

Die Mauer

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Though he is only forty, Dieter looks much older. He is thin—almost emaciated—and his stomach growls from lack of food, but he doesn't eat because he doesn't feel hungry. Instead, he takes a draw on the fat, hand-rolled cigarette he holds pinched between his thumb and forefinger. He inhales the smoke and holds it for a long moment, then lets it hiss out through tightly pressed lips. When his lungs are empty, he savors the oily-sweet aftertaste of the tobacco and waits until his head goes light before letting himself take another breath.

He finishes the cigarette and stares out the window at the Wall—*die Mauer*. It has been months since the reunification and the end of East Germany, but this part of the Wall still stands. Light glints through a fist-sized hole about halfway up—the result of some Berliners' joy at the news it would be torn down. Dieter watched the three of them beat on it with sledgehammers and a chisel for a half hour before they finally made that tiny hole; then they gave up, happy with their little victory. They took pictures and grabbed some bits of broken concrete from the Wall and went away.

Now the whole thing looks old and dingy. Even the graffiti is faded and dull; it's meaningless to write new slogans on the relic of an old complaint. In better parts of the city, the Wall has already been torn down—the east side of the wall came down within a week. But the tourists somehow forgot that the wall went all the way around Berlin, so out here on the west edge—the part of the city tourists rarely visit—the Wall remains whole. Dieter frowns. Now that the Germanies have reunited, maybe this part of the Wall will be torn down as well.

Pain flares in the stump of his right leg, and Dieter rubs it. Soon the pain subsides to its regular dull itch, and he flexes the

short stub that remains below the knee. The doctors worked hard to save that stub; they told him that as long as his natural joint was functional, he would be able to walk normally with rehabilitation and a prosthetic. So they took exactly as much of it as they could and still leave a working knee, resulting in a painful infection that required six months of regular visits to the doctor to have the wound lanced and the infection drained away.

Dieter makes a new cigarette, piling the tobacco in the middle of the paper so that when he rolls it, it looks like a joint or a piece of hard candy twisted in cellophane. He would rather buy normal cigarettes, but he cannot afford them on the small check he gets from the government. So he buys cut tobacco in a big bag and rolls his own. He sighs and examines his stub, checks to see that there is no new irritation or rash. When he is satisfied, he leans back and lights his cigarette, drawing the strong Turkish tobacco deep into his lungs.

He is annoyed that the doctors never asked him what he wanted. He would have told them to take as much of the leg as they needed to ensure a quick and painless recovery. It wouldn't have mattered if he had a limp—he would have preferred it. He is not embarrassed by his injury and doesn't especially want to walk normally. He doesn't want to pretend that nothing has happened. He doesn't want to pretend he hasn't lost his leg.

Dieter smokes the cigarette down until his fingers burn from the heat. He is one of the last to escape over the Wall from East Germany—only months before the border was opened. But no one is interested any more in those like him who risked their lives to escape the East. Where he would once have been a hero, Dieter is now only a disfigured reminder of a time his new countrymen wish to forget. Now the talk is of healing and reunification; victims of the past are tolerated, but they are no longer extolled. The new Germany doesn't want to be reminded of the years of tension and hate that once separated East and West; history is to be ignored, and the past forgotten.

But Dieter doesn't want to forget.

He stands up and grabs his crutches, then hobbles to the front door. His apartment is on the second floor, so he has to thump his way down to the first floor to check his mail. He opens

the rusted box and curses; the *Sozial Amt*—the welfare office—has sent him another complaint. He tears the envelope open and stares at the short letter inside, slowly closes the box, and starts back up the stairs.

When he makes it back to his apartment, he drops into his chair and rolls another cigarette with shaking hands. When he has smoked it and rolled another, he picks up the short letter and reads it again, then lets it fall through his fingers to the floor. The welfare office has cut off his support. They claim he has been employable for six months but has made no serious attempt to find work, so they are cutting off his weekly check until he can show proof that he has either found a job or has been repeatedly turned down.

Dieter stares out the window at the Wall. Has it been that long since the escape? He tries to remember the passing of time, the progression of days to weeks to months, but all he can remember is the hospital, then the apartment. He tries to recall going to the store and buying food, but all he remembers is his living-room window and its view of the steadily decaying wall.

The Wall—*die Mauer*. Twelve feet high and rounded on top to keep escapees from getting a good grip to pull themselves over. Surrounded by a “dead zone” of raked dirt that covered antiper-sonnel mines and hid trip wires that fired fragmentation grenades. Guard towers every two hundred meters, dogs every four hundred meters; an electric fence around all of it, with *Stalingrass*—large steel grates with two-inch nails sticking up—hidden in the underbrush.

The Wall. The object of his scrutiny for months before the escape; the focus of his life for the past two years. A barrier that cost him his leg, his homeland, and his wife.

And then East Germany opened the barrier, the Germanies reunited, and his sacrifice was made meaningless.

He picks up the letter from the *Sozial Amt* and stares at it. He had a good job in Potsdam before the escape; he was the foreman of an assembly line in an electrical appliance factory. It was good work and had good benefits. His superiors had been willing to look the other way when a finished refrigerator or washing machine was found to have a “serious and previously undetected manufacturing defect” and he took it home as salvage. His workers were good and life was satisfactory, if not overly full.

Then his wife started asking questions about the West. He humored her at first, tried to answer her questions as well as he could. But the questions became more insistent and more probing, and he had taken her aside and talked with her.

"What are you trying to do to me? Do you want to escape to the West? Why?"

She blinked at him, abashed at his vehemence. "I . . . Yes, I think I do."

"Why? What is so bad about our homeland that you think we need to leave it?"

She stared at him for a moment, and Dieter was surprised at the coldness in her eyes. "We have no life here. They won't let us live like human beings."

Dieter snorted. "We have a fine house and good jobs. What else is there?"

"Fine jobs? You're a factory worker for heaven's sake! You are no more than a common laborer! We could be so much more in the West."

Dieter winced. "I have nothing to be ashamed of. My position as foreman is an honor. I worked hard to earn it."

She put her hand on his arm. "You work hard; I know that. But you could have done so much more if you had been allowed to go your own way. You could have been an engineer had they let you."

Dieter shook his head. "No. I am not smart enough. I took the same tests as the others and did poorly. They put me where I belonged."

"They chose your life when you were nine years old!"

Dieter pulled away. "That is the way of it. I had the same chance as the others; I just didn't do as well."

"You were a child! How can you tell me that you believe they were right? I see the things you make in your spare time; they're wonderful things, useful things. You could do so much more if only they'd let you."

Dieter shook his head. "No. This is the life I have, and that is the way of it. As they say, 'Order is the half of life.'"

"That is pure nonsense! In the West you could go to school; you could learn more and become an engineer."

"Leave me alone! Do you think I haven't wondered about that? Do you think I am so stupid that I haven't thought about what we could have there? Yes, I wish we lived in the West, too. But we don't, and unless we want to go there so bad that we are willing to suffer, we can't even think about it. Unless you're prepared to try and fail—unless you're willing to lose everything we have—there is no way we can even try." He looked down at his hands. "I have thought about the West until I thought I would go crazy from frustration. Our country is divided, and I can't change that. Please don't make me think about things I cannot change."

It was the one thing Dieter had never been able to answer satisfactorily. He could not explain why Germany should have two parts that excluded each other. He could not understand why his government was so jealous of the accomplishments of that other Germany. And he could not understand why he was not allowed to visit that place that claimed the same name as his own country.

Dieter couldn't remember when they had started making plans. He never made the conscious decision, but there didn't seem anything else to do. They surveyed the Wall, looked for weaknesses. They drew plans and discarded them, and Dieter hoped that that would be enough to satisfy his wife—and himself. But the days and months passed, and they refined the plans and checked them over, and eventually he and his wife had prepared themselves as much as they could. There was nothing left to do but go; Dieter could think of no more reasons not to.

They chose the west edge of Berlin—south of the border crossing at Heer Strasse, near Gatow. The Wall ran through a marshland at that point; there would be no dogs, and the electric fence would be turned off where it ran through the water—West Berliners had complained that the fence was killing the marshland, so the East had turned it off to avoid meaningless argument. They would be able to make it under the outer fence there, then move along it until they reached more solid ground. If they slogged through the muck at the edge of the marsh, they figured to avoid the mines found in drier parts of the dead zone. If all went well, they would make it all the way to the barrier wall before a guard could even see them.

They left early in the morning on Dieter's day off, taking some of his tools from the factory, and arrived at the Wall at daybreak. Dieter waded through the chest-high marsh and approached the fence. He felt what must have been Stalingrass a few feet from the fence, but time had blunted the sharp nails and mud had worked up through the grate so that it felt like nothing but a corrugated floor when he stepped on it. Still, he was careful to stand flat on his feet and use the buoyancy the water gave him to put as little weight on the Stalingrass as he could.

The fence rose high over the water; there was no way they could go over it without exposing themselves. So Dieter probed the surface of the fence below the water. The fence went all the way to the bottom of the marsh—and beyond. He went under the water and probed the soft muck at the base of the fence, but he could not dig his way under.

He waded back to shore and got the bolt cutters he had brought from the factory. He felt vaguely guilty for taking them; it was the only pair the factory had, and it was notoriously hard to get good hand tools. It would take them months and reams of paperwork to replace it. The fence was little more than a thin steel grate, and he was able to cut an opening in it in only an hour. He slipped through it, then motioned for his wife to follow.

They worked their way along the inside of the fence until the brush along the bank began to thin. Dieter motioned for his wife to stop and waded carefully out to survey the area. A guard tower stood fifty meters from the edge of the marsh—about two hundred meters from where Dieter watched. The guards looked north, toward Heer Strasse; most of the escapes in this sector came from the direction of the road. The guards turned only occasionally to look south and then only for a moment.

He returned to where his wife stood neck-deep in the water. He looked at her and nodded but said nothing. They had decided beforehand that no words would be spoken until they were in free West Berlin. Though there was little chance that the guards would hear them, there was no reason to take that chance; if they were to be caught, it would be for a better reason than because they couldn't keep their mouths shut.

The day wore on and the sun rose high. It was August—the hottest time of the year—and there was no cloud cover. Mosquitoes and water skeeters buzzed around them, and nameless creatures bit at them under the water, but Dieter and his wife did nothing. At one point, Dieter barely stopped himself from yelling out when a thumb-sized leech latched onto his arm. He pulled it free, worrying for only a moment about whatever infection he might get from the acrid water around him. He turned to his wife, and she smiled at him reassuringly and shrugged.

Time passed slowly until the sun began to fall from the sky. They watched it dip toward the horizon. When it finally winked out, they started to move.

The whole area faded into the shades of twilight. Lights snapped on but did nothing to penetrate the monochrome gray of falling night. Dieter and his wife moved quickly toward the barrier wall and solid ground. They would have only ten minutes before the cover of twilight would be gone, but that should be enough.

They stayed low in the water as the marsh solidified under their feet, finally crawling out of the water on hands and knees. They held their breath as the guards—now only a scant fifty meters away—turned to look in their direction. A searchlight beam touched the ground nearby, but came no closer, and after a moment the searchlight swung away, back to the north.

They forced themselves to wait for a ten-count before they got to their feet and ran. The barrier wall was only twenty meters away. It gleamed a shining white invitation to them as they ran across the newly raked dirt. They were almost free.

Dieter pushed his wife out in front, placing himself between her and the guard tower. He was eight or nine meters away from the barrier wall when he felt the gentle tug of the tripwire on his foot. He barely had time to push his wife down before the concussion hit.

He felt his body lift and move through the air toward the barrier wall. He landed with a hard thud and scrambled to his feet as soon as he could. He was only five meters away from freedom. He stepped toward the barrier wall, but his right leg refused to take his weight, and Dieter fell facedown in the dirt. He heard a bullet ricochet off the wall as he struggled to his feet again.

He looked up and saw his wife stumble and fall, then rise again. He stood and ran toward the Wall, ignoring the pain that shot through his right calf, trying not to think of the damage that made him stagger drunkenly, his right leg inexplicably shorter than his left. When he finally did look, he saw only a ragged stump where his right foot should have been. He stared at it as he ran, tried to decide what it meant. But he did not stop.

The Wall loomed high in front of him, and he planted his left foot and leaped. He caught the rounded top of the Wall with his fingertips and felt himself slip. Panic surged through him, and he pulled himself up with a strength that he had not known he possessed.

As he rolled up onto the top of the Wall, he looked down and saw his wife silhouetted in the glow of the spotlight. She was only three meters away, and he reached his hand down to her. She smiled at him as she reached out, then her forehead blossomed in a fountain of crimson spray and she flopped to the ground.

Dieter heard his own screams as if from a distance and let himself fall over the Wall. He never felt himself hit the ground.

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Dieter looks away from the Wall, his heart thundering in his chest, sweat dripping from his face in the stifling August heat. He feels the ache in his chest and his eyes burn, but no tears come. It was her fault. If he had not let her talk him into that insane escape attempt, they would both be alive today. They would have lived in Berlin, just as he did now. They would have walked freely through the border crossing at Heer Strasse. They would have been happy.

He straps his prosthesis on and gets dressed. Everything would have been perfect if they had waited only a few more months. He would have gone to school to learn to be an engineer. They would have had a fine house and fine friends. They would have had children who grew up knowing limitless opportunity.

If only they had waited. Only a few more months.

He picks up the letter from the *Sozial Amt* and reads it again, and this time the words seem angry, accusatory. As he reads, he feels his own anger build. *They think I am a bum. They think I have no pride and no ability. They are laughing at me.*

Dieter sees his reflection in the mirror and stops. He doesn't recognize the face he sees there; instead of his own face, Dieter sees the visage of an old man, a downtrodden bum, a victim. He stares at the face for a long time, tries to find a hint of himself in the features, but Dieter sees only dead eyes that stare back at him.

He turns away, looks out the window at the Wall. Sunlight glints through the fist-sized hole about halfway up. Vines have begun to work their way up its face, and the whole thing looks old and dingy. He hears the sound of heavy equipment; they are finally going to tear it down.

East and West are gone. There is only Germany.

Dieter stares at the Wall for a long moment, and the tears finally come. When they pass, he turns his back on the Wall and picks up the letter from the *Sozial Amt*. He reads it one more time before he wads it up and throws it in the trash. *I am not a bum*, he thinks. *They will not dictate what I can do, who I can be. I will make a living on my own terms, in my own way.*

I am free.