

THE WALL

BY MERON HADERO

When I met Herr Weill, I was a lanky ten-year-old, a fish out of water in —, Iowa, a small college town surrounded by fields from every direction. My family had moved to the United States a few weeks earlier from Ethiopia via Berlin, so I knew no English, but was fluent in Amharic and German. I'd speak those sometimes to strangers or just mumble under my breath to say what was on my mind, never getting an answer until the day I met Herr Weill.

I was wearing jeans with a button-down, a too-big blazer, and a clip-on tie, waiting in line during what I'd later come to know as a typical mid-'80s Midwest community potluck, with potato salad, pasta salad, green bean casserole, bean salad casserole, tuna pasta salad casserole, a good three-quarters of the dishes on offer incorporating bacon and crushed potato chips and dollops of mayonnaise. The Norman Borlaug Community Center had welcomed us because one of the local bigwigs had been in the Peace Corps in his student days, and he'd cultivated an interest in global humanitarianism. He'd heard of the new stream of refugees leaving communist dictatorships in the Third World, found us through the charity that had given us housing in Berlin, and arranged for the NBCC to orient us, get us some new used clothes and a place to live. They also invited us to Sunday meals, which were the best ones of my week.

On this particular Sunday, I'd walked into the recreational room transformed by paper cutouts of pumpkins and bundled ears of multicolored corn. Cotton had been pulled thin across the windows, and dried leaves pressed in wax paper taped to the wall. Beneath a banner (which I couldn't read) was a plastic poster of a woman with a pointed black hat on her head, her legs straddling a broom, haunting grimace bearing missing teeth, as if I didn't already feel afraid and alienated in that space. Next to this monstrosity stood a very benign-looking real-life man with a wool scarf and wool coat, who wiped away a bead of sweat as he eyed, then looked away from, then eyed again a pretty woman across the room who was picking through a basket of miniature candy bars.

In German I said to no one in particular, "Why doesn't he just talk to her?" Nodding at the man with the wool coat, I continued, "What's he waiting for, permission from his mother?"

Then, from a deep voice behind me, I heard in German, "There was a woman in my life once. I looked at her the same way."

When this stranger spoke these words, I recalled the moment a few months back in West Berlin when I was playing soccer with Herman and Ismail, two Turkish brothers who lived on Friedrichstrasse next door to me. Our improvised playground was this plot close to the Berlin Wall where someone had tied a piece of yarn between two old halogen lamps, a makeshift goalpost. Sometimes I'd aim not for those feet between the metal posts but far beyond the Wall. This was in

defiance of my mother's strict command to stay away from "that horror of a serpent." Wasteful and risky, she called it when I'd told her twice before that I'd sacrificed a soccer ball to the GDR. She was wrong to worry that I'd get in trouble for my antics—I never did. But she was right that I'd been wasteful. We had nothing as it was, and the embarrassment of buying a toy must have been infuriating to her because strangers slandered her with cries of "welfare woman" and "refugee scum" when she walked down the street anyway, just to get groceries or some exercise, and when they saw her carrying something as frivolous as a soccer ball, they'd shout louder, with more spit in their breaths and more rage in their eyes. I knew this, I'd even witnessed this, but for some reason I couldn't help that sometimes, after running circles in the tiny paved playground that pressed against the barricade, I'd visualize this little grounded balloon between my feet soaring to the other side of that imposing wall that seemed to challenge my very sense of freedom, and so I'd close my eyes and kick hard. Herman and Ismail could never—or would never—clear the hurdle, but I'd done it twice already, and the third time I launched the ball just over the barbed wire, I heard a loud grunt from somewhere beyond, and saw the ball come soaring back toward us. I caught it and was stunned. Herman and Ismail yelled at me to send it over again, but I knew it would have broken my heart some if we'd kicked it back and never had it returned. I'd have held tight to hope, I'd have gone back to the spot and waited, I'd have lingered in the playground anticipating a reply, whether or not another ever came. So I convinced Herman and Ismail that we should retire our game, and to make sure of it I put a pin through the ball and let out the air.

This is how I felt standing in the potluck line that October day, looking at the man looking at a woman, hearing this response in German said back to me, the first words I'd understood in this new country spoken by anyone other than my parents: "There was a woman in my life, once. I looked at her the same way," the man had said in German, and I replayed this in my mind as I stood there frozen, not daring to say a thing, holding onto my words like I held that returned ball on the playground.

Johannes Weill went ahead and introduced himself and said everyone just called him Herr Professor Weill or simply Herr Weill because he once was a dean at the college who'd won some big international award, and so it stuck. He told me I was famous in town, too. I pointed at myself, wondering what he'd heard. "You're one of the Ethiopian refugees, right?" Herr Weill asked, then said, "I've been waiting to meet you. The whole town has been talking." I nodded, just beginning to trust in this conversation, in the sincere interest of his tone, in his perfect German, in which he continued, "To answer your question, the man in the wool coat is trying to think of a way to impress the girl, of course."

"Stringing together a sentence might be a good start," I suggested. "His opener is obvious. As she's picking through the basket of candy, ask her what kind of chocolate she likes."

Herr Weill took off his round glasses and squinted in a way that severely exaggerated the already deep lines that crossed his face. He held his glasses up to the light, like he had to make sure that I was real and not a speck on his lens or something, and after this pause he replied, "It's not always easy to find the right words, you know."

"Maybe you just have to know the right language," I said.

"Well, if you don't learn English soon, you'll end up like that man in the wool coat, with no way to say what's on your mind or in your heart, except to some old German guy you meet waiting for spaghetti and ham-balls," he said. "And that doesn't sound like a good way to spend a childhood."

“Yeah, I’m working on it,” I said.

“I could teach you English.”

“Then you must not know,” I said. The part I didn’t say was “just how poor we are.”

By now I was taking modest spoonfuls from the big Tupperware containers so as not to show just how poor we were. Not to overstate how eager I was for spaghetti and ham-balls, I pursed my lips to hide my watering mouth, and turned away hoping he wouldn’t hear the faint rumbling of my stomach.

I finally decided to take bacon that was in strips *and* in rounded patties.

“It’s true,” Herr Weill said. “I didn’t teach languages. I was a professor in the arts, but I do know how to teach.”

“But a tutor costs money, and the problem is—”

“A money issue?” he asked and waited, but I didn’t respond.

“You’d be doing me a favor,” he said. “It has been ages since I’ve spoken German to someone face to face—spoken German to anyone at all. It would be quite nice to have a new friend to talk to.”

I turned to face him. A friend, he’d said, and I nearly repeated him. “I would like a friend to talk to as well,” I confessed, unable to stop myself from smiling openly now. We shook on the deal, and I bowed slightly in the Ethiopian way as I said, “Nice to meet you, Herr Weill.”

I’d go to Herr Weill’s on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays after school. During our early conversations, it was a relief to land on his doorstep after the six hours in a school where no one understood anything about me. My silence, my inability to grasp the very words being said in class, including my own name—mispronounced by the teacher taking the roll. The pungent food I brought for lunch that I ate with my hands. My solitary play at recess that usually involved creative projects with flowers, rocks, wood, whatever I collected from the patch of wilderness on the edge of the playground. My need for expression took on non-verbal forms in those thirty minutes of freedom outdoors. I contributed nothing to the class discussions, and understood almost nothing as well, except during our math hour (what a short hour), my favorite subject, that universal language. Math and art, the only things I cared about. After these exhausting days, I’d walk the mile of country road to Herr Weill’s tidy brick house, and it mattered that he always seemed pleased to see me.

Before I went up the walkway that perfectly bisected his perfectly manicured lawn, I’d always straighten my coat, tuck in my shirt, and inspect my shoes. He’d greet me in a suit and wing-tipped shoes, hold out his right hand for a handshake while his left arm was held behind his back, like he was greeting a dignitary. His wispy white hair was always parted in the middle in an unwavering line from which thin strands were combed toward his ears. When those strands would flop as he was talking excitedly, shaking his head and index finger while making a point, he’d simply smooth his hair back down once he’d said his piece, that meridian reemerging just so. He had an unfussy home: no phone, sturdy furniture, lots of these framed silhouette paintings hanging on the walls. He’d set out tea and bread, cheese, and meats, and he always made me a to-go box to bring home to my mother. He was well regarded in town, and so my parents quickly warmed to the idea of these meetings, and especially the free English lessons. Whenever I asked my parents a question about English, they’d say, “That’s one to remember for Herr Professor.” Herr Weill and I would usually meet for about two hours. My mother didn’t have to worry about finding a sitter or some

inexpensive after-school activity for me three days a week. Herr Weill was a blessing, she always said. Father wasn't particularly religious, but he agreed. Herr Weil was a blessing.

We worked through a basic English textbook that had a cartoon of a red schoolhouse with a big sun shining down actual rays of wavy lines, something any preschooler could have drawn, if he had no imagination. We sat with this workbook for an hour and spent the rest of the time speaking German. At first, I was surprised by how much I had to say. With both my parents spending long hours at work cleaning the chemistry lab by day and applying to training programs at night, and with no one to talk to in my neighborhood or at school, I had filled my days with so much silence that my time with Herr Weill was an unexpected outpouring.

Herr Weill didn't reveal very much that first day, but opened up just to tell me he had been a refugee once, too, and had left home when he was a teenager because a war scattered his whole family. He spoke slowly and said little, but it was also an outpouring, I could tell. From then on, we talked often about these things, like conflict, violence, war, fleeing from it and the way it makes you tired and confused whether you're running or still. We talked about scars, invisible and visible, instant and latent ones, all real. How hard it is not to keep losing things because of conflict, even once it's far away, miles or years away, and yet how life fills up with other things all the while. At the end of that visit, he said, "It's a relief to be able to chat with someone around here about something other than Chuck Long," whom I'd never even heard of anyway.

The second time I visited Herr Weill, he gave me a leather journal so I would always have someone to talk to, if only the blank page. I wrote in German so that I could show it to Herr Weill if he ever asked to see it. I was always jotting down notes about my life, about the things I'd encounter and wanted to think about, conversations that were mostly reflections of what I longed to say and hear.

Li is from China. I've been sitting next to her in the back of the room ever since last week when we were the only people in the class without costumes for Halloween. She told me a secret, her family fled from the first country, and she asked me if I knew what she meant and I did. I told her I even knew what it meant to flee from the second country, and also to leave the third country, and that made her smile. She has a pretty smile. And she's really good at drawing. And geography. Maybe because she saw me writing in this journal, she gave me a box of pens today. She always has these nice pens she draws with that have little pandas on them. She gave me a whole box. How did she know I love pandas? Her English is worse than mine. When she handed me the pens, she said something like, "Your book." I tried to say, "Thanks, pandas are my favorite animals," but she didn't respond. Maybe underneath, it really went like this, or could have:

Me: How's everything?

Li: I'm fine, how are you?

Me: I'm fine. I've just been writing in this journal that my best friend gave me.

Li: What are you writing about?

Me: Oh, just about life and love and things like that.

Li: Wow! I brought you pens so you can keep writing in your book.

Me: Thanks, pandas are my favorite animals!

Li: Mine, too!

Me: I'll dedicate this journal to you.

Li: I'd like that very much.

Later, I will try to tell Li that Herr Weill is taking me to the college library. It will be closed for Veteran's Day, but he has a "ritual" to go every year the day before on November 10th. He thinks I might like it there, too.

Every November 10, Herr Weill would go to the college library to see what he called his German collection. Before we met, this was the only German he heard all year. He'd read German books out loud, and it was the only German he spoke all year, too. Herr Weill and I took a bus to the library. The roof of the bus had these little gold stars painted onto it, and I thought that was a fine touch. Unlike in Berlin, you could look up at night from any point in this town and see the stars anyway, but still, it was nice to be reminded of a clear night sky on a cold morning.

Herr Weill knew everyone at the library, and they all came over to say hi and see how he was doing. He introduced me to the research librarians and other staff. They took us to a very small room made of glass that reminded me of an elevator I'd once seen in Berlin. The room had two chairs in it and shelves for books. He gave the research librarian a stack of bits of paper with numbers and letters, and about a half hour later, the librarian rolled a cart over to our little room. The cart was full of books, maps, newspapers, photographs, most of them dusty as if they hadn't been touched all year.

We spent the whole day there with these items. So we could keep up our energy, Herr Weill snuck in breakfast, lunch sandwiches, a snack, and a light supper. I wrote down everything I could about what I saw in our glass room because it was such a standout day. I saw:

Café Elektric, a silent film with Marlene Dietrich and with no ending because it is said to be lost. Herr Weill thinks the end was later lost in the war because that's the nature of war, to leave stories incomplete and rob us of our resolutions (we also listened to Marlene Dietrich sing in *Blue Angels*). *The Threepenny Opera* by his "namesake by coincidence," Kurt Weill, also a refugee. The song I remember was about mercy being more important than justice and Herr Weill said he listened to it every year to see if he'd come any closer to deciding whether or not this was true, and, if it was true, what it required of him or what it eased in him, so he said.

Poems by the poet Rilke.

A few pages of *Zen and the Art of Archery*, which Herr Weill had been reading a few pages at a time for years, each year. We took turns reading aloud. He said Zen doesn't believe in language, so it's best to give the pages space, months, years to breathe. He folded over the top, a tiny bend marking where we would pick up next November.

News clips from November 10, 1938, because of the treacherous anniversary of Kristallnacht. Herr Weill says it's important to acknowledge an anniversary, even the ones that mark tragedy. This was around the time he left Germany and became a refugee, which I can tell he doesn't like to speak about. He said very little about 1938 except that some things we can't help but to remember, and some we must struggle to forget. I forgot to ask him which things are which.

Old maps and new ones because Herr Weill said that the borders can change on you, so you have to keep watch, keep checking in. Through the maps, I learned some more about Herr Weill and my old home:

Herr Weill was born in 1920 not in Berlin, but in a suburb. By the time he was two months old, the city had grown at least three times because someone moved some lines on a map. So he was born just outside of Berlin and grew up in Berlin, having lived in the same house all his childhood. I saw the old map of Germany in 1919 and in 1920. He called it something else, Weimar. He pointed out the borders of the Jewish ghetto that he said had walls of its own when Germany was called something else, the Third Reich, but he didn't call it that himself, he said. We looked at a map of Germany after WWII with Berlin in the eastern part of the country. This was before the USSR built the Wall, but still there was West Berlin with borders around it, a floating dot in the Communist bloc. Herr Weill said, "It's a very uneasy thing to live life surrounded by enemies." I knew this to be true. A satellite map outlining the wall built in 1961. From this point of view, it had none of the order I always associated with the Wall. On a modern map of West Berlin, I pointed out where our studio was situated in the shadow of the Wall on the Western side, which looked the same as the shadow that fell on the East. I pointed out where Herman and Ismail had lived. I also found the general location of our playground, and also where I liked to sit by the Spree and watch the boats when I lived in the East and where I liked to sit by the Spree and watch the boats in the West just like I liked to watch the boats when we went on vacation to the banks of Lake Tana.

I will always remember the way Herr Weill quoted me back to myself after that day, saying, "You say you lived with your family 'in the shadow of the Wall on the Western side, which looked the same as the shadow that fell on the East.' In this, you have pointed out the main aspect of a wall that these damn architects never seem to grasp: no matter which side you're on, its shadow is cast on you." He'd say it at random times, and reflect on those words in a way that made me feel understood.

At the end of our visit to the college library, Herr Weill wished me a happy eve of Armistice Day, his favorite holiday, marking the end of World War I, a "war to end all wars, a day that for a moment must have seemed to promise eternal peace, for a while." I asked, "Why celebrate a day that was a lie, there was no armistice to end all wars," but Herr Weill replied, "Even if a promise isn't kept, it doesn't mean there has been a lie." He said we'd do this again next year, and being let in to this annual ritual gave me the feeling we'd be friends for a long time. Before I left, Herr Weill invited me and my parents to lunch at his home on November 11, but I told him my father didn't have the day off and my mother wanted me to help mend the winter clothes we'd been given while we were still wearing our fall clothes.

November 14, sunny, freezing, so cold that recess is getting shorter so we've been playing inside. I started to pass notes to Li in the back of the room:

Monday: Do you like me? Yes, No, Maybe

Li answered by drawing a doodle of a cat sleeping on a chair.

Tuesday: Want to play after study time? Yes, No, Maybe (circle one)

Li answered by drawing a tic-tac-toe board and putting an x in the middle.

Wednesday: No note (playing it cool)

Thursday: Would you like to share my juice box today?

Li drew a sun with sunglasses on it!
Friday: Can we play tomorrow in the park?
Li wrote the words to the Pledge of Allegiance.

I couldn't tell if Li and I were growing closer or missing each other. There were few friends in my life. Ismail and Herman had left Germany just before I did, and the only letter I wrote was never forwarded, just returned unopened, wrong address. I couldn't write my friends back home because my parents said it was unsafe to tell them where we'd escaped to. Though I barely talked to Li, she was my closest friend at school. I longed to know her better.

I brought my heartache to Herr Weill, tentatively. I eased into the subject, asking Herr Weill, "When I first met you, didn't you say there was a woman you looked at once with longing?" He lifted his brow, and revealed that, sure, he'd loved a woman once. They were neighbors in Berlin. He was shy, she was shy. He'd carry her groceries, walk her to school sometimes, tried to show her he was a dependable rock in her life, and he had it all planned out in his mind: when he graduated from high school, started a job, and had enough money to take her out in style, then he'd ask her to dinner. But the war happened, and it didn't end in time. They both walked into the war, never reconnecting. She was always good to him. Her name was Margareta.

I asked him, "If you never married her, did you ever marry anyone else?"

"Almost once, but it fell apart. Then another time almost, but it slipped through my fingers. That seemed like as many chances as I was going to get. But I every so often wonder about Margareta, just like I wonder about many things from back home that eluded me," he admitted.

"Do you regret not pursuing her?" I asked him.

"You see," he said, "one always regrets a lack of courage. In one form or another, that's probably the only kind of regret anyone ever has."

"So you tried to find her again later?" I pressed, testing my own feelings about Li against his answers and experience.

"No, I haven't tried to find her yet," he said. I didn't feel the need to tell him the obvious, that forty-five years seemed long enough to wait. But I was shy, too, so I could understand where he was coming from, which made me even more upset. I decided that I'd need to learn from this, to be bolder than he was in matters of the heart, and I came up with a name for my plan to win Li ASAP: Operation Panda Margareta, which was both my favorite animal, the animal I imagined Li also loved, and the name of the woman Herr Weill had once loved.

I talked to Herr Weill about it and he seemed charmed, understood that something as monumental as Operation Panda Margareta would need to be dramatic, carefully planned, and very strategically implemented. The next time I saw him I showed him my idea, which he thought seemed adequately heroic:

OPERATION PANDA MARGARETA

- 9:15: Sneak into the principal's office while Principal is out for his daily smoke/walk
- 9:16: Play the Jackson 5's "ABC" over the PA
- 9:17: Read a poem for Li
- 9:19: Run!

I worked on the plan on my own, especially writing the poem, which took time since my English was still halting. A couple of weeks later, I was leaving school to visit Herr Weill and go over last-minute details for Operation Panda Margareta, recite the poetry, test out the cassette player my dad had loaned me, and go over the book I'd checked out from the library on operating a PA system, when I noticed Thomas Henry—sweet quiet farm kid—come down the front steps of the school, walk up to Li, and, without saying a thing, put his arm around her in a familiar way, like he'd certainly done it before. Behind his ear he had a panda pen, and my heart was sinking. I fumbled for the poem in my pocket, and I almost did what I had meant to do, read these words to Li, declare my feelings. When Thomas and Li walked by, I tried to catch Li's gaze, but I couldn't quite keep it.

I stopped writing in my notebook after this, and just before winter break Li began sitting with Thomas and his friends up by the front of the room. I joined a soccer club and cut back on my visits to Herr Weill's. I made all kinds of excuses, but the truth is as my English improved, other barriers came down, too, just like Herr Weill predicted. I was discovering more about my classmates, that it turned out they also found it fun to watch the magic tricks that Benny the crossing guard practiced on his breaks and also liked playing in the cleared fields surrounding town. They pranked me by teaching me dirty words but telling me the wrong definition (for about a week, I thought *cabbage* was an insult, *artichoke* a sin to say). I pranked them by showing them sophisticated, "worldly" ways to dance and shop and roller-skate that were ridiculous and hilarious and got us all kicked out of a few establishments.

So in this way, Herr Weill and I drifted apart, allowed ourselves to become somewhat untied from each other, and let the ebb and flow of life move us along our own paths. I'd still go by from time to time, after chatting at the community center and making plans to meet some weeks, until eventually, with weekend matches to play, I stopped going to those Sunday potlucks, too. When I did come over, Herr Weill would put out meats, cheeses, and breads as always, and I allowed myself to imagine he did this whether I came or not, set out this spread every afternoon, that he wasn't going out of his way for me on these haphazard visits. By the spring, my parents decided it was time for us to move again, this time to move toward something: a new job for my father pulling us away. A better job, no longer washing lab instruments but now getting training in a hospital in a town that American doctors avoided. And so we packed our bags again, I hoped for the last time.

Herr Weill and I wrote letters for the first few months after this, but then I guess I just couldn't keep up, or just didn't. The letters piled up, four unanswered ones from Herr Weill that I'd only read quickly, meant to answer but hadn't, life becoming something else by now.

We nearly met again, almost, just after November 9, 1989, when suddenly and unexpectedly the Berlin Wall fell. My first thought upon hearing the news was where were Ismail and Herman, and maybe they could reclaim our lost soccer balls. My second thought was did Herr Weill see the news and what did he think/do/say? I tried to look up Herr Weill in the phonebook, but he still didn't have a number listed, so I told my parents what I wanted to do and they reluctantly let me take the car to visit him the next day, November 10. I managed to get to the library before it closed. I went to Herr

Weill's usual desk, but he had left. When I asked, the librarian said Herr Weill had come by for just a short visit, and I'd missed him by hours. I requested that old copy of *Zen and the Art of Archery* and saw he'd gone through a few more pages, advanced six unobtrusive folds since the time we'd read this book.

I retraced a path I'd walked so many times, driving that road through the fields and wooded brush. I drove right by his house at first, looking for a large home, circling back, puzzling over how modest it actually was. The paint was faded, but the mailbox was new. The lawn was strewn with leaves, some soggy and patted down and some fresh atop that cover, like he hadn't cleared the yard in weeks, maybe all season. It was too late to ring the bell, I told myself. It would have been awkward to visit unannounced then, and I realized I hadn't worked out what I'd have said, anyway. I could sleep in the car and knock in the morning. But it was hard to sleep that night for some reason, and I found myself clearing his lawn with my bare hands of all those messy leaves and filling up his mulch bin. I finished just after dawn, then stayed to pull the tiny weeds that had just sprouted up in the cracks on his pathway leading to his porch, which already had an American flag flying for Armistice Day ("Armistice Day, flags display," Herr Weill once said). I drove into the quiet town, the shops on Main mostly closed, yet all with bright red, white, and blue banners hanging in the still morning. I passed my old school and the community center, circled back down by the college, saw the movie theater and the roller rink, each taking on an aura of reverence that a quiet holiday brings.

I thought I might look up Li and see if her family had managed to stay still in her second country. She'd have been sixteen, a junior in high school, but I never got the courage for that, either. I imagined she was getting ready to go to homecoming with Thomas, maybe thinking about buying him a boutonniere and he asking her what color her dress was so he could find the right corsage. As I was filling up the gas tank to make the trip back, I wondered already if I'd regret not looking for Li and I knew I'd regret not having stopped by to visit Herr Weill, our friendship that I'd once thought would last for years already somehow in the past. At least after clearing his lawn, I'd left him a note, simply the first page in the journal he'd once given me and that I still carried around from time to time. On top of the torn-out page, I wrote: *11/11/89, To my first friend in my fourth country on the event of the end of the Wall. A heartfelt and happy Armistice Day.*

Then, in faded ink and smudged lettering:

October 15, 1983:

To Herr Weill: Thanks for this journal. It's terrific.

To Journal: Welcome to my life! Herr Weill is my first friend here so far. We have some things in common and some not:

My favorite food: wurst with kraut and mustard. Also dorro wat or kitfo with injera.

Herr Weill's favorite: schnitzel because his mother used to make it and it is "comfort food."

My favorite movie: *Casablanca*, ever since they played it at the American Consulate because it was about refugees.

Herr Weill's favorite: *Casablanca*! He says it's a story about true friendship.

My favorite season: I hate the cold because of the way it makes you cry, but I love reading next to a fire.

Herr Weill's favorite season: he loves the vigor of the cold, but he hates the snow, too mushy when it melts.

So what else can this mean but that we both love the fall?