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Weil wir längst woanders sind /

Because We're Elsewhere Now

A Novel, 187 pp.

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Snow (pp. 9 - 13)

One day it's just there. Arriving silently overnight when no one is looking. 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 seen in children's books, or in the German TV programmes our grandparents would tape on VHS and send home 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 a path or a field, a white blanket.

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. I can't believe it. 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 the flower box pecks around in the snow-covered rose bush.

Behind me I hear Layla padding softly into the room. She stops right beside me, barefoot in her nightie. In one hand she clutches her cuddly rabbit. 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 to it tightly. She looks up at me as if seeking reassurance.

I let go of the curtain cord and open the balcony door. Together we 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 white layer with my hand to see if it really does melt under our touch. Layla's arms and legs are covered in goosebumps and she shivers ever so slightly. 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, 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 a firm arm round 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 just water, and relieved, she wipes her little hands 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 a tablet or a dose of cough syrup. Layla screws her nose up a little; I chew slowly and listen to the snow crunching between my teeth. It doesn't taste of anything, and from the look on Layla's face I can tell she's a bit disappointed, just like me, though neither of us knows 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 a flask of hot chocolate and a bag of sandwiches. My grandpa parks his red car behind all the others lined up on the street. Parents and grandparents stream into the park, children laugh and throw 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 dense mop of curls. Grandma takes the hat off her, twists the curls into a knot and pulls the hat down to just above her eyes. My sister gives me a questioning look. I just 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.

(...)

"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, and her skin-coloured tights soak up the slush. Wet patches appear on her knees. The water forms little streams, running like veins down her legs into the fur tops of her boots.

"But I can't skate," says Layla in a small voice, slowly withdrawing her right foot.

"There's nothing to it," says Grandma. "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 her foot out again and Grandma laces up the white skates.

My skates are too tight across the top and every step over 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!"

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Jeddah (pp.33-45)

The city bears no resemblance to the place in my memories. Sometimes, perhaps once or twice a year, I still dream of the city the way it was when we left it for the last time. That's more than two decades ago now.

Back then, the drive to the airport was like one long desert rally. We drove for an eternity along flickering concrete roads that crossed the endless grey desert like blue veins. At most a billboard and the occasional skeleton of a house or a construction site.

Nothing recalls those adventurous journeys now. A new eight-lane highway takes us straight from the airport to a sterile satellite town. The city has swallowed up the desert.

It's dark outside but lights are gleaming everywhere, reflecting in the glass and steel facades. Expensive apartment buildings, very expensive cars alongside us and on the approaching lanes. For every mosque there were now two or three shopping malls, Layla had written, and I couldn't imagine it before seeing it. And now it seems as though we're driving through a giant fairground with all its bright, flashing neon signs, logos and ads —red and blue for Burger King, white and black for Hugo Boss, orange for Harley Davidson, green and yellow for Chillie's Taco Bar. It's incredibly crowded and noisy. Cars hooting, curses shouted through wound-down windows, synthetic Arab Pop booming out of nowhere.

Long lines of SUVs and dark limousines have formed outside the Dunkin' Donuts and KFC drive-throughs, young men leaning out of car windows to grab large bags and cardboard cups. Some of them have small children on their laps, drumming on the steering wheels. I've only been here three hours and I can barely remember what women's hair looks like. Instead, black headscarves everywhere, ninja women in all shapes and sizes.

'So, does anything look familiar?' Omar asks, in English. 'It's changed a lot, huh?'

'You can speak Arabic, it's fine,' I say. 'I haven't forgotten it.'

My cousin laughs. 'No, but your accent's terrible. *Marra min barra*. I'll soon get that sorted out.'

Omar picked me up from the airport. Over the past few days I'd been wondering what it would be like to see him again. We'd spent a lot of time together as children, even though he's almost ten years older than me. He had taught Layla and me how to swim in his parents' pool and played football with us in the backyard. He's now forty-one with a generous belly – typical Saudi, Barbara would say – on his third wife and a father of two teenagers. I'd seen the pictures of them on Facebook – weddings, holidays, the children looking slightly askew at the camera and making victory signs, chubby.

At the airport, he had collected me even before passport control. '*Ya basha*, do they not give you anything to eat in *Almanya*?' was his laughing welcome, followed by a bear hug and a playful nudge in the side. 'You look like a toothpick. Come on, let's get out of here quick so you can get a decent bite to eat.' He had taken my passport out of my hand, inconspicuously slid a banknote between the pages and dragged me across the glittering new terminal. 'A friend of mine works at the immigration desk, he let me through. All we have to do now is pop into his office to get your visa stamped.' The group of white-clad pilgrims who had boarded

with me in Cairo had meanwhile knotted themselves into a tangle at passport control, gesticulating and shouting. 'It's always the same,' said Omar. 'They can't wait another minute to set foot on holy soil. If only they knew what was waiting for them.'

My visa was stamped without further ado in Omar's acquaintance's office; a few pleasantries were exchanged. 'Ah, *Almanya*, Ger-Ma-Nee, very good, Mika-Eel Schu-Maker, Ba-Yern Myu-Nik! *Ahlan wa sahlán, ya akhi!*'

By the time I put my passport away the banknote had disappeared.

'Why didn't you come earlier, last week maybe?' Omar asks as we turn onto the busy corniche. 'We'd have had more time and you could have seen the whole family again.'

'I had to work – the earliest flight I could get was for today.'

I look out of the window in silence and feel old, long-faded images rising to the surface. The illuminated King Fahad Fountain directly on the coastal road, visible even from the plane in its final descent. The brightly lit artworks on the traffic islands, which we climbed on as children. We were particularly keen on the concrete block with four cars embedded in it. For a long time I believed what our father told us about it: years ago, there were roadworks on the corniche and the cars had driven too fast and got stuck in the wet concrete. And the king had left the cars there to warn other drivers not to go too fast.

Layla had realized even then that it must be a fairytale. 'That's impossible, look, one of the cars is stuck backwards in the cement.'

'Welcome home. *Ahlan wa sahlán.*' Omar turns into a driveway on a short street. An instant wave of memories hits me. It's impossible to say which are my own and which originate from the stories Barbara used to tell us. Anecdotes of an old home. Welcome home. But yes. I do recognize the gate, although it's surely not the same one as twenty years ago. It opens, not automatically as you might expect of such a luxurious driveway but slowly, first one wing and then the other. A bent old man with dark black skin and snow-white hair pushes the heavy wrought-iron gates open so the Lexus can drive through.

'You ought to remember him,' says Omar with a punch at my shoulder.

The man in the grey thowb raises his head, turns to the car and smiles a broad smile that unleashes a row of large, gleaming-white teeth.

'Mussa?' I ask incredulously.

Omar nods, grinning. '*Abuya's* fired him eighty times over and sent him away, but he refuses to leave. He says he's going to die here, come what may. All that's waiting for him in Sudan is his wives, he says, ready to take the last shirt off his back.'

'*Ya basha, ya Basil,*' the old man calls out and shuffles towards the car to open the door for me. Getting out of the air-conditioned car, I take a heavy blow from the evening heat. '*Ahlan, ahlan, ya basha.* You haven't changed a bit, *mabrook, mabrookya akh al-aroosa!*'

Trembling, I shake his leathery, wrinkled hand and accept his best wishes. I want to say

something but the words get stuck in my mouth. My throat is rough and dry and I find it hard to breathe. My Arabic refuses to come out, the words resist and collide, all I can manage is a low *'Shukran, Allahyosalimak.'* Old Mussa was already ancient when we were children playing in this backyard. His voice and his loud laughter gurgle just the way they used to. All at once I feel overwhelmed by endless fatigue. Barely has Mussa let go of my hand to close the gate behind us, than the front door opens. I get only a fleeting impression of how much the house has changed. It has grown taller, topped up by several storeys, extensions to one side, new facades and windows. Light falls into the courtyard, which is much smaller than I remember it. The scent of oleander and stale condensate from the air conditioning is the same, though. Time seems to stand still for a moment and the world around me starts spinning. Memories, as fragile as paper cranes, the feeling in my chest and my fingertips as though something inside me were about to implode.

Then the noise. Out of the front door dashes – limps – my Auntie Basma, Omar's mother, tugging her headscarf into place with one hand, the other outstretched to me. *'Ya habibi. Ya galbi, hamdilla al salamah,* thank God you've arrived safely. My God, look at you, just look at you.' I take a few steps towards her and see she has tears in her eyes. She's got old. And smaller. Do old people really shrink? Get less and less? Or does it only seem that way because you yourself are so much further away from them?

She kisses and hugs me. Behind her, other members of the family have gathered in the doorway. I press the old woman to my chest and we walk into the house together. There are a few faces I recognize. Faces I haven't seen for an eternity, which are nonetheless deeply incorporated within me.

In the doorway, small and almost faded into the background behind all the people now launching themselves upon me, shaking my hands and patting me on the back, leans Basma's husband, Omar's father. My Uncle Khaled, my father's brother. He is wearing only a white vest and a green chequered futah, folded over beneath his protruding belly. One arm over his shoulders, an unfamiliarly gentle smile on her face and her headscarf draped only loosely over her shining black curls, there she is. The bride.

Layla (pp.91/92)

I remember the city in the rain, especially. Which is odd because it only rains here once a year at most. But perhaps that's precisely why those memories have stayed on the surface. The days when the city was flooded because the rudimentary sewage systems couldn't deal with several hours' rain. The days when we couldn't go to school because the courtyards were underwater and the classrooms were damp. Days when Layla and I sat by our bedroom window and looked out. Out to where the young men in their white thowbs and leather sandals got out of their cars to push them, the cars seeming to float like cargo ships along the deep, waterlogged streets.

We'd spend hours sitting on brightly coloured plastic boxes and looking outside. Between the high pavements, the streets had transformed into raging streams and the tide brought empty plastic bottles, crisp bags and other rubbish bobbing past us.

Everything was dull grey on those rainy days. Even the date palms and the apricot trees in the courtyard of the house opposite, the bright Toyota pickups, people's faces. The hazy rain veil had covered the entire city and we couldn't get enough of the sight of it.

The evening rushes past me. Faces and voices and yet more faces. I know many of them, former faces grown older, belonging to my cousins, my uncles and their wives. Children who aren't children any more but young adults, some of them with their own families now.

Thirty people are sitting around me in the new lounge in the newly topped-up house. The building used to have only two storeys; now it has seven and a lift goes straight from the ground-floor lobby to my uncle and aunt's penthouse on the sixth floor.

Hands are held out to me, and tea glasses; the TV, not much smaller than a mid-range cinema screen, is showing old black-and-white footage of an Um Kalthum concert. Our father always used to listen to their songs in the car, until we started imposing our detective-story cassettes on him.

The children and their young mothers have gathered in front of the TV, playing with iPhones, iPads and plastic rattles.

Um Kalthum, 'Old McDonald Had a Farm' from the iPhones, loud laughter, heated conversations and calls for the maids almost bring the overcrowded lounge to bursting point. Despite the air conditioning on full power, sweat runs down my temples.

Plates of dates, nuts and pastries are passed around. The air smells of Saudi coffee made from unroasted beans and cardamom and I search the crowd of people tugging me from one sofa to the next for Layla's face.

There she is, at the head of the room, sitting next to Uncle Khaled. She has taken off her headscarf by now and given it to one of the girls to play with. The child wraps herself in the pale blue scarf, laughing and squealing, turns in uninterrupted circles in front of Layla, picks at the little beads on the seam of the fabric and keeps reaching out a hand for my sister. She laughs with the little girl, claps her hands and sings a few lines from an Arabic nursery rhyme. The girl laughs even louder and claps a clumsy rhythm. As she does so, she gets tangled up in the headscarf, loses her balance and falls flat on her back on the carpet.

My Auntie Basma talks over my head at Omar, who is sitting on the other side of me, and I carry on watching Layla as she and Uncle Khaled play with the little girl. Her face looks softer. Her features more feminine. Even beneath her loose white blouse, I can tell she's put on a few kilos. Her nails are neatly filed and varnished pale pink; she's wearing her golden engagement ring. It's as though she had physically accepted her heritage. Her gestures resemble those of my female cousins and aunties, she laughs loudly and from deep within. And even after all these years without the language, I can hear that her Arabic is almost unaccented. She seems almost effortless here, a stronger, braver version of herself.

(pp. 99-106)

Uncle Khaled has sat down with Layla and me, and Mary brings tea, coffee and dates although no one could possibly eat another bite after the evening's feast of a meal.

We are deeply embedded in the soft upholstery, sipping at our glasses and enjoying the moment's peace. Briefly, I think Khaled has fallen asleep but then I notice his fingers flicking along his prayer beads, his mouth moving barely perceptibly.

'Jeddah,' Layla says eventually in Arabic, giving Khaled a loving stroke on the back, 'got its name from *jaddah*, the Arabic word for grandmother. A folktale says that the grave of Eve, the mother of humankind, was here. For our uncle, that's still a sign that the cradle of civilisation, of all humankind is right here.'

'You see, *ya waladi*,' he says and turns his black eyes framed with laughter lines on me. 'God has always looked here first of all. If Mother Eve ended her last journey here, *ya waladi*, then it's only right for us all to come together again here. Then it's Allah's will, *ya rab*, then every starts here and finds its peace here. Your sister sensed that, Basil. She listened to Allah. She came back.'

Layla laughs. 'Oh no, I just wanted to be with my family, *ya ammy*.'

'I've got something for the two of you,' says Khaled, waving for Mary. 'Could you bring me the envelope from the desk in my study, please?'

She returns with a large brown envelope. Our uncle opens it slowly and deliberately with his old, slightly knotty fingers and pulls out a pile of photos. The top one shows him, obviously during his time in the military, although the boy in the yellowed image looks far too young for his uniform. And then there's a picture of our Arab grandmother, our *sitti*. We have no memory of her; she died at a great age when we were very little. It shows the old woman in a pale green kaftan, bent low over a book. On her head she wears a loosely placed black veil, beneath which a long silvery grey plait is visible.

'Once, when Layla was just a few months old and your parents were here on a visit with the two of you,' Khaled begins, 'we wanted to go out, all four of us together – we were young once, you know. Your auntie had had a new dress made, I remember it very clearly, it had a long green skirt, as green as the grass in Germany, we never have colours like that here, you know. Everything here looks like the dust on the furniture. The dress was beautiful and she looked like a young Fairouz. Your mother had dressed up too and we went to a ball at the Diplomats' Club. Your grandmother looked after you all, you and Layla and Omar and Sahar, but they were older. I can't remember how old they were exactly. Your auntie, she always knows that kind of thing.'

'Anyway, your grandmother looked after you all. Do you remember her? She was my mother, and your father's mother. Layla, *ya binti*, you look very like her, look, over there, there's a picture of her. She had very long hair, like Sahar, and like you used to have. Her plait almost reached the ground and she used to burn off the ends with a piece of coal from the kitchen so it didn't grow any longer. It smelled terrible, I remember it well; we always thought one of the wild dogs must have fallen into the fire outside. What was I telling you? Oh yes, how your grandmother looked after you. Well, it got rather late, maybe two or three in the morning, you

know, we knew how to party in those days. Your auntie and your father, they loved dancing. Layla, *ya binti*, apparently you refused to go to sleep. You kept crying, your grandmother said. And when we got home there she was, sitting on the floor like she always did, the old lady, with you on a cushion on her lap, and singing for you and rocking you to and fro. You laughed so sweetly, *ya binti*. She had painted your eyes with khol and your hands with henna. She'd drawn little flowers on your tiny fingers. You looked beautiful, *ya binti*, like a real *Badawwi*. We all laughed and laughed, except for your mother – she was horrified. She snatched you away from your grandmother and started swearing in German, screamed at your father, and then you started screaming too, your father tried to calm you all down, and your grandmother didn't know what was going on. All she wanted was for you to calm down. Your mother didn't know back then how we treat our children here. I think she was just shocked, because of the khol and the henna. But it was a terrible fuss. Your mother, she cried, she cried and cried and I couldn't understand a word, only your father's name, she kept repeating it, Tarek, Tarek, and pressed you to her bosom and tried to wipe off the khol with her sleeve. Your auntie took her away to help her clean you up, and your father explained that babies would all be asleep by this time in Germany, and that they don't put makeup on them. It simply wasn't done, he said, and Fatma, your mother, was just a bit confused. She didn't know all this here yet, you know, she was very young, much younger than Layla is now.'

I can well imagine Barbara, the small blonde woman she must have been at the time, with her fashionable short haircut, in an evening dress, presumably blue or pale grey, those were always her colours, after the diplomats' ball, finding her little daughter in the arms of her Bedouin mother-in-law. Painted and bedecked like a desert princess.

Uncle Khaled puts down a black and white photo, four small boys with big, dark eyes lined up on top of a wall, looking dreamily and slightly sceptically at the camera. One of them is our father, the others are his brothers. A picture from a different century, a completely different life.

'Isn't it crazy that we're related to them?' Layla whispers.

'Your father was a good man, a very good man,' says Uncle Khaled. 'He always wanted to help everyone. That's why he wanted to be a doctor. You couldn't study medicine properly here at that time so we sent him to Germany with a grant, and the whole family clubbed together for the rest of the money, your uncles and aunties, our parents, their parents. They all wanted Tarek to be a doctor.'

Uncle Khaled takes out another picture: my parents' wedding photo. A slim, dark-haired man smiling euphorically with his very young, very blonde wife in his arms in her white hippie dress. They're both laughing and they look free, in the wood-panelled vestibule of a small-town registry office in provincial Germany. They are flanked by my German grandparents with their Protestant stiffness, in their high-necked, neatly ironed Sunday best. My grandmother in one of her flowery dresses, dark blue with a white collar, her perm short and accurately set. Next to her my grandfather, his suit a touch too loose, his tie in an ambitious knot. Beside them are Uncle Khaled and Auntie Basma, standing like a royal couple at a servant's wedding, sceptically inspecting the new in-laws, my auntie in a red evening dress, clutching a golden handbag, her hair in elegant water waves, the gentlewoman she was throughout our childhood, the lady Layla always wanted to be. Only my uncle is holding his

freshly married brother lovingly by the shoulder and giving him an encouraging smile; the young blonde girl in the hippie dress will have nothing to fear. I wonder why I've never seen the picture before.

My grandparents used to say they couldn't even find the country their daughter wanted to marry into on the map, back then. 'Arabia,' my grandma had said, 'that's just a fairytale land.'

'Your *jaddo*, may Allah bring peace to his soul, he broke the ice,' says Uncle Khaled, stroking the wedding picture.

'We all came to Germany for the wedding – your *sitti* had never flown in her life. Your grandparents picked us up at the airport. It was very, very cold, the middle of winter. I think there was even snow on the ground. We couldn't speak your grandparents' language and they couldn't speak ours. Your mother, oh, she was so young and excited. She couldn't get a word out, kept just looking at your father. And your grandfather, he came up to us and hugged your *sitti*. Just like that. I don't think your *sitti* ever touched another man like that in her life, apart from her own husband. She looked absolutely horrified, and your father too. I think your mother wanted the ground to swallow her up. Oh, how young we all were then.'

Uncle Khaled looks up from the pictures, at Layla. He takes her hand and strokes gently across her small, fragile fingers. Layla puts the picture in her other hand on the table and embraces my uncle's wrinkled hands, pressing them firmly.

'When your father wanted to marry your mother, everyone here said, "Why does he want a German girl? There are plenty of good women here." But he wouldn't be talked out of it. So I flew to Germany to talk to him and to take a look at the girl. She was so young, much younger than you are now, *ya binti*. And such a beautiful woman, so lively. I could understand my brother. And so I asked her to cook *ruz bukhari* and *mahshi* for me.' His eyes light up, heavy, full of memories and love. 'Of course she didn't know it was a test. She cooked a fantastic meal. Your father had taught her very well. After the meal I went into the kitchen with her to see how she made the coffee. You know, that's the test for every daughter-in-law. The mocha has to be brought to the boil slowly, several times over. And the little spoon on the edge of the pot, the woman has to move it down at the right moment so the coffee doesn't boil over. If she does everything right she'll make the perfect wife – because then she has patience, but also the confidence to act quickly at the right moment.'

I look at Layla. 'Did you have to make coffee too?'

'I don't think they do that any more,' she says with a laugh.

'Layla, my dear, I'm so sorry your mother couldn't come,' Uncle Khaled says. 'She never forgave your father for leaving, you have to understand that. Your auntie always says happiness is at home where there's hope for more, in that one moment that contains many more. *Inshallah*, it will be that way for Rami and you. For your mother, that moment was only short and you must forgive her.'

The call to prayer sounds outside and Uncle Khaled stands up to get ready. As he passes Layla, now huddled on her chair and staring at the pile of photos, he presses a kiss to her black curls. I get a brief pat on the shoulder. My little sister has tears in her eyes. Layla's tears rob me of my breath and I always want to blame someone for that.

Layla and I, we've never been strangers to one another.

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My paternal grandfather was a tailor with a small shop in the old centre of Mecca. My grandfather on my mother's side was a miner in the Ruhr Valley. My paternal grandmother came from Pakistan. Legend has it that she was of noble extraction and horrified her family by eloping with a young apprentice tailor from the Bedouin state of Saudi Arabia. My maternal grandmother fed geese on a farm in Lower Saxony as a young girl, before she returned to her Ruhr Valley hometown after the war, married a young war veteran resettled from East Prussia and had three children.

My father came to Germany as a young man, almost a boy. He learned the language and studied medicine. The devil's coincidence brought him to a small faceless town in the middle of the industrial Ruhr Valley, where he met a very young German nurse.

Together, they moved back to his family's country and had two children there. My German grandparents had never heard of that country.

My ancestors' furious movement outlines the dilemma of my life – to go or to stay? '*Haraka baraka,*' is an Arabic saying. *Movement is a blessing.* That's not always the case.

English Translation © Katy Derbyshire

Durra (pp. 109 – 116)

At the weekend, as promised, we take a trip to the sea. Rami has rented a big holiday house for the whole family to relax before we all get swept up in the wedding. The house is in Durra, one hour from Jeddah. "The complex is totally new and modern. Girls even drive and go around without abayas," he told me last night. "Everything's really laid back, women go swimming too and sit in the restaurants on the promenade." It seems important to Rami that I see him as liberal. He probably is.

We used to spend almost every weekend by the sea, although not in Durra. My dad never rented a house, but would cram our car full of rugs, cool boxes and his shisha. We'd drive straight onto the beach like all the other families, right in the city, just off the Corniche. Barbara would spread out the rugs and dress Layla and me in our swimsuits, while Dad lit charcoal in a clay pot for his shisha.

In the evenings we'd use the same pot to grill corn cobs and shish kebabs. Layla and I dug up half the beach and swam in the sea, our parents watching us from the shade of the car.

Layla and I join Rami, while the others follow in convoy. I take the passenger seat, with Layla sitting in the back like she's always done. "I get sick in the front, you know that," she'd said when I offered her the seat next to Rami. I put my sunglasses on in the harsh glare of the afternoon sun.

It's a long tedious journey out of the city. Bumper to bumper, the cars snake along over the Corniche towards the highway. Small children wave from car windows, drivers honk and yell at each other, the women adjust their headscarves. I glance in the rear view mirror. Layla's wearing her black abaya over a red summer dress, but her headscarf is draped over her shoulders like a shawl, her hair held back with large sunglasses. Our eyes meet. She smiles

her disarming smile, winks at me and hands me a chewing gum. Rami's on the phone nonstop, calling colleagues on his headset and then ordering food for the evening. By the time we reach Durra, the sun is low. At the holiday complex gate, a guard who can't be much older than sixteen checks Rami's I.D. He's wearing a faintly ridiculous white uniform with a machine gun slung over his shoulder. Rami nudges me with his elbow. "You see? It's great, isn't it? Really safe, really clean. You'll like it here." There's something almost touching about his pride and his excitement.

We drive along streets lined with flower beds, past little shops, beach cafes and a small funfair. The carousels screech and shriek, colourful lights glitter in the early dusk, it all looks a bit like a film set. I feel Layla's hand on my shoulder and turn round. "Better than Disneyland, isn't it?" she whispers, and we grin at each other. "Hey you two," Rami laughs. "Are you keeping secrets from me?" For the first time since my arrival, I feel the knot in my chest loosen a little.

Our house is on the outer edge of the complex in a row of medium-sized holiday villas. Colossal SUVs are parked outside the buildings, Pakistani drivers sit on the curbs, smoking cigarettes and eating sandwiches.

"Come on in," says Rami, unlocking the front gate. "Leave the bags in the car, the shaghalat will see to them later."

In the courtyard is a small, illuminated pool. "Yes! And there's a Jacuzzi! It's exactly how I imagined it." Rami flings out his arms as if he'd built the house himself. I just nod as Layla takes Rami's hand and whispers something to him. They share a laugh; I bury my hands in my pockets and look across at the pool.

The inside of the house isn't bad either. The living room alone could contain my entire flat. There's a massive TV on the wall; black-and-white footage of old concerts appears on the screen as if by magic.

Meanwhile the others have arrived. Omar with his wife and kids, Basma and Khalid and yet more cousins. Rami allocates the six bedrooms between them; I'm only half listening. The family racket is in full swing.

(...)

After dinner, Layla and I sit in loungers right by the water. Above us are colourful strings of lights; a whiff of lamp oil lingers on the air from the torches dotted across the lawn. Everyone else is in bed apart from Omar and Rami, who are still lolling in front of the giant TV. They're messing about on the PlayStation they managed to get going after endless effort and expletives. We gaze at the sea lapping at the stones again and again, lapping at the pebbles, washing over them, very gently, again and again.

"I just hated the city," Layla says at some point. "Too grey, too silent, too oppressive. I hated being told how great everything was, how we had the best of both worlds, how it could only ever be a good thing to know two such different cultures. But no one ever told us that most people want you to pick a side, that they're just looking for what they already know. The divide never ends, it'll never close and you never really belong anywhere. Nobody tells you that."

I look at her. Her face is half in shadow, but her eyes are shining. It's the first time she's said anything that's meant only for me, the first time in all these days. She's been explaining, negotiating, organising and smiling sweetly. And now she's suddenly here, present, just as loud and passionate as the Layla I know. But her gaze remains fixed on the sea.

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