

What We Leave We Carry

Eve Grubin

'What is the name of the thing you push in the supermarket? They call it something here. I try to talk about cars – places in the back or front: they say 'boot' for one, I'm stuck on *trunk*. What is the American word again for the part in the front?'

— Eve Grubin

[Music]

Presenter: Eve Grubin was so affected by the differences she found in the English language when she relocated to London from the US that she wrote a poem about them. This is *WritersMosaic, What We Leave We Carry*, the series that tells the true-life stories of migration to the UK.

[Music]

Eve Grubin: I was born in New York City, in Manhattan, at Beth Israel Hospital in Lower Manhattan. So I grew up on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, on 92nd and Broadway. It was the heyday of the Upper West Side, where it wasn't an expensive place to live yet, so a whole range of people lived there, from psychologists to professors to everything, working class to investment bankers. It was really diverse. And I had—it was a time where I had lots of friends who lived near me, around me, in other apartments. And people often ask me, 'You grew up in New York City in an apartment, how did you—you couldn't play outside?' And I always found that surprising because I think I did have a lot of fun with friends, and we went over to each other's apartments. When I was very young, I guess we went to the park, and there were adults around. We could go out on our own at a certain age and be—starting at around 9 or 10 just going to the corner store and playing Pac-Man and buying bubble gum or something, silly things like that. At the same time, there was a period where it was becoming a bit dangerous as well. Crack was a thing. I think I was aware, like people standing on street corners. There was an awareness of some fear as well.

[Music]

I actually read *Pride and Prejudice* when I was way too young. I don't know what I understood about that novel, but I loved it because the little I did understand, I loved. I don't think I understood the humor. I don't think I understood anything about the culture really or the history. But I very much liked the character Elizabeth Bennet and the love story and the prejudice and the growing affection but the embarrassment and the reserved quality of the passion, but at the same time, the holding back. And I think I was very drawn to that. And I think I could say I was a little bit of an Anglophile because I did read—I read all of Jane Austen, I read all the Brontës, and then later George Eliot. So I really, really was into that whole 19th century literature world throughout my entire childhood.

[Music]

I loved American literature as well, as I got older. But yeah, the British, the Anglo—there was this Anglo part of me. I actually had an uncle who moved to England when I was maybe 10 or so. He went to Oxford. And that was a very surprising thing in my family. Like, *why is he going to Oxford?* No one had any connection to England. But he was at Columbia University, and then he chose to transfer to Oxford. And then he stayed and even married an Englishwoman. So that was a little bit of—and we came to the wedding, and I came to his graduation from Oxford, actually. So my father and I went to his graduation. We came to London. It

was rainy. I remember the umbrellas. I remember the English policemen on the street with their funny hats and no guns. I was used to New York policemen. I don't see those kinds of policemen around anymore [laughs]. And I remember getting on the train to go to Oxford, and we were so jet lagged that we fell asleep and got off in Bath and had to turn around.

[Music]

I think I imagined it to be a place where women wore long petticoats and skirts and drank tea and wore bonnets [laughs] because that's all I knew because I read these 19th century novels. I mean, not really. I mean, obviously I understood that we're not living in the 19th century, but I mean, that's what I knew. I mean, I guess I was aware of the Beatles. I was aware of English music a little bit.

[Music]

I was curious about it. I found it intriguing, a little foreign, not familiar. I felt like there was a part of me now that had something that was a little bit different, that wasn't just American. I did feel, *it's sophisticated. They know things we don't know.* In fact, I remember he bought me a t-shirt that said Oxford on it, and I was maybe 10 or 11, and I wore it, and I think I did feel a little bit like that was something special. There's

a certain intelligence, a certain depth, a certain history, a certain refinement. It's not ideas that are fully formed. They're just feelings and associations, and I think I did have those.

[Music]

Well, over the years, I did come back for various things. So this uncle married an English woman, an English Jewish Sephardi woman. And they had four children, and each child had a bar mitzvah or a bat mitzvah. So first we went to the wedding, and then we came to every bar or bat mitzvah. And so we came back for all of those. And then my other uncle's daughter married an English man, and so that's another connection that we had.

[Music]

When I was looking to get married [laughs], I was in my 30s, and I was very aware, *it's time for that*. I actually had a glimmering thought that I would like an English person, but it wasn't a requirement. But then a friend of mine, who is English, suggested I meet someone that actually she had dated a while back. And she said, 'I think it's a good idea for you.' And I thought, *well, how's this going to happen? He lives in England*. And she said, 'He actually is organizing a big conference in England, and

I'm going to ask him to invite you to that conference.' So I said, 'Okay, fine.' So he wrote to me and invited me to the conference. And then we, back and forth, we emailed for a while. And we talked about poetry a bit in the emails. And so he was an English guy. We didn't even speak on the phone, we were just emailing. So then I came to England in the summer to visit these cousins here now, and I was aware that he was here. Part of my visit, I thought, *I will meet him*. So when I came, we made a plan to meet. And he called me to find out exactly where I was so he could pick me up, and that's when I realized he was really English because I heard his English accent. And that was a shock. I was like, *oh, he's really English. This is, wow*. I thought, *could I like someone who actually really has an English accent?* I'm like, *I know Darcy did, but I never actually heard Darcy speak*.

[Music]

I had to re-imagine my idea of what a man was because I think a man has an American accent. That's what a man—so like my father is American; my brother, American. Men I know, boys I know. So I was like, *okay, he's masculine, he's a man, he's someone who wants to meet a woman, and he has an English accent. Okay*. So then I met him, the person, there he was, and he continued to have an English accent [laughs]. And so then I had to get used to that. We have a joke now because I actually don't always understand him. For Americans who aren't around English

people a lot, it sometimes takes a second to really—*what did they just say?* Say he said, 'Okay, I'll collect you later.' We would say, 'I'll pick you up later.' So you look at him and think, *okay, he means I'll pick you up later.* You know what I mean? It's the same language, but I'm not used to someone saying collect. It's little things, they're nothing things, and the word does express what he's saying, it's just, you're not used to it. And it happens a lot. So it took a lot. So sometimes I would say, 'What?' And then he would—so the joke is that he would switch his accent to a Southern accent—American Southern accent or to a Western like cowboy accent. And then I would understand him, which is funny because I have nothing to do with the South, nothing to do with [laughs] cowboys. So he'd be like, [in exaggerated Southern American accent] 'I'm gonna pick you up a little later.' Something like that. And I was like, 'Okay, I understand what you're saying now.'

[Music]

When we decided that we were getting married, I realised I would be moving to London. I could just feel like for his work and different things like that was really what he wanted. And also, I was ready for that. I felt like I could—I was ready for an adventure. So when I moved to London, first of all, people in America would say to me, 'You're moving to England? It's going to be so—people are very cold and reserved. It's going to be hard to make friends. It's going to be hard to meet people.'

And I knew they were wrong. These were people who said this who were not in the Jewish community, like maybe colleagues, because what they didn't realise is that if you move to London and are in the Jewish community, which we are, you're going to meet lots of people very easily. And so I was aware of that already because I had visited, and I saw that, and I know that that's true all over the world, really. So when I moved to London, every single weekend we had invitations out because we had [inaudible], you know, Friday night Shabbat dinner, Shabbat lunch, synagogue, and all of that's happening every single week. And so I think a whole year went by and we never ate at home once because we had so many invitations. I liked people, and I felt there were a lot of people around me, and I really genuinely felt like, *wow, there's a lot of good people around here*, but I didn't feel close to anyone yet, which is normal, I guess, anywhere if you're moving somewhere. But I did feel that in America, it would have happened more quickly, the close friendships.

[Music]

It was both sad and happy because it was very exciting to be getting married and very exciting to be going on this adventure and moving. I think people were happy for me, but it was—I was scared. I mean, even when I decided to get married and move here, I was—there was just a fear of disconnection and not seeing people. I think deep inside, I knew it was permanent, but I think I thought, *oh, we might move*

back. So we're both writers, academics, teach, and if we really wanted to, we probably could find a way to move back to America and get jobs. The more we're here, the more our children now are in the schools and things really work well for us here, it just feels like the right place to be for us.

[Music]

I think I'm partly in England and in a Jewish version of England because where we live in North West London, in a Jewish community, it's a—actually we live in a neighborhood that's very diverse internationally. People live here from all around. There's Romanians and Hungarians, Turkish, and people from all sorts of places, and British people, but also there's a big Jewish community here as well. My parents visited for the first time, they'd never been here, and they said, 'Oh, this is like Queens.' Queens is a borough in New York that's very diverse internationally and has some similar looks to this neighborhood. Actually, the Jewish community is diverse also. It's Ashkenazi, it's Sephardi, it's also people from Italy and France and Israel and all over, and America and Canada. So it's not even like so, so, so British. But the larger bulk of people are English. And the English Jewish culture is very specific, very particular. And that was something I had to get used to. English Jewish culture is a specific type of Jewish culture that's different, very different from America. And it took me a while. Now I get it. It took me 15 years. But it is very

different. Like American Jews, if they don't know, they don't know. So I have learned. The English Jewish community is different from the American Jewish community, first of all, because the Reform Movement is not as big in England. It's huge in America. The Reform Movement in Judaism is a more recent development that is more relaxed about Jewish laws. For the most part, English Jewry are people who are very traditional, so even if they're not that religious, they do—they feel very traditional, and they take on certain traditions that most American Jews would never do because they're influenced by the Reform Movement. In England, even the least religious Jews, if a parent dies, they will not go to a party for a year. And there's a joke that people say, 'When it comes to death, English Jews really come alive.'

[Laughs]

[Music]

I've lived here for 15 years. I don't know—I feel like I don't know England very well, and I don't know London very well. I don't know a lot of the country or a lot of the city for some reason, partly because we started having children, and then I didn't travel as much. But early on, we went to Winchester. And I said to my husband, 'Let's do something. Let's get out.' And actually, Winchester is where Jane Austen lived, and so I thought that was kind of fun. So we went there. And when we went to Winchester, I said, 'I now realize I live in England.' I felt that this was England. I saw

English people. I saw—I just felt this was English culture in a way that London wasn't. On the train, going up to Winchester, all these English people, they were white people drinking tea, eating things that looked English. [Laughs] I don't know, they were scones or something. We got to Winchester, very old, quaint buildings, and very pretty in a reserved way. England has a beauty that's a little bit restrained, and I appreciate that. That's what I grew up reading in the novels. I liked that. And it was England, I mean, and so I finally felt I'm in England because we live in Northwest London in a neighborhood that is—there's a Jewish community here, and we live here because there are Jewish schools, there's Jewish kosher places. You can completely live your Jewish life with all of these things around you and easily, and it works very well for us. And that's why we live here. Also, if you observe the Sabbath, you don't take trains or buses or even use the phone from Friday night till Saturday night. And so that means you need to—if you want to socialise, you want to live near other people who do that too.

[Music]

I did find the language difficult, which is surprising because it's the same language. I mean, there's that cliché phrase, 'Two countries divided by a common language', you know, America and England. But there's truth to it because what happens if you move here, at least for me, is that you start forgetting the American words. I actually

have a poem I wrote about this, where you start forgetting the American words,
and—but then you also don't quite remember what the English words are.

[Eve Grubin reads *American in England*

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'American and England

What is the name of the thing
you push in the supermarket?

They call it something here.

I try to talk about cars – places
in the back or front: they say 'boot' for one,
I'm stuck on *trunk*.

What is the American word again
for the part in the front?

A Jane Austen fan, I thought I would enjoy
saying 'pram' and 'carriages' and 'torch',
but I find myself stepping back, timid.

'Lorry' for *truck*, 'rubbish' for *garbage*,
'acclimatised' for *acclimated*; will I ever switch over,
step into the language of this new life?

Even more difficult are the words I do use, which

here mean different things:

'quite' is often 'somewhat' instead of *very*.

and 'subway' is 'underground tunnel' instead of *train*.

And then there are nuances:

'interesting' means 'I don't like you',

and 'Nice day, isn't it?' means 'I'd like

to talk to you – will you talk to me?'

I am mute and stuck, forgetting

their terms and my own words

which shrink under the rug, hide

in dusty corners and inside drawers,

and fade into pillows and into our conversations

after we switch lights off,

letters of words mingling and falling asleep

on our tongues.'

Also the humor and subtle messages and picking up on cues. I think I feel sometimes more earnest than English people. And they—there's a sense like they're being a little bit sarcastic or ironic. It's very subtle. It's difficult. I feel like if we were in another—if I was in another culture that was very different from America

and very obviously different, it could be easier. Sometimes you can't put your finger on what's going on exactly.

I think I feel a little bit British sometimes, although I'm actually not a British citizen yet. I actually—I try to hang on to my American-ness in different ways by not using all the English words. I mean, I have to say rubbish because everyone says rubbish, but other than that, there's a lot of words I don't use. I feel that I have become British in certain ways where—just like that when you speak with certain subtle cues, a message can come across. You don't have to be so direct and earnest and strong. You can be very quiet about something, and it can be perceived as quite intense. Like something I recently learned, that if you say to someone, 'I'm surprised that you did that', it could sound extremely aggressive and threatening. I never, ever would have thought the word surprised would have that connotation, and it's been used at me once or twice in situations, and I've had the opportunity to use it once or twice. Also on a positive side, to be able to say something very simple like, 'That was really nice that we went for that walk together.' That's a way of really making a connection and showing you're close with someone. So I think I've taken that on, and it's a nice feeling. I do feel some of the romance of the English way and that—this restraint that I keep talking about, I think I really do appreciate about the English. It can, not always, but it can be quite romantic because you feel like

someone's feeling being a little bit held back because they're a little bit shy about it because they feel so strongly. I think it's very beautiful really.

I think I forgot that I was a migrant. I do not feel English. The word migrant, I think of coming from countries where they don't speak the English language. And also maybe because of the Jewish community, I feel like I was in the Jewish community in America; I'm in the Jewish community here. I'm kind of fluid in a way. But now that I've had a chance to think about it, I realise I really am. I moved here. It's a big deal. It's a huge deal to move to a new place for anyone. And even if you know the language, and even if you have a community, it's huge gaps. You miss things. You—so I do identify with that term now.

I don't know if I like to think about decisions as good or bad, although you might be able to sometimes say something was a good decision, because you just never know. I feel it was an adventure. It was a bit wild in a way. I mean, it doesn't sound like such a big deal. Okay, I got married. I got to get a job here. What's the big deal? But to me, it was pretty wild to leave a place that I knew well and that I was even happy in for a new, totally unknown place. I mean, we can't say totally unknown because I had been here, but to leave everyone was a big deal. So in a way, I think it was good because a lot of good things have happened. And we have these wonderful children, [Music] who are growing up here and love their schools and

their friends, and I've been able to create a Jewish family life and be a part of a Jewish community, which I wanted very much, and I've been able to do that here. And I'm able to continue with my poetry writing and my work, which I also love. But I do miss people, and I missed out on friends and things that were going on in America. I miss lots of things. I was very close to my grandmother, who I saw a lot and went home a lot to see, but she passed away about eight, nine, maybe 10 years ago. And so I am aware that I missed times with her. So I am glad I'm here, although it's hard sometimes.

[Music]

Presenter: Eve Grubin was talking to Colin Grant.

[Music]

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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