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**Extract from novel *Weil wir längst woanders sind***  
**and an essay**

**Chapter 1: Snow**

One day it's just there. Silently in the night, when no one was looking, it arrived. And now it's as if it's always been there, the most normal thing in the world. I open the net curtains in the living room, like I do every morning. And there it is, a simple fact.

We'd never seen real snow before. Snow was something we'd only come across in children's books, or in the German TV programmes our grandparents would tape on VHS and send to us in big parcels along with Lebkuchen at Christmas and chocolate bunnies at Easter. And we'd seen it in pictures. Photos of my mother, Barbara, as a child, muffled up in a red ski suit, her brother pulling her along on a wooden sled across paths and fields, white blankets.

And now it's here on our balcony, in the flower boxes with the pruned roses and on the plastic chairs that haven't been used in months.

Barefoot in my pyjamas, I stand and stare, the curtain cord still in my hand, and I can't believe what I see. The sky is hidden behind dense grey, and the clouds are so low I'm afraid they might get caught on the bright windmill Layla stuck in one of the flower boxes back in the summer. A blackbird perched on the edge of a box pecks around in the snow-covered rose bush.

Behind me I hear Layla padding into the room. She stops right beside me, barefoot in her nightie, one hand clutching her stuffed bunny. At the age of seven she's too old for it really, but she's been taking it to bed with her again for the last few months. Her other hand reaches for mine and holds on tightly. She looks up at me, seeking reassurance.

I let go of the curtain cord and open the balcony door. The two of us step out onto the coating of snow. The air is cold and smells of rain and exhaust fumes. We tread carefully, our feet pressing into the thin layer and making little holes in the white blanket. The wet cold beneath my feet makes me flinch, and I bend down to feel the fine powder with my hand to see if it really does melt under our touch. Layla's arms and legs are covered in goose bumps and she's shivering. The snow instantly yields to the soft pressure of my palms. I spread all ten fingers and draw them back together two or three times, then I push the little mounds of snow aside and smooth them out again until all that's left is a puddle.

I stand up, shake the water off my fingers and put my arm around Layla's shoulder. With her bunny safely laid down on the living room floor, she's absorbed in rubbing a handful of snow between

her palms. Eventually she too is left with water, and she wipes her little hands in relief on her pink nightie.

Beneath our balcony, someone is sweeping the pavement, and in the supermarket car park, a woman is clearing her windscreen with a piece of cardboard.

“Can you eat it?” whispers Layla, almost to herself. “That’s what they do in *Ronia The Robber’s Daughter*. Basil, let’s taste the snow.” She looks at me with her big black eyes. Her uncombed curls make her look a bit like a robber’s daughter herself.

I pick up some snow from the back of the plastic chair and put half of it in Layla’s hand. We take a few cautious licks before stuffing the scoops in our mouths, ready to gulp them down like tablets or cough syrup. Layla screws her nose up a little; I chew slowly, listening to the snow crunch between my teeth. It doesn’t taste of anything, and from the look on Layla’s face I can tell that she too is a bit disappointed, though neither of us knows exactly what we were expecting.

Behind us in the flat, I hear the bathroom door close. A moment later the shower goes on. I shove Layla back into the living room and shut the balcony door behind us.

Later that week our grandparents take us to the park. The pond is frozen over, Grandma tells us, so we can go ice skating with the other children from school. Grandpa has already packed two pairs of skates for us, and Grandma has made sandwiches and a flask of hot chocolate. Grandpa parks his red car behind all the others lined up on the street. Parents and grandparents stream into the park, the children laughing and throwing snowballs, their skates tied together and slung over one shoulder.

Layla tugs at her red woolly hat, which keeps falling off because it’s too small for her thick mop of curls. Grandma takes the hat off her, twists her curls into a knot and pulls the hat down to just above her eyes. My sister gives me a questioning look. I shrug. I’m wearing the hat and turquoise fleece Grandma brought home a few days ago. Stitched onto the hat is the crest of a football club I’ve never heard of.

I get out of the car, a skate in each hand, and watch the other kids pass by. It’s been snowing all morning. By the entrance to the park, a group of little girls is making a snowman. I recognise two boys from my class, Stefan and Patrick, beside the lake. They too have skates – shiny black ones – and hockey sticks. They step onto the ice and skate right off, gliding, chasing each other, curving sharply around a couple of girls from another class, and using their hockey sticks to hurl snowballs across the glittering surface of the lake. They glance in my direction, and I look down at the ground, pushing the snow into little heaps with the tips of my boots.

“Off you go then, you two, don’t you want to join in?” Grandma asks. She kneels down and helps Layla into her skates. Grandma never wears trousers. She wears dresses, floral or striped ones usually. Even today she’s wearing one under her brown woollen coat. Her beige-coloured tights soak up the slush, and wet patches appear on her knees. The water forms little streams that run like veins down her legs into the fur tops of her boots.

“But I can’t skate,” Layla says in a small voice, slowly withdrawing her right foot.

"There's nothing to it," Grandma says. "Just skate! Even the infant-school kids can do it. You'll get the hang of it. Look how much fun they're having." Reluctantly, Layla holds out her foot again and Grandma laces up the white skates.

My skates are too tight across the top, and every step on the snow hurts.

"There you are, now you look just like the other children. Go on Basil, take your sister with you. We'll be right here, don't worry. Off you go!"

Layla buries her hand in my mitten and together we teeter onto the ice. She slips immediately, pulling me down with her. Her skate gets caught in my anorak. I grab on to a tree trunk, cautiously haul myself upright, and help Layla stand up, my knees trembling with cold and fear. With her arms outstretched and a miserable expression on her face, Layla takes three tiny, shaky steps on the ice. Snowballs whizz past us, and a little red sausage dog trots by so close that I narrowly avoid kicking him. He looks back at me reproachfully, a stick hanging out of his mouth. Layla stands motionless and watches me as I slowly make my way towards her. The ice cracks beneath my feet, and the blades of my skates keep getting caught in holes and grooves. The dog, which has been observing me too, comes over and slowly walks beside me. "Come on, you can do it," he seems to be saying. "Look at me – I can do it, and I'm carrying a stick in my mouth."

I take a deep breath. The air is cold and burns my lungs. Pressing my lips together, I try to imitate the other kids' gliding motions. Chest forward, arms slightly out to the sides. The dog is now standing beside Layla, and the two of them look at me expectantly.

"For goodness sake, children, don't make such a song and dance," I hear Grandpa calling from behind. "Come on, Grandma, let's show 'em how the pros do it."

Grandma has no chance to protest. Grandpa grabs her hand, pulls her onto the ice, puts his right arm around her waist and sweeps her off into a dance step.

"Knock it off, Grandpa, stop being so silly," Grandma says, laughing. It's not often that she laughs. The two of them dance further and further out on the ice. They're not wearing skates, just their winter boots, as my Grandpa sways and bounces and sings "Roll out the barrel, we'll have a barrel of fun. Roll out the barrel, we've got the blues on the run."

A small crowd has started to gather. They clap along, laughing, as Grandpa skates faster and faster, spinning Grandma along with him, spinning and spinning, sliding effortlessly, one more verse. Sensing the excitement, the sausage dog with the stick has left his lookout post beside Layla and is now bounding around my dancing grandparents. Grandma throws back her head, her dark perm bobbing along in time with the song. You can still see the water stains on her knees.

Layla puts her hand in mine and laughs. With her other hand, she takes off her hat and throws it on the ice. She shakes out her curls, just like our dancing grandmother, and bobs her head as she hums along with the melody. She seems to have forgotten all about the treacherous skates on her feet.

Later, as we make our way back to the car, it starts to snow. The foggy grey light is fading fast, and the buzzing lanterns in the park illuminate the snowflakes with a sandy yellow glow. Stefan and Patrick spot me and coming running over to us. "Hey, next time you'll have to play hockey with us! My dad has a spare stick in the garage." I nod and mutter goodbye, my skates in my hand.

Layla is hand-in-hand with Grandma a few metres ahead. Grandpa is still singing the chorus of “Roll out the barrel” as he unlocks the car door. Layla looks up at the sky, opens her mouth and tries to catch a few snowflakes on her tongue. I run my hand through her dark hair, now speckled white and soaked through.

“Come on, hop in before you catch a cold,” I say, and she scrambles into the back seat.

On the drive back she puts her damp head on my shoulder.

“Basil, do you think we can go home soon?”

*Translated from the German by Sinéad Crowe*

### **Buddha and Parsley**

My mother missed parsley most of all. Not the parsley with the small, curly leaves, but the flat parsley you can buy in thick bunches at the market. She also missed fresh coriander and courgettes. We had just moved back to Germany with the whole family; we had lived in Jeddah for eight years, and my mother had got used to cooking certain things. We too missed various dishes at the dinner table – my brother soon accepted that there would be no more *bamiya*, but my father and I mourned our beloved *molokhiyya* for years. My mother, it must be said, really made an effort to cook us our favourite meals nonetheless. She faked, cheated and improvised, and immediately made a beeline for every newly-opened Turkish supermarket in the vicinity in the hope of finding parsley after all. Surely it couldn't be that difficult!

That was in 1988, in the little town in the heart of the Ruhr, and nowhere was there a bunch of flat parsley or a courgette to be found.

Perhaps I should explain that my mother is German by birth, whereas my father is from Saudi Arabia. The move to Germany, to the homeland of my maternal grandparents, was primarily due to the idea that school would be easier for us children – and above all for me, the girl – in Germany. It wasn't easy for any of us, that was clear. My mother in particular, that blonde, capable woman, still says today with tremendous wistfulness how much she liked living in Jeddah back then, that even today she still thinks of it as a home and sometimes misses it.

I have now learned (though it took many years) that for most people in our so-called Western world telling them something like this can disconcert them, and prompt considerable need for explanation. A German woman, a mixed family – how can it be that they felt so at home there, in that distant country that in our part of the world is known primarily through negative headlines? And where, as a woman, you really can't do anything at all. Drive a car! Open a bank account! And then they miss parsley and red lentils?! Have they taken leave of their senses?

As far as food was concerned, at some point we had come to terms with our new home, for better or worse. Every holiday in Jeddah ended with a big shopping trip; we hauled tins of *ful medammes*, red lentils, various spices and fresh pomegranates back to Germany in huge suitcases. Then when the smell of baked aubergines with pomegranate seeds, garlic and coriander spread through our German house, it was always a bit like Christmas. Ultimately, though, it didn't assuage the longing for this former home; perhaps it even made it a little more powerful.

Other things were even harder to understand. Why, for example, were we constantly being told – in school, among other places – that we must be very happy to be living in Germany now because we were German, after all. Our otherness, particularly that of us children, was not particularly obvious – we spoke fluent, accent-free German, neither our skin nor our hair was particularly dark. Our strange names, which we were always having to spell out, were the only things that, on second glance, revealed that we didn't quite fit in, there in that little town in the Ruhr. People were friendly to us, well-meaning, you might say. So why did we still feel so foreign? Such outsiders? And at the same time so involuntarily appropriated? Was it the cold weather? The strange children? The lack of Arab food?

When I think back on these first years in Germany, on all the questions I asked myself and others asked me (or didn't), it sometimes makes me feel quite dizzy. Our lives had been switched; the erstwhile holiday with our German grandparents had become home; our former home was suddenly just a holiday destination. And in spite of this we did not have the right to be foreign, thanks to the language, thanks to our German family members. Yet this longing, this homesickness was always present, for all of us.

This, however, didn't sit well at all with all the people who were constantly insisting that life was so much better for us now, in Germany. Much freer. Much nicer. I began to feel ashamed, and the feeling that there must be something wrong with me, because I couldn't see it like that at all, couldn't see what exactly was supposed to be better here, now, in the little town in the Ruhr, kept getting stronger. Displacement. We had no name for it. Just a diffuse inner voice that was constantly saying: 'You're doing something wrong if you don't feel at home here. Everyone says you must feel at home here. It's your fault, it must be.'

This feeling lasted for quite a long time. I could never really explain it to anyone; the shame was too great, and the fear that it was a failure, a deficiency of my own. If I just try even harder, I thought when I was young; if I just fit in even better, make stupid jokes about Arabs, refine my German language and shed my Arabic language, if I myself keep asserting that I'm German, and distance myself more and more from my Arabness, then at some point the feeling will have to correspond with how everyone else sees things.

Then came the one sentence that, back then, when I was about seventeen or eighteen – shortly before I graduated from high school, anyway – described to me for the first time a feeling that to some extent I recognised: 'My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost.' It is the first sentence of Hanif Kureishi's novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*. This 'almost'; this little word, this afterthought, so simple, so understated – and it contained all my doubts, all my malaise with myself and the world around me. Here was someone who was English, but at the same time somehow not. Here was someone who was a different person to the one his name was giving him out as. The novel tells of Karim's British mother, who is forced to listen to her neighbours' racist remarks; it tells of Karim's Indian father who, although socialised as a Muslim, suddenly, in this lower-middle-class neighbourhood, starts portraying himself as a Buddhist guru, giving yoga workshops and esoteric lectures, reinventing himself with a new identity. With every single

character the novel plays the full register, loud and soft, subtle and aggressive, and always with the question in the background: what's it like to live with foreign names, a foreign appearance, in a small, parochial suburb?

Long before this I had started to read incessantly, even taking a part-time job in a bookshop in the hope of finding an explanation somewhere for this nebulous fissure within myself. Kureishi's novel explained to me, and to a whole generation of migrant children, perhaps for the first time, that it wasn't our fault, this strange feeling of displacement; that it came from outside. That the others, our fellow pupils, our colleagues, our neighbours, were the ones who, with their well-intentioned remarks on the one hand or with open hostility on the other, were constantly exposing us, putting us in the position of the 'other'. To this day *The Buddha* remains, for me, one of the most important books of my life.

I felt inspired, understood. The same way others my age had felt understood by Hesse's *Steppenwolf* or by the beatniks. I began to write. I wrote and wrote, filling diary after diary; tried, like Kureishi, to find words and images for the feeling of being foreign on the outside. I read and I wrote, wrote myself out of the little town, out of the internal conflicts and the external ones, with my parents, my family, my fellow pupils. I wrote myself out of isolation and into a new, other, wonderful form of isolation: that of the writing reader.

I left the little town in the Ruhr and moved to a medium-sized town on the Rhine. It had very green meadows, brightly-painted old buildings with lots of stucco, and an old palace, yellow as the sun, that housed the university, to which I then went. There, there were more books, more literature; there were new people who became very dear to me, who showed me foreign films, introduced me to modern art and put Michel Houellebecq's *Whatever* under my pillow. The world seemed to be opening up, fresh air made its way into a life stifled by small-town constraints. As with Karim; as in *The Buddha*, when it takes him to London, where he becomes an actor. For the first time I felt truly at home – in art, in the language, which I had in all its aspects so painstakingly made my own.

And at the same time – though I only realised it much later – I was growing further and further apart from the family with whom I shared this sense of foreignness, the longing for things left behind, for parsley and fresh coriander.

It was only an advanced seminar on Orientalism that roused these things again, the background I had finally left so far behind me. Edward Said roused them, the nineteenth-century travellers to the Orient roused them, Nerval's *The Women of Cairo* roused them. There they were again, all the images, the sounds, the smells, described here from a Western perspective, with this 'Orientalist gaze', we students learned. And again and again I wanted to shout, 'Yes, but it is a bit like that! You don't know, but I do, I know it! Believe me, I recognise it, I know what I'm talking about!' There it was again: this lacuna, this peculiar, painful lacuna.

After *Orientalism* I also read Edward Said's autobiography, *Out of Place*. A story that was so absurd, so full of dichotomies, full of love, grief, questions and attempted answers about his own origins and his own place in the world. It was a new Kureishi moment. And this time it resulted in not erratic but systematic reading. I read my way right across colonial literature, especially British and French, took inspiration from Susan Sontag and Joan Didion, wrote, as Didion said, 'to find out what I really think', reclaimed my old, my first, my own language, read Arabic newspapers and books, got hold of Arabic films and series. I opened the door again, let in the Arabic language. Reunion after a long time. I began to travel. For three, four years I travelled for months each year in all the Arab countries. Usually alone, sometimes not. I blanked out all the questions about what I was actually

doing, what all this was for; I simply didn't answer.

On these travels I read and wrote. Wrote letters, articles, copious stories in brightly-coloured notebooks; wrote about the encounters we had, dangers and delights, all the things that happen when you travel. Suddenly I was writing trilingually in my notebooks, my mind was completely unfettered, the pages filled themselves with German, English and Arabic words and sentences. In a strange way I felt free for the first time. Free of other people's evaluating, judgmental looks.

I felt old longings, but suddenly I missed my German bed, too; I finally ate freshly-prepared falafel from the street vendor and was happy each time I returned to Germany that my German grandmother put sauerbraten, red cabbage and dumplings on the table. But the lacuna started to close. Slowly and gradually. And it was a healing process.

All of this did not happen smoothly, without casualties. People fell by the wayside, as always happens when you shed your skin, when you believe you have to keep moving. Others grew along with me, stayed, or went back. Helped me to keep being present in the Here, or the There. I established a world for myself between many lands and languages, and with many people everywhere who were dear to my heart. I had finally shed the constraints of the little town in the Ruhr. And begun to write a book.

A while ago, the British author Taiye Selasi gave a lecture entitled 'Don't ask me where I'm from, ask me where I'm local'. A lecture that is perfect for the twenty-first century: it observes that something like 'origin' can now no longer be established with any certainty, that identities are fluid and that today we, as the younger generation of a globalised society, are 'locals' in many places. In her speech Selasi writes that she is 'local' in various cultures, that she doesn't necessarily feel British, Ghanaian or American. Every experience has its origin in one or the other particular culture. Every identity is the sum total of experiences.

Biographies like these, like that of Taiye Selasi, like my own, have long since become normal. People with parents from different countries, cultures, religions, who settle in entirely different parts of the world. It's only in praxis and in daily perception that there still seem to be problems. This feeling of not really belonging, of being an outsider, is and remains a component of all these biographies. We are looking for a new home, in the world, in art. A place where the gaze can be free of judgement.

No one displaces him- or herself. It is not a decision, an autonomous act, to feel displaced. Its origins must, therefore, be external. Something that is displayed towards the one who feels displaced, that prevents him from feeling himself to be *in the right place*.

Arriving as a migrant or emigrant or refugee or third culture kid in a place where you settle, for the time being or for good, you inevitably start to assimilate. You learn the language, if you don't already know it, as we did back then; you pick up local dialects, perhaps a certain body language, habits that belong to the environment. You observe your fellow man very closely, become a quick-change artist in the crowd, try not to stick out, are almost pleased when you are told more and more often how well *integrated* you are. You become a chameleon; every form of perceptible otherness suddenly seems burdened with shame.

At the same time, what is all too often forgotten, or not taken into consideration, or overlooked, is that successful integration is not the same as annexation or assimilation. Because then a part of your Self disappears, is given up, pushed or taken away.

We felt foreign in Germany, because we missed familiar things – our big family, with whom we spent a lot of time in Jeddah. The warm weather, the sun, the regular weekends by the sea. The loud *adhan* five times a day. The language, which suddenly felt foreign, because it was only ever used, mixed in with German, by our little core family in our kitchen; it no longer blared out of televisions, radios or telephones, was no longer omnipresent. And last but not least, familiar smells and tastes: courgette and parsley. All that could not be overwritten or even replaced by the freedom to ride a bicycle to school, without a school uniform, or by the fact that my mother was now allowed to sit behind the wheel again, too.

I dream of a time when all of that will be allowed to exist side by side. When people will no longer see if someone has darker skin or a name that sounds different. And when no one has to be ashamed any more because people look down on them, because of their foreignness. When it is permitted, even taken for granted that one can play and switch freely between all the worlds we carry within ourselves.

My biggest inspiration in this – and I don't think they're even aware of it – are my own parents, who made a home for us in which there was a Christmas tree every year but also, several times a month, Arab lentil soup with fresh *sambusak*.

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