Excerpt from: Navid Kermani: Dein Name (Your Name), Munich 2011, Carl Hanser Verlag, translated by Mitch Cohen

A trip from Isfahan to Teheran was not common two generations before my time, the state of the route there was miserable, the danger of highwaymen great, and there was no thought of help in the case of an emergency. As written by Grandfather in his memoirs, which were sadly never published, the brand new means of travel amazing everyone at the time was the carriage-and-four with horses exchanged every forty or fifty kilometers. When possible the coach also drove through the night. Thus, God willing, one reached Tehran after four days and nights. Today it's four or five hours by car and we always fly the distance. It did not seem absurd to Grandfather, as he writes, to add that the coach had no roof. Passengers thus had to endure the hot, glaring summer sun and the cold and rain of the other seasons—in winter often snow. Sleep was also difficult: due to the rocking it lasted only minutes or a half hour. More time was spent by the travelers in a dozy state of weariness or pain, heat or cold that ruled out conversation or thought. Nothing worse normally happened than that a hat fell from the coach or a mantel to the floor. The danger of disaster came only when the coachman fell asleep. Then the horses could go astray, the coach overturn, the passengers topple one over the other and the heavy vehicle on top. Grandfather experienced such an accident many times and a reader can picture, as he writes, how ill-at-ease the passengers felt in the wilderness, on the steppe, in the desert or on a mountain ridge. The ride cost one *rial* per person, an additional five *schahi* gratuity for the horse driver at each caravansary where the horses were exchanged, and one or two *toman* for the postal clerks, who received the coach. What do the amounts signify? Seventy years later Grandfather described the scene of his first departure from Isfahan, which had been highly dramatic for his relatives at the time, yet which is more likely to make a reader today smile: "They are nothing more than names now." Of the aunts, cousins, and other relatives who stood in the foyer to say their farewells to the boy and offer him their prayers—all that is left of them are their names. As he didn't write them down, an additional thirty years later they are not even names. The Surah Ya-Sin was recited three times, the Quran was lifted repeatedly and Grandfather was nudged to walk beneath it. The relatives, a throng of fifty, sixty people, accompanied him to Sadeghiha-Bazar where the coach departed. - Where are they headed? wondered the neighbors, passers-by, and merchants. Someone from the crowd of relatives yelled back: The boy is traveling to Tehran! He's going to attend school, the Franconian School! Franconians, *farangihâ*: to this day it's how Iranians refer to people from the West. The now deceased Norouz Ali Gomaschteh lifted him into the coach. The boy quickly stowed his luggage and sought out a seat. He now just sat there, the coach wasn't to depart for some time, all around him were relatives in tears, the loudest sobs seeming to come from his mother. "And what should I hide from you?" Grandfather wrote in his memoirs, which were unfortunately never published, "Even though I myself wished to travel to Tehran, I couldn't contain myself any longer. I cried like a small child."

An Englishman happens to be seated next to the guide in the spot that serves as a box seat—Grandfather uses the French term, today it would be called Business Class—Mister Allanson, if I'm correctly transcribing the name into English (in Persian script one has to piece together the vowels): teacher at the Bishop's School in the Jolfa district, where my aunt lives today; it is one of Isfahan's most popular residential areas because of the Christians who have remained, and the parent's apartment is not too far away. When Mister Allanson sees the boy crying, he gathers him to the front with him, rests his arm around his shoulder and begins to comfort and distract him. - Look here, have you ever seen such strong horses? And Look at that uniform. The Persian seems so strange to the boy, so stilted, that under other circumstances he would have laughed at it, among the group of strangers perhaps even ridiculed it. At the moment he is grateful for the arm, enfolding his shoulder more like a brother than a father. Yes, like an older brother, although Mister Allanson is much older, a real gentleman. The coach has long since departed, they have left the city behind, the fields and plantations, are following the gravel road through the desert, when he further encourages the young boy. - Don't be worried, he says, first, God willing we will reach Kaschan, where we'll rest at the Paradise Garden, which is even more glorious than the Park of Forty Pillars in Isfahan, you'll see; then Qom, where God willing you pray for your father and mother, and then God willing we'll arrive in Tehran—you'll like Tehran. God willing. Enschâ`allâh, as the teacher at the Bischop's School would have said with his British accent. Not that Mister Allanson would have known the boy or his parents or one of his relatives or teacher before this; he looked after him out of pure friendliness— the boy would emphasize seventy, eighty years later, out of human kindness. Although Grandfather was always politically nationalist—an enthusiastic supporter of Doctor Mossadeghs, who took on the British by nationalizing the *Anglo-Persian Oil Company*—and even as an old man demonstrated against the Shah primarily so that American domination would come to an end, it struck me even as a child, the veneration with which he spoke of the West (and in doing so he of course differentiated between nations and peoples), especially of Europe—most emphatically of course about France, the cultured nation, which unlike the British, Americans, and Russians, had left Iran in peace. Out of respect, the Armenian church in Jolfa and the foreign priests, nuns, missionaries, who erected hospitals and schools, were never challenged in his home. There was something cosmopolitan about him, an awareness, to put it more simply, that there is this and there is that everywhere. If we have something of this awareness, if I have it, then it is not, or not only, because we have traveled the world or learned about Kant and Capitalism. It also has other remote origins, a long history that I am now reading. It is due to my grandfather, who rode from Isfahan to Tehran with the coach; due to my great-grandfather, this man in the photo that I brought with me to the office where it hangs next to my desk, the man in the middle with turban and missing teeth in his smiling face, who sent off his boy to study at the American school, although the farewell brought him to tears just as it did all the others—and he questioned whether he had made the right decision for his son; it is due to Mister Allanson, whose kindness kept the boy lifelong from considering a person an adversary solely on the grounds that his or her country is adversarial. As I sat, first row center, in the Staatstheater Darmstadt and the president announced that I had been accepted into the German Academy for Language and Poetry, I felt the banality of the circumstances: behind me an envious colleague, to my left the wife of a politician, who asked me what I do for a living, three photographers in front of me and one literally in my lap in order to best get the famous writer to my right better in the picture, I nevertheless felt a flurry of emotion and pride. It seemed as though it was not I who was receiving the prize, not I who was accepted, but rather my forefathers, their thirst for knowledge, their yearning for the world and their courage to discover it. Their ambition as much as their virtue, and as far as i'm concerned my grandfather's seriousness and lack of humor, handed down from generation to generation so that in the end their sons would be accepted into the Franconian Academy. I see Grandfather now, how he sat crying in the coach to depart imminently for Tehran, and think, for example, that there, there and then our journey began. The boy wiped the tears from his face and gradually found his way back to the confidence with which he packed his bag yesterday afternoon. He now wants to show something of his capability, he's not a crybaby, wants to say at least two, three sentences in English, only his English vocabulary, so painstakingly drummed into him at the Aliye School by Mister Armani, has vanished. Mister Allanson doesn't laugh at him—he smiles. This manages to indeed bring the boy to English, that he is traveling to Tehran to attend the American School. - Ah, I'm also going there as well, cries Mister Allanson. He's been invited by Doctor Jordan, the director of the American School. - I'll introduce you there, you'll like the school. God willing. *Enschâ'allâh*. Mister Allanson's return to Persian loosens the boys tongue once and for all. "I will never forget how we stayed in Nezamabad the first night because the road was so dangerous. The caravansary, where really only the horses are supposed to be exchanged, was half in ruins. We sought out a corner on the roof of the building's wing that was still standing and lay out our blankets next to each other. As long as I was awake this honorable Frank with the curious Persian accent cast away my fears, told thrilling stories, and reported just as grippingly about Tehran, the school, England, Franconians, until I finally, God be praised, fell asleep."

The coach arrived at Lalehzar Street in Tehran towards evening on the fourth day and stopped in front of the post office on Cannon House Square—the heart of the city at the time, and like many others probably a major intersection today. The travelers unload their luggage and say their farewells. Mister Allanson makes certain that the boy has accommodations. - Yes, the boy says, my father wrote out the address for me. He waits until Mister Allanson disappears into the crowd, calls a porter and fetches the letter on which the address can be found from his shoulder bag. It is a letter of recommendation from his previous school director, Mohaseb od-Douleh, to a friend, Mirza Abdolwahhab Chan Djawaheri. Even though he already knows it by heart, the boy is studying the address anew when the letter is suddenly snatched away. The boy looks up and sees a fat man standing before him, blue uniform, flashy cuffs, spiked helmet and thick mustache— Zell-e Soltan incarnate, Isfahan's tyrannous ruler, alternately examining him and the letter with a threatening air. - The letter has no stamp, the man says accusingly: that is an administrative offence! Without daring to object or to point out that he had actually brought the letter himself from Isfahan, the boy pays the fine demanded.

He then makes his way with the porter to Mr. Djawaheri. The sun had long ago set, when they stand in front of the building: it is Mr. Djawaheri's store, a candy shop, the shutters closed, the door locked. In the darkness the boy asks again and again until he finds another porter, who knows where Mr. Djawaheri lives, namely in front of the Ghazwin Gate at the other end of the city. Fortunately his father had given him enough money. It is night when the boy finally knocks on the door, nearly unconscious from excitement, fear, and exhaustion. Mr. Djawaheri, who himself comes from Isfahan, does not need to first read the letter to take in the boy from his hometown, no less a student of his old friend Mohaseb ol-Douleh. He instructs for the luggage to be unloaded and allows no objections as he pays the porter his fee. Mrs. Djawaheri, who has thrown a chador over her nightgown, leads the guest to the living room. Having scarcely sat down on the carpet, the boy falls asleep mid-conversation. When the Djawaheris finally wake him, dinner the following evening is waiting for him. The boy doesn't know who brought him to bed or removed his clothes, but he is so comfortable at the moment that he closes his eyes once again, briefly, and immediately falls back to sleep.

Four short passages from: Navid Kermani: Dein Name (Your Name), Munich 2011, Carl Hanser Verlag, translated by Mitch Cohen

What did Pir Arbab actually teach? In grandfather’s description of his life there is a single indication. When Sheikh Abu Saíd, one of the most famous Sufis of the 11th century, once came to Tus, so many believers streamed into the mosque in expectation of his sermon that no room was left. “May God forgive me,” called out the usher, “Everyone, from wherever he is, should take a step closer.” At this point the Sheikh ended the gathering before it had begun. “Everything that I wanted to say and that all the prophets have said has now already been said by the usher,” he explained before he turned and left the city. “Everyone, from wherever he is, should take a step closer.”

*

The guide accompanied the stipend holder in Rome into an ancient family crypt three meters under the ground. It looked like a kitchen, but the stove’s burners turned out to be the lids of urns. The family had furnished the room prettily: the wall and ceiling paintings were as colorful as wallpaper from the time of the economic miracle, with ornaments and little flowers garish on white, quite homey in this cramped space of a nuclear family’s living room. All that was lacking was a kidney-shaped table with a transistor radio. What fascinated the older daughter the most was the thighbone lying in an open grave. Yes, it’s original, the tour guide attested. And the dust in the urns? Hard to say, it mixes with all kinds of things, but in principle it is original, too, the original dust of a Roman family who were who knows what two thousand years ago. As much effort as the family expended on its eternity, in the end fifteen Germans stand in the crypt and a child asks the tour guide whether the dust is original.

*

On the drive to Cologne, he heard an American singer narrate a story from Aristophanes’ *The Birds* at night on the cultural radio station. I would read it if the book with the ancient comedies, because of coincidences that would make a novel of their own, did not still lie in the cellar of the office for which he was seeking someone to take over the lease. Therefore I can reproduce Aristophanes’ story only in the form in which he remembers the singer retelling it: Long before time, when the world consisted solely of space, of sphere, as the singer said in English, long before time there lived a family of amphibians, which thus must have been the first living creatures, in German *Lurche*, he thinks that's what the singer spoke about, or… I look it up in the dictionary… no German *Lurche* is *amphibian* in English, while *lure*, the word I think he heard, *lure*… means in German *Köder*, bait, and the singer can't have said that. Maybe she meant lungfish, those fish also called *Lurchfische* in German, as I learn when looking up the word "Lurch"… but no, the *Lurchfisch* is called *lungfish* in English and is definitely not the word the singer used. Long before time – I can't remember that she used such a formulation, but it suggests itself – long before time, a couple or a nuclear family of let's say microorganisms, or I'll better write amoebas maybe, tiny fish or stubby worms, with which I might already be back with the *lures*, bait, long before time lived the first living creatures, a little family. They lived happily in space, long before time, in the endless sphere. There was nothing, not water, not land, no questions, no sorrow. After a long time, which will not have been measurable before time began, something happened, the first time that anything ever happened in their life: someone died, the father. The family of amoebas, amphibians, or worms wondered what they should do with the father. There was nothing in which amoebas, amphibians, or worms could lay, put, or much less bury, sink, preserve, or hide their father. There was only mere space, *the sphere*, as the singer definitely said. But the father had to go somewhere. The mourners looked at each other, stricken. So the son took the father on his back and carried him around with him from then on, the amoeba the amoeba, the amphibian the amphibian, or the worm the worm. And time began.

*

- You're breathing so deeply? – Oh, just because of my cold. – And because of everything else. – And because of everything else (*sighs*). – That was the sighing kobold. – The what? – Don't you know the story of the sighing kobold? – No. – I learned it from Nasrin. Like I've learned everything from Nasrin. Every time someone sighs, the kobold appears. That is, to be precise, the sigh *is* the kobold, and he asks a person what he wishes, and the mere question makes things a little easier. That's the sighing kobold.

Excerpt from: Navid Kermani: Dein Name (Your Name), Munich 2011, Carl Hanser Verlag, translated by Mitch Cohen

Everyday I walk through my district behind the train station. I hear a bit of Arabic here, over there Polish, to the left something that sounds like the Balkans, Turkish of course, the occasional Persian catches my ear, French from Africans, Asian languages, German as well—spoken in the most diverse of colors and qualities, by blondes as well as Orientals, blacks and yellows. It's not always so pleasant, the bums, the masses of black imitation leather jackets (maybe real leather too, what do I know), oh God, the black-haired women with gold front teeth, wearing long colorful skirts and carrying a baby tied to them in a cloth. The second and third children, in hand and walking ahead, the teenagers hanging about, the drug addicts and those who are not quite right, whose rooming houses are in "Unter Krahnenbäumen"—as the streets in my part of town are actually called—among them a few Muslims with long suspicious beards.

This reality doesn't propagate solely behind the Cologne train station. It is likely that the mix of Turkish vegetable venders, Chinese groceries, Iranian specialties sold by dealers who were public television directors in Iran before the revolution, the traditional and self-serve bakeries, the string of cell phone shops and internet cafés—Iran nineteen cents, Turkey nine, Bangladesh twenty-four—can be found in all of Europe's big cities. The budget hotels, sex shops, bridal wear, the scenster bars and tea or coffee houses for Turks, Albanians, Africans, Turks with and without Alcohol, the chic and the shabby restaurants, Thai massage shops, betting houses with and without alcohol. Between im- and export this or that ancient establishment for house wares or rubber stamps, the refugee house on main street with Romas, who have removed the glass pane in order to set satellite dishes in the open window and who sell bikes along the street medians, among them time and again in winter a troop of older gentlemen in red or blue uniforms with pointed hats and rapiers, a band of Indians or a horde of half-naked Huns—carnival associations.

What do the merchants survive on with their oversized shops that all offer the same twenty batteries for a Euro-fifty? Certainly not the batteries, if at the same time the old, well-frequented specialty stores one after the other can no longer pay the rising rents. International understanding takes place from start to end of the neighborhood with Humba and Täterä along four long counters, at which the most tried and true of Cologne's nuts sing through always-open windows, with fat Germans as with drunk Turks. These are the new centers, far less aggressive behind the Cologne train station than elsewhere, no, often even idyllic beyond that what can be and is said here. They are no less than pure. They have nothing to do with the history of the place, yet they don't erase history either, let alone Cologne's two thousand years. As if wanting to trace the name Colonia back to it's literal meaning, they are colonies of strangers, but of many different strangers mutually foreign to each other as they sit side by side in front of computers in the Internet cafés or stand in groups in front of the call shops. I often wonder, whether they didn't also board a boat near Tangier, under the cover of an embankment at night, except that their boat neither sunk nor was intercepted—real success stories then, even if they are still five to a room and afraid of the police?

Iran nineteen cents, Turkey nine, Bangladesh twenty-four. They are no marginal societies. They waft out from the middle of town. The margins are those who arouse the appearance of homogeneity. There the city is divided by social differences. In the city center everything has toppled one upon the other. I go through the district, I hear a bit of Arabic here, over there Polish, to the left something that sounds like the Balkans, Turkish of course, the occasional Persian catches my ear, elsewhere French from Africans, something Asiatic, German in the most diverse of colors and qualities. I don't understand about half, really half of it. And of the half that I understand, I mostly understand only half because it has already disappeared again behind a window or shop door, was poorly articulated, or too far away. I went by too fast or the other passed me too quickly. I finish the sentences myself or think up their beginning, I imagine histories that don't play out in Deutz or during the Second World War, but rather in provincial Chinese towns, at Nigerian universities, in the boats, containers, and departure halls, in which the heart rests.