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To My Identity Sister

A German Survival Letter

(Translated from German by Lloyd West)

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For Solongo

Sister, what has happened to us? Why do we find ourselves back in Germany — you on the Munich cobblestones and me on the streets of Berlin — when it seems that only yesterday we were sauntering arm-in-arm under the blazing New York sun, free and proud along Amsterdam Avenue towards the New School of Social Research — inwardly showing Germany the middle finger?

That middle finger was directed at all those Germans who would daily ask us where we really come from, why we speak such good German, whether we drink milk and eat rye bread or know the taste of *Rollmops*, whether we have ever read Arendt or Kleist — directed at all those Germans who accuse us of abolishing Germany with our almond-eyes and then in the same breath whisper to us that we are cute Asian chicks — all this as we sit unsuspectingly in a seminar or at a negotiation table; and afterwards, half-paralyzed, we attempt to shake off these whispered insinuations like the bite of a rabid dog; and later on the smooth tiled floors of our bathrooms — behind doors bolted so that nothing of this reaches our devoted mothers, who would readily scrub

off the last layer of their skin for this better life in their new homeland — we break down completely.

With our graduate school scholarships and relocation to New York, we managed to break triumphantly loose from all that shit. We managed, as if in a dreamlike prehistoric phase before our German birth, to become weightless again; we could be invisible and at the same time display our authentic selves to the world. In New York we neither had to explain ourselves constantly nor apologize for our existence. Our voice was once again our voice, our arm once again just a human arm, our hair once again just a thicket of keratin fibers, identical in its basic structure to that on any other skull on Amsterdam Avenue.

I remember how we spoke about precisely this bodily experience when we first met on the Upper East Side, you in a silky sleeveless top, standing alert and upright at the bar, with the last light of the summer evening reflecting off the fine Asian skin of your upper arms. I thought to myself how beautiful you were, how German you looked in your upright posture, your features.

“Do you know that feeling, when you get out of the plane from Germany at JFK: your lungs suddenly expand and your breath slows down...,” you began haltingly, and I breathlessly finished your sentence, “...and after an hour you forget your body, because unlike in Germany you don’t have to take part in this dual gaze, this dual questioning of your foreigner’s body? Because the otherness of your body doesn't have to be up for grabs as a subject for commentary and criticism by every entitled bureaucrat, fishmonger, cyclist or saleswoman? Because people here are aware how shitty such a commentary would make you feel? Because here you get more space simply to be a human being?”

That's how it began, this peculiar German friendship on American soil. We laughed together about the left-liberal Germans, who imagine themselves to be progressive, but simply can't conceive that we as Chinese- or Mongolian-Germans could understand anything about *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, whose eyes would glaze over if they happened to cite a famous European philosopher in our presence, because our bodies just don't fit to those book covers, because that is not our history, because the 20th century in Germany could't possibly have anything to do with us, because there is no monument for us in Germany's sense of history.

"Remember that woman at the Technical University of Berlin, the one who made that daft Hannah Arendt comment at us...?" I started to chuckle, but wordlessly you linked arms and pulled me resolutely up the stairs to the New School of Social Research. I understood what you meant by this: Look, now it's us who are here in New York on the trail of Arendt, we are the ones who are following her escape route out of Europe. An exchange of looks between us, and all of a sudden the irony of our improbable life could be grasped tight; it no longer ran like a slippery Thing through our fingers.

In New York we became more Chinese and Mongolian and, in an unexpected twist, also more German. Unburdened, I could explore and enjoy my Chinese identity, as you did with your Mongolian identity, without the fear we would have in Germany of being accused of having betrayed our Germanness, of disrupting German culture, of polluting the German language, of bringing about Germany's abolition and downfall with the other identities inside us. Everyday life with two identities was no longer this perpetual criminal case, this endless examination in the interrogation room of the German psyche:

“Where did you,
when did you,
with whom in you,
at what place
hide something from us,
and who are you truly,
but truly, most truly, and above all
do you love this Germany
truly enough?”

But that was the sad joke: in New York we missed Germany, with a sensuality and intensity that frightened me. We missed German seriousness and eschewal of frivolity; the pretentious postering of New York’s intellectual and academic circles got on our nerves. Grow up guys, I often found myself thinking.

We would never have admitted to each other that we missed Germany; the hard-won triumph of our new existence was too fragile. But it showed in your gestures as you cooked *Königsberger Klopse* for us in your Brooklyn flat share, serving them them up with a conspiratorial smile. It could be heard in our self-ironic, exaggeratedly indignant exclamation, “In Deutschland machen wir das aber ganz anders!”. It told in our excitement, when we saw that a German artist or writer would be holding an exhibition or a reading in New York. Above all, it revealed itself in the web of wordplay within our German language-cocoon that we diligently weaved at each meeting, so that our German existence would not be lost.

For no rooted middle-class family was waiting for us in Germany, who could have preserved our German youth and childhood years like an amber amulet, to be presented to us on our return. Instead, like so many of the first precarious generation of immigrants, in which children teach parents what it means to be German, we wore the self of our youth and childhood years like a cameo pendant that we had picked up and hung invisibly around our necks; it became more real every time I spoke with you, and lost luster whenever I felt your absence.

Once, on an unusually sultry October day, we were jogging through Central Park when you suddenly paused at a park bench and declared, almost irritated, that today was the anniversary of German unification. It was oppressively hot; the sweat ran down our backs: we had to sit. On that bench, we told each other our family histories for the first time, yours starting in the East, mine in the West.

“Where were you before the wall came down?”, I wanted to know. You squinted and stated simply, “You were lucky that you could start in the West”.

Your parents came to the DDR from Mongolia. Your father was an engineer, an academic and a charismatic figure. He died too young, shortly after the wall fell, and your mother had to bring up you and your sisters alone in Plauen. The East was in you: You had a bone-deep understanding for the feeling of disappointment and neglect, the rage against both regimes, against the arrogance and condescension of West Germany. At your schoolfriend’s home, you had watched wide-eyed as her father took out his Swastika collection from the cabinet.

For your family, the fall of the wall was the collapse of a world. Since your story had started in the East, you were doubly burdened as both Foreigner and East German.

The wall was still standing when I arrived, aged two, with my mother at Schönefeld Airport in East Berlin. My father, who had driven from West Berlin to Schönefeld to pick us up, was held up by a DDR policeman for a parking violation. We waited for him in vain. My mother decided that we would take the last night bus to West Berlin alone. She was determined that we would not spend our first night in Germany in the DDR.

Later, Sister, when we knew each other well, that is, when we were able to guess at each others' vulnerabilities, you saved me from another break-down. Fleeing from a snowstorm into our beloved Metropolitan Museum on the Upper East Side, we stood before Anselm Kiefer's massive painting "Bohemia Lies by the Sea".

An ocean of field poppies fills Kiefer's picture; a deserted road leads up to the horizon and into nothingness. Above the horizon, in the neat cursive child's handwriting that I had learnt in Bavarian elementary schools, is written the impossible: "Bohemia Lies by the Sea". The line, from an Ingeborg Bachmann poem, expresses both the destruction and depravity of war and the loss of, and continuing hope for, a Utopia, for a new beginning after the destruction of all human order. That's how I had always understood the painting; after all, isn't that how it was meant?

But, as I saw that child's handwriting on the broad canvass — handwriting which could well have been mine — my tears began to fall. Bohemia Lies by the Sea expresses the impossible: Bohemia is landlocked, and will never be at

the sea, no matter how hard one wants it and longs for it. I was suddenly aware that this phrase and this painting described our relationship to Germany. Why had that never come to me before?

Germany was the place to which we felt we belonged, but which always evaded us. Every attempt was condemned to failure, laughable. Our German identity was a mocking joke, one at which I would myself have laughed, more loudly and violently than anyone, into the silence of the museum gallery. We would never truly belong in Germany. *Bohemia Lies by the Sea*: that was the Utopia of our insane attempt to match our German life stories, and those of our parents, our German self-image and citizenship with a social and cultural reality that would never exist. My tears turned from tears of despair into tears of unbridled rage. In that moment, I could have torn the whole painting off the wall.

During this time, you stood silently next to me, your sharp gaze directed ahead. I thought, relieved, that you had not seen my tears. But then you leant towards me and whispered into my left ear: "Remember how as high-school students in Germany we thought that Ingeborg Bachmann was the most famous female poet of the last century and that German culture was the absolute center of the world? But no one here has even heard of Bachman. The world is always wider, Liebes." You winked to me. "Come, let's go see the Byzantines."

That's the last memory that I have of you in New York. Your voice in my ear, your attempt to save me from myself. I imagine how you walk now along the roads of Munich: your usual elegance, your posture, your urgent pace. But the image blurs and I can't hold it. Is that because these bodies of ours that

have returned to Germany are not the same bodies that they were then? Why is it so damned hard for us to preserve anything lasting? Why does everything that's ours always dissolve again into this slippery Thing?

I only know that we left Germany with our girls's bodies and have returned as women. Our Asian, feminine bodies still elicit uncomfortable reactions, just as they did a decade ago, before our departure, now, with our new self-confidence, perhaps even more so. Since our return, our bodies are once again insecure on German soil, embarrassingly afflicted and contorted under a constantly questioning gaze. On account of our physical otherness, we must explain ourselves, restrain ourselves, defend ourselves, take up once again the daily battle for even the most basic level of recognition and minimal standard of comfort in human interactions. A hair is no longer just a hair, an arm no longer just an arm.

O Sister! Have we gone mad, coming back here to this den of thieves in which the daily scrutiny of our existence will one day rob us of the last shred of our wits? Why — after making a clean break, after our brave gesture of showing the middle finger, after our great transformation — did we come back? Are we going to lose the hard-won sense of humanity that could first blossom for us only in the pulsating American post-civil rights discourse, which still lives on in the US, despite Trump? What are the stakes for you and me, Sister? Have we not, at last, squandered them?

I sense your voice in my ear. I think of the wideness of the world and of the narrowness of our existence between the Donau and Spree. I feel a wave spreading in me, lapping first at my soles, and then bursting forth into my cranial cavity and through my brain, a wave of excess, an excess of reality, an ex-

cess of the reality of myself, an overabundance of atoms in my Chinese feet on German soil, a neural oversurge of my universal brain within a dizzyingly differentiated and fractured world.

A plain image forms before me out of simple brushstrokes. I see it and it's clear to me that we have not in fact squandered our stakes. We are not children anymore, and it is not as children that we have returned. The constant battle over who we truly are, which sooner or later forced us to strip away each layer of our reality until we were raw — we already decided this battle for ourselves ten years ago with our departure from Germany, we conquered our own reality with our friendship.

Sister, how grateful I am that you banished the sorcery, those intimidating magic-spells from my path, so that I could walk as a pre-mephistophelean 'mere human' down Amsterdam Avenue, so that my body could have that experience.

We, as immigrants, we too have the freedom to redefine ourselves; Germany defines us no longer. And our return is not compelled, it is not a renewed flight, not a pact in which we hazard the reality of our selves yet again. We are not a joke any more, perhaps never were — for those who have survived are not easily laughed at.