

## *What We Leave We Carry*

Anouk

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—  
Anouk

[Music]

**Presenter:** Anouk was raised in Paris by her North African parents and finds her community amongst fellow foreigners in London. This is *WritersMosaic, What We Leave We Carry*, the series that tells the true-life stories of migration to the UK.

[Music]

Anouk: I was born on the 28th of July, 1979, in Paris. My parents are Jewish. My mum was born in Algeria when it was still France, and she had to leave when she was 10 because of the independence. And my father probably had to leave around

the same time and for same reasons, different contexts, but they also had to leave their countries quite young. And my father was from Tunisia. So both North African Sephardi Jews.

I mean, it was love at first sight, but it was a short-lived story because I think they met in May, and I think they got married in the next November, and I was born eight months after, and I think when I was 11 months, they split. I don't remember them being together, but I do remember them fighting a lot and only being divorced when I was six. And all this time, between one year old and six, they just fought for my custody for, for everything. My father was observant, sort of traditional. He wanted me to have some form of Jewish life, to have a Jewish education. He's very attached to his roots, and he really wanted me to be attached to these roots. Whereas for my mum, it was very different. She didn't have a very strong attachment to her Jewishness. She sent me to Catholic school because she thought that was the best school. So she didn't really see any point really of keeping traditions, yet, she was a woman of contradiction, and she felt extremely Jewish.

[Music]

I had a very acute sense that I was not like other people, and I probably had been told to really be discreet about the fact I was Jewish. Not to lie about it, but I was really discouraged about talking about—I think around talking about it. And not just being Jewish, but also being North African people, being immigrants, because I think that's how my parents perceived themselves. I don't know which one was the most shameful, being from Arabic origin or Jewish, but I just knew I was different. Plus, my

parents were divorced in a Catholic school, which was not so common at the time. I just felt like other all my life.

[Music]

At school, I didn't feel that was my happy place, but then I went to study law, and I worked really hard, and I loved it. And I went towards international and European law. And then I went to Brussels. I was lucky in that sense that I met the one who was going to be my husband very early on, as soon as I arrived in Brussels, so in 2001. And that's really funny because as a child, I remember distinctively when I was in playgroup, like kindergarten, that I was pretending to speak English, and I always had this feeling that I was not going to marry someone French. I love the fact that he spoke English, that maybe I felt less weird. I felt like maybe because he was foreign and I was foreign, that it was an equal footing.

[Music]

So I had been to England as a young—as a teenager, like when I was 12, 15, 17; I went several times. And I felt there was an incredible freedom. I mean, it was mostly London I went to, but I felt a freedom that I never felt in Paris. I felt like you could be anything. You could be dressed in any way. You could be anything, people just wouldn't bat an eyelid. Whereas in Paris, I always felt very judged by the way I looked. And again, I look like more Middle Eastern person, and I know in France, they will judge me for that. They will judge me less because I look Arabic or Middle

Eastern, like there's some form of racism. It's subtle, but I can really feel it. Whereas I suppose in London, I didn't feel that gaze.

[Music]

That's what I thought about England. And then my husband was also very proper, very British in many ways. He spoke really well. When we met, I spoke English not perfectly, and he corrected me all the time until I spoke really rather well. And then he decided to speak French, so we exchanged. So we both speak each other's language now.

[Music]

I also felt it was a place of a lot of extremes, like between the rich and the poor, much more than in Brussels, where I used to live, or France. I really felt that there were very extreme differences.

[Music]

By the time we had our three children, we were an observant Jewish family. But the more they grew, we realized that there was no friendship support. They were always the children who ate kosher, and they always had to bring their food. I was thinking to myself, *they're either going to reject us or they're going to—they're not going to have friends*, which is not desirable. I said to my husband, 'I think we're going to have to move.' Life in London for Jews, it sounded quite appealing because there

were lots of youth movements, quite a few different schools, quite a different—I don't know, there was variety, whereas in Brussels, there were none really. I thought, *why not?* And my in-laws were also living in London, not in the same area where I live now, but I just thought—and they are getting older, and my mother-in-law is disabled, and I thought, *you know what, actually, that would make sense.* I mean, it didn't really make sense, but there were two good reasons.

[Music]

The intention when we came into the country: find a good Jewish school for our children, which would be good academically and also give them a sound Jewish value. So we really wanted both. We felt that in London, we didn't have to choose. You could be a good Jew and a good citizen and a good professional. So we first found the school, and then we found where to live, which is North West London.

[Music]

Culturally, I think there was much more of a clash than I had anticipated. First, it was hard because my husband was commuting; he had kept his job back in Brussels. So it was mostly the kids and I during the week, and it was extremely stressful. I think the first thing that struck me as so different is that in this country, there are rules for everything. There's etiquette for every single thing. And it's a very strong sense of hierarchy and class that's not just like in terms of classes of people, but there's a very strong sense of a ladder that you can climb or not climb, but that there's people on top and people under. And I think that's the thing that struck me the most.

[Music]

I think both France and Belgium are much more socialist countries, and the culture of being equal is much stronger than here. It's funny, before coming I thought I was, I don't know, centre-right, maybe, politically, but when I came here in England, I just felt so violently anarchist. I don't know why, but I felt like there's way too many rules. I can't deal with them.

[Traffic noises]

I don't know if it's about the rules, but we were taking the bus with my children. And they were very little. They were between, I don't know, nine and five, so three little kids, and I was on my own with them. And they were very excited to be in that double-decker bus. And they were going up and down, and the bus driver was going really irritated. And I hadn't noticed that one of my children, the youngest one, was pressing the the button to stop the bus. And the bus driver was also someone who wasn't—he was an Indian guy, so he was British, but I suppose in the same way that my grandfather coming from Algeria was French, so I think he had to represent the British value even more than perhaps if you had been here for centuries. And he gave us a whole moral talk about how to raise my children and that they were some misbehaved, and I felt extremely ashamed. And he said if they kept going on like that, they would just ask us to leave the bus. And I think to this day, we still feel traumatized about that. I mean, it's both funny, but I think we still felt traumatized. We felt really like foreigners, like, *okay, we need to understand and integrate the rules*

*otherwise they're going to kick us out.* I really had this huge fear that we're here and perhaps we're so different and they're not going to understand our culture, the rambunctiousness. Everybody's got to be so tame.

[Music]

We found exactly what we were looking for. We have been incredibly lucky, first with the school, the kids school. It was a wonderful school. People were extremely warm, and we made friends. We made friends way quicker than if we had been not in the Jewish community because I think it's really hard to make friends, British friends, in this country. Again, there were rules. Sometimes people were really kind to us. They invited us once, but then I thought we had become friendly, but it was just being polite. Again, I had to learn a little bit how to be social. I really had to relearn that.

[Music]

Overall, people were very helpful. I could tap into the wealth of the Jewish network of people knowing one another. And our kids really took off to the Jewish social life with schools. They really loved it. They thrived there. With the youth movement, with all the programs, with the camps, they really absolutely adored it. So through them, we integrated. I don't know how it would have been if we had been without kids, but again, we came for them and for them to have this social life, so it's impossible to know really.

[Music]

I don't know if I'll ever feel British because I have already so many layers of identity. But I suppose there's a real liberal streak here. I feel like a Londoner in the sense that I have these layers of identity, and I think I'm not the only one. I think a lot of people have all those layers of identity, and they learn to play with it and to use it. So in that sense, I feel very at ease in London, which is not always the case when I come out of London. I really feel the gaze I was talking about earlier. When we went to Scotland two years ago, and I felt like—I wear a headscarf most of the time outside, and I felt people looking at me in a way that I never feel in London.

[Music]

I think it's impossible to go to a place where you lived and you've been without feeling nostalgia, but I feel that in Belgium as well. There is nostalgia because there's people we've loved and people who are behind and Paris is so incredibly beautiful and—and I think what I'm the most nostalgic about is the language. I really miss speaking French. I think that's the thing that I really miss the most. I don't miss Paris. I can't ever imagine living in Paris. But I really think that I am a Londoner, for real.

[Music]

So I hadn't been in London for a long time, but I just thought I had to fix myself, and I thought, *well, I need to lose weight and see this nutritionist*, who was in Hampstead. And I think that was probably the worst and the best experience I had. I was driving



there, and I think that was the only time, and hopefully the last time, that I drove on the wrong side of the road, and that was absolutely terrifying. I thought that was the end of everything. And I was expecting people to beep and insult me, and actually, people were actually I think very relaxed about it. I think it's because I had my Belgian car at the time and they saw that I was foreign. And then I drove into Hampstead with a big car, and the roads are tiny and beautiful, but extremely tiny. And at one point, I got stuck in a cul-de-sac, at the end of a cul-de-sac, and I thought, *I don't know what to do*. My GPS was not working. My car was stuck. I had driven on the wrong side of the road. I mean, I was not in a great place. And I was there, and I didn't know what to do, and I was late for my appointment. And there's this lady who comes towards me, and I thought, *I know she's going to tell me off, and she's going to tell me to move, and I'm going to yell at her*. And she told me, 'I'm going to help you get out of there.' And I started bawling and crying because I was not expecting her kindness. I think I was ready for a battle but not for her to be kind, and I think that killed me.

Me and my mum, we never had the best relationship. So there were periods in our lives where we didn't talk to one another. I think when I arrived in London, we had started to talk together again after a long period of not. And two years after, she got ALS, a degenerative disease, and we knew that there was no coming back from there. And it was really difficult because I couldn't be there every day. By the last year of her life, she couldn't move, and she couldn't come, and I just made the decision that I was going to go every month to see her. The pain of having someone with a terminal disease in your life is huge, and I felt guilty to leave it to my stepfather and to my to my brother, but I felt that going there every month and having a couple

days with her, it was—there was another quality of these meetings that if I had been around, I probably wouldn't have gone so much. And there was an intention to really squeeze whatever needed to be squeezed out of these meetings because we both realised it was precious and we had wasted a lot of time arguing and disagreeing. And I think we both understood that these little trips every month were really part of a repair in our relationship

[Music]

My dad lives in Israel, and I have six siblings there as well. And I think being an immigrant has always been having FOMO because I know there are babies being born, parties that I can't always go to, and I think that's a big—it's a lot of work to accept that, to go once in a while and know you've missed a lot of episodes. I have a lot of foreign friends like me, people who come from Israel, America, Italy, Germany, I mean, Europeans, mostly. But not just—because even at university where I study, they are mostly British people, but my friends are the Polish and the Iranian girls. I do feel actually with Iranian, I have a lot of commonalities because of my North African background. I feel with the Iranian, I feel so close culturally, sometimes.

[Music]

When I came here, it was just after Brexit had been voted, so it felt quite depressing to be honest because a lot of people in the Jewish community were pro-Brexit, whereas actually, I mean, I had lived in Brussels in the heart of Europe, and I am a firm believer in Europe. And so when I came here, I could have sought a job to

manage the Brexit, like with the British—within British governmental institutions, but I just felt it would have been a betrayal of my values.

[Music]

Really, I always wanted to be a therapist. I really wanted to help people. And I started, in the midst of COVID, a master's in child psychotherapy. So yes, there was COVID that made me accept that I could do that, but also felt that, I don't know, in England, you could really change career, you could reinvent yourself. I mean, of course it's expensive, but I felt that I didn't feel judged for doing that. I don't know why in France or in Belgium, I would have felt judged for some reason or maybe a prisoner of my beliefs, but I felt here, I just had the freedom to do it. And also, people work quite late. I think maybe because of a lack of benefits, but in France, people retire in their 60s, 65s, but here I see people of all ages in the workforce quite late, and I think it inspired me. I thought like, *it doesn't matter, I could be an older therapist*. I don't think people will judge me for that.

[Music]

I always thought of my husband as a very proper British person, and I think he—I was the one who wanted to come here. He really was resisting because he was really happy in Brussels. And actually, many times people ask him where he was from, and he say he was British, but people just didn't believe it. And I think he had Europeanized in a way. And I don't know if it was at my contact or speaking French or being in in Brussels, but I realized that, actually, he had dissolved a little bit of his

British identity. And probably because where I come from that I had this idea that I should assimilate, integrate, and become as British as I could, but then I realised that people would always treat me as a foreigner, and actually, I realised I didn't mind so much. And I realised actually, I used that for myself because I realised that I am much more direct in the way I speak or ask questions, and I actually use it. For example, in my husband's family, people wouldn't ask questions about people's health or about personal questions about who married who or why. And I embrace the cheekiness. I just say, 'Well, it's a French thing.' I often say, 'Oh, I don't know if it's a French thing', and I ask a bit of a cheeky question, and I realize that people will accept it a bit more coming from someone who is not from their midst. I think British people talk a lot of—in detours or idioms. And sometimes I just don't understand. For real, I don't always understand the reading between the lines, so I will ask questions.

[Music]

If you ask me where is home, I would find it really hard to tell you where is home. Home is my house with my children and my husband. I wouldn't be able to tell you if it's France or if it's Belgium. I don't know. Or if it's London. I think being a foreigner is my identity. I think it's much easier to relate to people who are expats or who are not from here because I think the need to form friendship and alliances is much stronger when you're not from here. Because when you're here, everybody's got their family, cousins, a network, but when you don't have that, when I came here, I only knew maybe three people. [Music] And we all need to live in a community. I mean, London is notorious for being a lonely place, and people die of loneliness. I feel that with people who are foreigners, like me, they understand that you don't need to explain

that it's important sometimes just to give a call or just, 'Let's have a cup of tea', or just—I don't think I need to translate that need to be close to people. With British people, people assume that you want to be left in peace, I think. I think that's the belief.

Presenter: Anouk was talking to Eve Grubin.

A recording of this interview can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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