Indeed. He goes now as Suheil al-Hassan,” said Bashar.

“The Tiger!”

“The very one. But even tigers must start as cubs, and for this cat I didn’t even need a rib, for I fashioned him of manly clay of my own making. But knowledge takes time, my fawning acolyte. Before him I have devoted years to building upon myself, exploring the depths and limits of the human body, pushing envelopes that no man has before. And from myself I have made a self within myself and upon myself.”

“Secular Syria,” muttered Navsteva in astonishment.

“Indeed,” chortled Bashar. “And now if you wish to help her, you will please her.”

Bashar grabbed his droopy coil of a beast cock with both hands, its bob and bounce resembling a decrepit garden hose caked in mud.

“You must suck its wealth.”

“Say no more,” said Navsteva, his head angling in for the kill. He grabbed the tip between his teeth, the thrum of the ticklish tentacle taking a tour of his tonsils.

He sucked. He sucked hard. He took Bashar’s pride and joy, his monstrous appendage, sculpted from the unknown and grafted onto a body more golem than man, and he took it deeper and deeper, his mouth stretching as wide as possible, his throat feeling as if it were being raked with coals by the intermittent bouts of steam that came from its boundless creases and honeycomb of holes.

But it was too much. Its bounty had more than he could handle. He gagged. He knew the feeling in the back of his mind that was brewing there, of love, of joy, of the universal language settling into the nape of his neck as if to say it will be all right, Navsteva, it will always be all right, there is nothing but love and the essence of love. But here was the word become flesh, the cock of the Syrian presidency, gagging him. And he didn't want to be gagged. He tried handling it, riding it like a gaucho, refusing to let go and sucking it to tease out every pleasure membrane.

It just wasn't working. The gag reflex wouldn't subside, and soon it started coming up. First in drips, then in waves, entire shoals of vomit heaving out of his mouth and spattering the deformed cock of the Syrian presidency. As soon as his man chum bathed Bashar's penis the entire affair starting unraveling: first the steam started rapidly increasing, violent jets and hisses, and then a sizzling sound filled the air like an old skillet. The vomit was quickly burning holes in the unholy phallus. Bashar let out a shriek, higher than Navsteva thought possible, that being the only reasonable thought entering his head that very second, soon panic setting in, the epiphany that it was all done, that the entire cock was ruined, become unstuck and scorched.

The penis recoiled, withdrawing inward towards Bashar's body cavity, entire skeins of skin peeling off under the assault of Navsteva's acidic vomit.

Bashar reached frantically for a phone next to the divan, entire bolts of steam shooting from his multitude of nipples, as if it were the end of the Capitoline wolf herself, for you are on your own now oh Rome.

The lion pulled together his voice enough to scream into the phone, "GET THE CEO! GET THE CEO!" and then promptly collapsed.

Navsteva fell limp, vomit gliding down his emaciated belly. A complete feeling of defeat, of loss and disappointment was quickly interrupted by the sudden opening of the chamber door, a portly man in a Hawaiian shirt charging in.

"Leith..." sighed Bashar, the steam from his nipples and burst man-appendage subsiding along with the last flickers of life within.

"Ya rab!" shouted Leith, running to the fallen Bashar. "Oh, my sweet prince, what has happened?"

The water in a glass nearby trembled; the lion had left Damascus.

“You’ll pay for this, you know,” said Leith as he dragged Navsteva away from the couch. “We have a special place for people like you.”

A series of darkened moments, bare recollections.

More hallways, these endless corridors, the only semblance of recognition being the word “Mezzeh,” row upon row of squalid cells, a series of re-orientations on account of this Leith character’s inability to read Arabic, finally arriving in a room with a single plastic chair and sad light bulb dangling from the ceiling, flakes of dried vomit caked on Navsteva’s chest.

Leith’s pager rang, leading him to a nearby phone.

“Yes?” A moment of silence. “Dad? What is it? Oh, yes. I see.”

Navsteva could only hope to maintain some semblance of normalcy.

“What is it?” he asked Leith innocuously, barely suppressing tears.

“It seems my father has found a pack of British SAS agents in Idlib. But it doesn’t matter to you. Or perhaps even to me,” explained Leith. “Because of you secular Syria, I’m afraid, has no hope. No, no more vacations in Slounfeh for me and Peto. You know I always liked you. But after what you’ve done to our father, I’m afraid this is where the journey ends. It’s time to log off, Navsteva. It’s time for all of us to log off.”

A shot, a whimper, a man become a shell.

An endless charnel house, children of hungry ghosts cascading across the Horan plain in the dead of each night to gather on the ancient fields of Qadesh, Enki speaking through the reed wall — the humans have become too loud again, it is time to start anew — a nail being driven through the solarplexus of a young boy, the newly dead rising from Ghouta and Idlib and Aleppo and Deir ez-Zour to meet in fellowship and congregation, to join hands with the spectral army that has dashed across the land a thousand times already.

Can you remember, will you ever forget, nights in Douma, melon mint arghileh, the last lights seen at the beginning and the end, all the weeping mothers of this earth, a country burnt and riven, perhaps one day to re-awaken, when the men finally decide to stop rending apart their families and return to their caves for the darkest slumber?

Walk for two or three days, until you find a stream. Any size will do. Sit. Close your eyes. Feel each finger, each toe. Maybe you have all of them. There is life there. You may leave if you wish. But you shouldn't. Keep your eyes shut. Count to one hundred thousand. When you finish there will still be tears.