

Excerpt from



**GOETHE
INSTITUT**

Rasha Khayat's

Weil wir längst woanders sind

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Durra

The promised weekend getaway takes us to the sea. Rami has booked a big vacation rental for the whole family to give us all one last chance to relax before the wedding hubbub begins. The house is in Durra, an hour away from Jeddah. "This place is really new and modern. The girls there drive cars and can walk around without an abaya," he had told me yesterday evening. "Everything is really laid-back there. The women even go swimming and sit at the restaurants on the boardwalk." It seems important to Rami that I think of him as liberal. And maybe he is.

We used to spend almost every weekend at the sea, but not in Durra. My father never rented a house. Instead, he stuffed our car with mats, coolers, and his hookah. We simply drove the car onto the beach right in the city, just off the corniche, like all the other families. Barbara would spread out the mats and Layla and I would put on our swim suits while my father lit coals in his clay shisha bowl.

In the evening we would use the same clay bowl to grill corn on the cob and ground beef kebabs. Layla and I would dig up half the beach and swim in the sea while our parents sat watching us from the shade of the car.

Layla and I are riding with Rami, and the others follow in a convoy. I sit next to him, with Layla in the backseat, like old times. "You know I get sick in the front," she had said when I offered her the seat next to Rami. The afternoon sun is glaring and I put on my sunglasses.

The drive out of the city is long and slow. Cars snake bumper to bumper along the corniche in the direction of the expressway. Little kids wave from the windows, drivers honk and holler at each other, women straighten their headscarves. I glance in the rearview mirror. Layla is wearing her black abaya over her red summer dress. Her headscarf is draped like a shawl over her shoulders and she's pushed her hair back with a pair of big sunglasses. Our eyes meet. She flashes her disarming smile, winks at me and hands me some gum. Rami talks nonstop on the phone with his headset, first with work colleagues, and then he orders food for dinner.

The sun is already low by the time we get to Durra. The guard at the security gate of the vacation rental complex checks Rami's ID. He's wearing a fancy white uniform, has

a machine gun slung over his shoulder, and is probably no older than sixteen. Rami nudges me with his elbow. "This is going to be great, my friend. The place is really new—you're going to like it." His pride and excitement are almost touching.

We drive slowly through the complex with its little shops, seaside bars and restaurants, landscaped roundabouts, and a little amusement park. The carousels screech and whistle, colorful lights twinkle in the early dusk—the whole thing has the feel of a film set. Layla puts her hand on my shoulder and I turn around. "It's better than Disneyland, isn't it?" she whispers, and we grin at each other. "Hey, you two," Rami says with a laugh. "Are you keeping secrets from me?" For the first time since I arrived, 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 villas. Massive vehicles are lined up in front of the buildings; Pakistani drivers sit on the curbs smoking cigarettes and eating sandwiches.

"Just come inside for now," Rami says and unlocks the gate to the stairway up to the house. "Leave the bags in the car. The *shaghalat* will take care of them later."

In the courtyard leading up to the front door there is a small illuminated pool. "Yes! There's a Jacuzzi! It's just how I pictured it." Rami spreads out his arms as though he built the house himself. I just nod silently while Layla takes Rami's hand and whispers something to him. They share a laugh. I stick my hands in my pockets and look at the pool.

The inside of the house is pretty impressive, too. My entire apartment would fit inside the living room alone. There is a massive television on the wall showing old concert recordings, as if by magic. The others have arrived by now: Omar with his wife and kids, Basma and Khaled, even more cousins. Rami divides them all up among the six bedrooms. I am only half listening—the din of the family has already set in.

From the living room, a sliding glass door leads straight into a little garden that opens onto the sea. A hedge of bougainvilleas and roses separates the garden from the adjoining property. There are rattan chairs and an awning. Someone set up three hookahs before we arrived.

I take off my shoes and walk slowly towards the water. My toes sink into the warm, soft sand. The sun has almost gone down and the sky has turned red and

yellow and purple. Small benches and umbrellas dot the beach, forgotten toys are scattered around, the lights of a small yacht harbor shimmer in the distance. Soft waves break beneath the humid evening air. You could almost forget where you are in the world.

Behind me at the house a couple dozen voices blend together, someone turns up the music coming from the television, and loud snippets of conversation make their way out to me. I close my eyes for a second and take in the muggy air.

“Basil? Basil! *Ya Basha*, come on. We’re going to go pick up the food. You can swim later.” Omar appears next to me wearing red Hawaiian print shorts, a T-shirt from the University of Michigan and green flip-flops.

“You don’t have anything like this in Germany, do you?” he says, pointing to the water. He offers me a cigarette.

“We have a harbor and also a river that feeds right into the sea,” I say and light the Marlboro.

“Yeah, we have a harbor here, too. But you can’t swim in it. Come on, we’ll be quick—I’ll even let you get behind the wheel.”

We drive through the brightly lit vacation home complex to the yacht harbor promenade, past little shops selling beach balls and inflatable floats, colorful bikinis hanging in the windows.

There are, in fact, women and girls without abayas sitting in the restaurants, smoking hookah nonchalantly with their fruity cocktails while 90s American pop blares from the loudspeakers.

We park the car and amble over to one of the restaurants. A big lit-up sign across the open counter proudly advertises the Lebanese grill specialties in red and green lettering. Even from this far away I can see the two giant ovens with open flames. The smell of grilled fish is incredible.

We take seats on the terrace, because our food isn’t ready yet, and the owner brings us two glasses of tea. “While you wait,” he says, shaking both our hands and exchanging a few pleasantries with Omar. At the table next to us sits a group of teenagers who would hardly be out of place back in St. Pauli. Big horn-rimmed glasses, even bigger headphones, each of them busy with an iPhone. They are mixing English and Arabic, taking pictures of each other and their food, and one of the girls is writing

in a slender black notebook.

Another girl comes up suddenly and whispers with the others. Then she tosses a glance in our direction and gestures with her hands. "*Fi Hay'a*," she spits and all at once, the group is up and moving. Just like that, the girls are back in their abayas and headscarves and some of them run inside the restaurant. The boys get up from the table and disappear behind the wall separating the men's area of the restaurant. A few lonely colorful cocktails and a half-eaten bowl of potato wedges are left behind on the table.

I look quizzically at Omar and he just shrugs his shoulders. "*Hay'a*," he says. "Religion police."

Just then, two young bearded guys in calf-length thobes come around the corner patrolling the promenade. One of them yells after a young mother, damning her to hell for riding a bike with her little boy in public. The woman just shakes her head and keeps riding.

The other guy sees us on the now deserted terrace, murmurs something to his friend and heads straight for us. All I hear is "*Haram!*" "Family section!" "Men behind the wall!" "You should be ashamed sitting there gawking at our women!"

As a reflex I take out my phone to take a photo of the two guys to send to Alex and Layla.

They'd have died laughing. But Omar puts his hand on my arm and pushes it down. "Don't forget where you are," he whispers, and for a brief moment I can't tell if he's serious.

Meanwhile one of the restaurant employees has approached the bearded men and is talking to them and gesticulating wildly. They both look over at us again, shake hands with the employee and continue on their way.

Omar gives me a stern look and then laughs. "Don't seem so shocked, *ya Basha*! That's nothing to get excited about. They just recently set up an office here and they think they need to clean things up. You just can't show them any fear. It's like with dogs." He lifts himself out of his chair. "Come on, it's time we get some food."

After dinner, Layla and I sit on lounge chairs next to the water. Strings of colorful lights hang above us and a few garden torches stuck in the lawn let off a faint smell of alcohol. The others have already gone to bed, except for Omar and Rami, who are still

hanging out in front of the giant TV playing PlayStation, which they managed to get working after an inordinate amount of tinkering and swearing. We look out at the sea, how it slaps against the rocks, against the pebbles, very quietly, again and again.

“I just hated that city,” Layla says eventually. “The grayness, the stillness. The gloom. And the way they were always telling us how great it is that we get the best of both worlds and what an advantage we have because we know two cultures that are so different. But the fact that most of the other people you meet will always want you to pick a side, that they are only interested in what’s already familiar—they never told us that. That this gap will never close and that you’ll never really belong anywhere. No one says anything about that.”

I look at her. Her face is half in shadow but her eyes gleam. It’s the first time that she has said something for me alone, the first time in all these days. She has explained, organized and smiled sweetly. And now she’s suddenly here, close to me and as loud and impassioned as the Layla I know. But her eyes remain fixed on the water.

“And then they ask such dumb questions,” she says, “ ‘Oh, does your family have oil?’ and ‘Oh, you must be glad you’re not forced to get married here!’ It’s automatically assumed that their side is better and we must of course prefer the grayness and the gravel and the orderly, trimmed hedges with the front yards.”

I take a drink of my fresh mango juice and cringe at its sweetness. Even the fruit here is oversweetened.

Of course what Layla is saying is true. But it still somehow makes me angry. “Is it really that bad at home?” I ask a little offensively and lean back. I can’t help but think of Barbara sitting in her kitchen smoking and working on a puzzle, of Juli, who doesn’t have the courage to tell me that she wants a real relationship, and of Alex, who I haven’t heard from in months because the whole drama with my sister at the end got to be too much, and he’d rather give up on us completely than deal with it. From the living room comes loud laughter and the sounds of a Formula 1 race.

“Do I really have to explain it to you, Basil? It’s all bullshit! Complete bullshit! This ‘Oh, how wonderful, two cultures!’ No one really wants to learn anything. How much time have I wasted with people who just want to explain to me what’s wrong with me, make me better, because I don’t see how great it all is. Until you start to believe that there really *is* something wrong with you. But you know what? They don’t feel the same way about you as you do about them. These people think you’re interesting

but they can't really comprehend your differences."

Small red blotches have formed on Layla's neck as always happens when she gets worked up about something. Her bare feet trace circles in the sand and she continues to avoid looking at me.

"This whole 'Oh, how great! Oh, how exciting!' " she continues, "They should just leave me alone! I never want to hear it again. I just want peace and quiet. Here, they don't know my whole background and they have no idea how we were raised, but they don't care. They accept me for me, and when they don't understand something, they just shrug and say: 'That's her German side.' "

"I don't know," I say. "Maybe you see it that way now, but don't you think that in a year or..."

"Of course there's more opportunity back there," she interrupts me. "Especially for women.

But what good does that do me if no one is happy? If they're silent and cold despite all their freedom and always just repeat the same familiar patterns? What good are their opportunities without any human connections? If I have to be lonely in that small, gloomy city because I know so many other things, if I never get to be free, because I constantly have to decide, and I'm supposed to be happy about it, too. If I constantly have to prove how happy and grateful I am that I get to be there? Their compassion has a price: this eternal gratefulness, gratefulness for falsely motivated compassion. Am I supposed to drop to one knee for eternity because I was allowed to grow up in this boring dump with a bunch of pale, gray people who thought our mother fled in the dark of night with us kids to escape an abusive husband? You know how many times I heard that story. 'Oh yeah, Saudi Arabia, just like in *Not Without My Daughter!* It's nauseating, Basil! Did anyone ever ask you how it really was? How it feels to be surrounded by kids who are all different from you? Did anyone ask you that? They always thought they already knew everything and they formed their image of you as soon as they heard your name. For the first half of my life, I was supposedly this mysterious desert princess with big eyes and pyramids in my front yard. And then 9/11 happened and we were all suddenly terrorists. Before that, hardly anyone even knew what Islam was—we were all just lumped together as the people from the land of the camel. You went along with all that crap, Basil, so don't act like I'm imagining it. All at once I had to defend girls in headscarves even though I had never wanted to

wear one myself. I suddenly felt obligated to defend a religion that didn't have anything to do with me, except that I was born into it. The plumber tells me: 'Oh, you speak really good German,' and asks if I know those terrorist guys from Hamburg University." She bends down to pick up a rock and throws it with all her strength into the sea.

"Basil, I have a real home here. From here, I can go anywhere and come back and no one will ask me to pick one thing over another."

"Hey, we're going to bed, you two," Rami calls from the terrace. "Keep an eye on my bride, *ya akhi*." I give him two thumbs up. When I turn back around, Layla is looking at me for the first time. Her eyes are wide and red.

"You always just take it, Basil. Or you give way, block it out, leave. You shut people out like our mom does. You confine yourself to the same thirty square feet of feelings, because you don't know what to do. Damn it, Basil! Do something with your life—commit to something!

Barbara checked out a long time ago. Do you want to live like that, too? Honestly?

I want to object, but she just takes my hand and squeezes it tight.

"There's not enough room for beauty back there, Basil, not enough room for warmth. There's space and there's filters. I've had enough of the filters. Why can't anyone there just say how they feel?" Her hands begin to tremble a little. She takes two, then three deep breaths, in and out.

"After Alex, I was afraid that I'd felt everything I would ever be able to feel," she says. "And then I landed here and they just let me be. They let me be. Regardless of what I don't have here or what I may not agree with."

"But then, we never had anyone who could have helped us," I say, "anyone to show us how to live a life in between."

Layla gives me a sideways, somewhat quizzical look. "I always had you, though," she says. "You and me. That always felt right."

"Sometimes I don't know how feelings are supposed to feel," I say and light a cigarette. I try to blow a smoke ring, but Alex is the only one who can do that.

Layla hardly ever speaks his name. Even before, that's how it was. As though it were a secret, as though no one was allowed to know—not even her—that there was a connection between them. "Is *he* there?" she would ask me, "Have you seen *him*?" There are photos of the two of them during holidays or from trips we all took

together, and when you look at Layla you can see that she's in love, how she looks into the camera bashfully, smiling, while Alex is always holding back a little, his face strained, contorted. But he always held Layla tight as though she belonged to him, as though she were a part of him. With his long arms and his big, broad shoulders, he wrapped her up, surrounded her with his near six-and-a-half-foot frame, so no one else could get in, and maybe so nothing could happen to her. He protected her and he held her back.

"One time," Layla says quickly, "I asked Alex what it was he really wanted. 'For you to find someone you love but to still love me too,' is what he said. He was always happy to just stay on the safe side." Layla fishes a cigarette from my pack. She glances back at the house to make sure all the lights are out and the old aunts have really gone to sleep. Then she lights the tip.

"I actually don't know why we were always so cruel to each other," she says then. "We knew we loved each other. Maybe we thought we didn't deserve it, such complete devotion, unconditional acceptance. Maybe we just confused love for something else and we believed that drinking whiskey, smoking cigarettes, talking about books every now and then, and the fact that we both understood loss could be enough, and so we just called it love. He always *was* the only one who understood, though. All the anger and sadness that never goes away when you lose a person or a place. He knew how much energy that takes. I never had to explain that to him. But in the end, I guess you have to be willing, have to believe life can be beautiful in spite of all the pain."

"Alex confused possession for love," I say, but Layla shakes her head.

"No, he didn't. He confused love for possession. That's why I had to leave." "Do you ever miss him?" I ask.

"Not anymore. Just the idea of him sometimes. You know what I mean? I miss this mental image of this amazing, vibrant person, the person he was in my head. The image of this affectionate, funny man who I loved so much. But then I see the real man in front of me, who doesn't know how to deal with his own feelings or other people's, who always just talks, who learned to care but not to love, would rather avoid things than feel something for once. But I also miss the easiness we had with each other and the sense of absolute, because we wanted to belong together. But the price was always too high. And you know, here, I don't pay for that.

What Rami and I have with each other maybe isn't as intense but we get along and we're on the same page. That's worth more than you can imagine."

I know exactly what she means. Alex never took care of his things. He was constantly losing something, gifts that he treated carelessly, unlovingly, that would suddenly disappear. It always made me so mad, because he treated Layla the exact same way. Because I blamed him that Layla was suddenly gone, without warning, had packed up her things and left me alone with Alex and his disappearing stuff. And that she's here now and in a few days, she'll marry a brand new, completely different, old life. A life with no place in it for me.

"Did you ever say goodbye to him?" I ask. "Does he know that you're here and you're getting married?"

"I spent a lot of time wondering if I should write to him," says Layla. "I went back and forth, you know. But it's not like he came looking for me. I was simply gone one day and he accepted it."

"He didn't know how to reach you, though."

"I don't buy that. He could have written to me or asked you. You always had my number, wherever I was. Did he ever ask you?"

I shake my head and Layla nods.

"For a long time, I wondered if I was even worth a personal goodbye for him. Every day I checked emails and the regular mail and my German phone. Nothing. And then I made the choice to move on, because I knew we would never actually talk things through. Then, little by little, he became less important to me. And I thought, why would I want to undo that now? I already know what he would say anyway."

I know she's right. Since he'd moved out, I hadn't heard from Alex either. And before that, I had once caught him reading one of the postcards Layla sent me. It was in a stack of mail on the cabinet in the entryway. He had just looked at it and put it back in the pile. I imagined I saw sadness on his face, but probably only because I wanted that for him and Layla—that they would see for themselves how sad they were making each other.

"Let's get some sleep, *ya akhi*," says Layla in Arabic. "Tomorrow we get more of all the beautiful things: sun, food and noise. You won't miss it until it's gone—I know what I'm talking about."

Green

Little by little, the weather turns warmer. It's been a few weeks since it's snowed and we are wearing tennis shoes to school again instead of riding our bikes in boots and warm puffer coats.

We spend nearly every weekend at my grandparents' garden. Barbara took a job at the hospital and only sometimes joins us in the evenings. She says we need the money.

The garden is tucked among a bunch of other little gardens behind the main street that runs in front of the train station. The paths between the plots are covered with gravel, so we don't like to ride our bikes here. The other gardens are enclosed by fences and hedges and there are no other kids around.

My grandpa has built a little hut in the garden where we sometimes spend the night. My grandma sits there in a plastic garden chair, always in the shade of the hut, wearing her sleeveless house dress, a cloth bag stuffed in the pocket, and cleans green beans or asparagus or peels potatoes into a big blue plastic bowl. Layla sits at one corner of the flower bed with a little shovel, digging up flower stems and then burying them again. She waters the plants again and again, pats down the dirt with her hand, and hesitantly runs her palm over the soft petals.

I usually sit on the narrow strip of grass and leaf through my grandpa's soccer magazines. I don't know the clubs or the players but the other boys in my class know all their names and wear the jerseys in gym class and sometimes the team scarves in winter—in blue and white or yellow and black or red and white.

There is a little birdhouse in the garden, too. My grandpa built it and put it on a pedestal next to the hut. Last summer, when we were still coming here to visit and would fly back home afterwards, the little house was still out in the open and visible on its pedestal, and every now and again a chickadee or a sparrow would find its way inside and peck at the birdseed we had scattered there.

Since then the bird house has become completely overgrown by green ivy and hardly visible under the dark leaves. Just a hint of the roof's little shingles peek through. But the birds still find it—again and again they fly up to the ivy shrub, push

the leaves aside, and look for food behind the green curtain. Layla often brings bread crumbs along that she laboriously distributes among the leaves and on the roof of the little birdhouse. Then she sits off to the side in her flower bed and waits for the chickadees and sparrows to find her food.

Sometimes my grandma brings along strawberry cake or blueberry cake or cheesecake from home and then we are allowed to drink a small cup of coffee with lots of the fancy brand of milk in it and whipped cream on our cake. Wasps sit on the edges of the plates and Layla asks what kind of animal they are. We don't have wasps at home.

One afternoon my grandpa and I walk ahead together into the garden while Layla and my grandma are still carrying bags in from the car. We brought salad with us and later we're going to grill sausages and make stick bread.

Next to the birdhouse on the pedestal a swarm of flies has gathered and is buzzing loudly. As I get closer, they fly away and I see a small chickadee lying dead in the grass. There it lays, eyes closed, beak wide open, and feet stuck in the air, as though it has fallen from the roof of the birdhouse. I squat down in the grass next to the bird and nudge it a little with my finger. It doesn't stir but the slight movement rouses two more flies from the bird's dead body and they buzz away.

I hear my grandpa at the gate to the garden call to my grandma not to forget to shut the car off

I stand up and run to the gate, past my grandma and down the gravel path to Layla. The

gravel edges into my brown sandals and between my toes, the sharp little rocks sticking in the soles of my feet.

“Layla, let me have the bags,” I say when I’m standing in front of my sister. “Give me the bags and wait here for a second, OK? I have to take care of something first.”

She looks at me with her big eyes, nods silently, hands me the bags and takes two steps backwards.

“I’ll come right back to get you. Don’t go anywhere, OK?”

I run back into the garden, drop the sausages next to the hut and grab Layla’s little shovel from the flower bed. Carefully I push the bird onto it, carry it around to the back of the hut and lay it on a bed of lawn clippings. I cover the chickadee with leaves from the apple tree so the flies can’t bother it anymore. I arrange a few rocks around the bed and scatter more grass over the bird. Layla won’t see it and won’t have to be frightened, and the chickadee can rest peacefully.

I head back down the gravel path in front of the garden and see my grandma trying to get Layla to budge and to come with her into the garden. Layla just stands there, resolute, and crosses her arms over her chest. But when she sees me wave, she nods and finally heads in my direction.

“Can someone please explain to me what that was all about?” my grandma asks.

“Nothing,” I say. “I just had to take care of something real fast.”