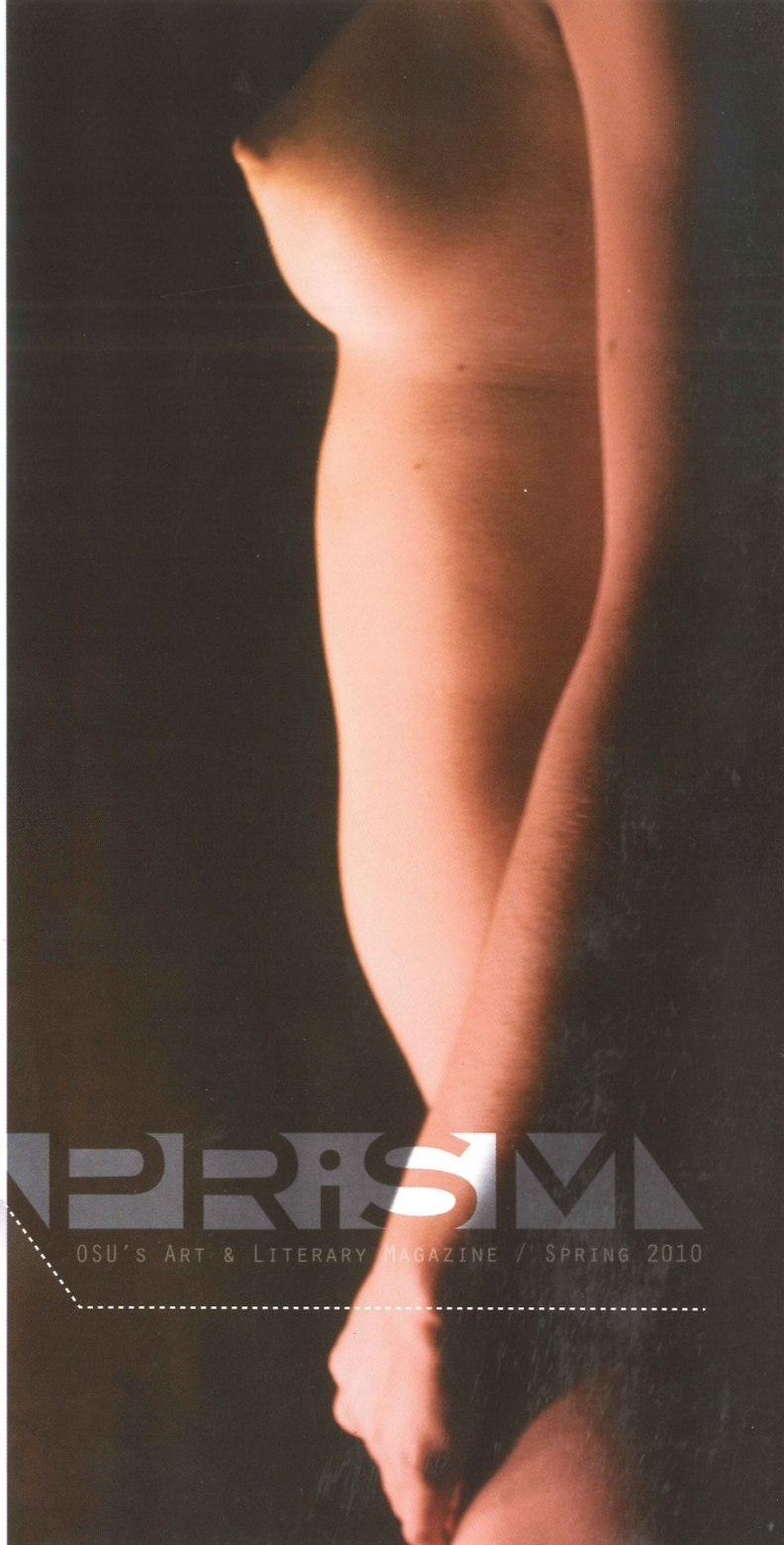




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# PRISMA

OSU'S ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE / SPRING 2010



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*PROVOST'S PROSE WINNER:*  
**ANOTHER WORLD**

MARK WALSH

FICTION

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The Provost's Literary Prize, established over twenty years ago, is an open competition in poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. Any currently enrolled OSU undergraduate is eligible to submit work. Winners receive a cash prize and on-campus publication. A committee of creative writing faculty presents finalists to the Provost, who selects each year's winner(s). For more detailed contest guidelines, contact Professor Scribner, Chair of the Provost's Literary Prize committee, at [keith.scribner@oregonstate.edu](mailto:keith.scribner@oregonstate.edu).

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**W**alter knew he was dying. Not then and there, stuck in the small balky elevator on his way up to Frieda's apartment where his weekly supper awaited, but surely sooner than later. Death felt like a cat sleeping on his chest, a slight weight that gripped at him and would often induce him to pound on his sternum with his fist as if it was only a ball of the yellowish phlegm he occasionally coughed up and nothing more. And so Walter pounded and hacked, short and dry, while the elevator squealed to a halt on Frieda's floor, and as he slid the gate open, dabbed his fingers with spit for the purpose of taming his remaining gray wisps of hair.

Frieda cooked for Walter every Sunday, and regardless of what she prepared, the aroma that issued into the hallway as he approached was each time most singular. There were scanty any neighbors, they either died on the battlefield, or during the bombings, or more recently left across

the border, especially when it was still easy to do so. Walter knocked, smelling braised pot roast, roasting potatoes, hot bread. He could hear the floorboards creak as Frieda made her way to the door, and knew she would stop at her mirror to tidy herself before allowing him to see her. The door swung open and she stood in an expensive, though dated, Sunday dress. On bright evenings such as this one, her apartment filled with a diffuse golden light from sun-bleached yellow curtains, the effect of which only added to the warmth of her smile. "Flowers?" Walter offered. They hugged, as if they were brother and sister, and in a way they were. Frieda was a widow, near forty-five, the same age his youngest brother Kurt would have been had he not been killed outside Bastogne fighting the Americans. She took it hard, his death, and it still showed in her face that evening a decade and a half later: a sadness observed with her coming and going, yet a thing she would control in the company of others; or once set to a task, such as looking for a vase for the flowers Walter appropriated

from the park on the walk over. Frieda had hair that was still more pepper than salt. She kept herself young, she would say, by keeping busy at the grocery she managed, which in turn allowed for her icebox to remain healthily stocked and Walter eating like a prince each Sunday evening.

Never allowed in the kitchen, Walter often gravitated to the mantle upon which sat a framed photo of Kurt standing in his fatigues, a city of tents behind him. He looked handsome and strong. It was his last picture.

"Dinner's almost on," Frieda called from the kitchen. He loved it there, not only for the food, which was a small miracle with the rationing, or for Frieda's company, of which he was careful to treat as the sister he never had, but to simply observe and participate in life being lived. Frieda's was an apartment unmolested by war; bombs had hit elsewhere, the Russians and Americans had not found their way to her furniture or silverware; the luxurious smell of cooked meat wafted, sunlight passed through real curtains onto cushioned furniture and tables complete with flowers in vases. By comparison, Walter's place was a shanty. Like many during the war, British and American bombs had displaced him. His current apartment was austere to have it put kindly: a bed, desk, chair, an armoire with a missing door, and a too-small bathroom. In his icebox a few bites worth of liverwurst sandwich, an onion, some aging apples, perhaps a bottle of milk of rather questionable age. The only soul Walter allowed into his humble home was his old friend and employee, Felix.

Walter was a respected construction foreman in and around Berlin, and Felix was his go to man. During the war, Walter and his crew were hired by the State to help assess the safety of buildings damaged during the bombings. It was not

really Walter's fault, what happened, it was just one of those things. His crew was conducting structural tests on an apartment building when a portion of the floor gave way. One minute Felix was right there with Walter measuring fissures, and the next he was replaced by a rift, the sound of rending timbers and a thin cloud of asbestos and dust, and two heartbeats later, shocked pleas for help from the floor below, down in the basement. Felix.

A doctor was found. He rubbed his whiskers and frowned, assessing the situation. It didn't look good, Walter thought. Felix writhed on the floor, his left leg impaled on a rusted old pipe jutting from the gravel floor. As the doctor set his bag on the floor and opened it, a saw of chrome gleamed among the other apparatuses. Felix grabbed a fistful of Walter's shirt. "I'm keeping it!" he spat. "Don't you let him take my leg!"

"Sure," said Walter, nervously scratching at the back of his head. "He is rather partial to that leg, doctor," he said, gently extricating his shirt from Felix's grip.

"Relax, son," said the doctor as he gave him an injection for the pain, "no one said anything about taking your leg." And yet, the doctor's incessant frowning kept both Walter and Felix from feeling relieved to have him there. He was prodding at the protruding pipe with a pen when the air raid siren sounded. The doctor turned nervously to Walter. "We have to get him out of here," which meant a bomb shelter. He grabbed the wounded leg and motioned for Walter to take the arms. "Okay. On the count of three." Walter began offering reassuring words to Felix, but noticed his friend was out cold.

The weight crept back. It had begun to snake under his sternum as he sat at the table admiring the candelabrum Frieda had just set before

him. Walter grimaced. She returned with a silver-plated platter steaming with the roast, potatoes and cabbage, a quizzical look on her face. "If you wanted something other than pot roast, you could have said something."

"Nonsense," Walter managed as she set the food down. And then, regaining his voice as the wave of pain subsided, "Everything you touch in that kitchen is worth its weight in gold." They began to eat, Frieda with an ingrained Continental grace, Walter with what could be described as mechanical gusto. Despite his complete and utter enjoyment of those Sunday dinners, Walter would usually spend that night and sometimes even the next unable to sleep, wondering and worrying as to how Frieda came across all that marvelous food during such strict rationing. In his and Felix's neighborhood there were still lines for butter and sugar, never mind the strong black coffee Frieda would serve for dessert. All that was to be had at the local corner shop he frequented was an unsettling chicory-sawdust blend they would peddle, a cup of which was had at one's peril.

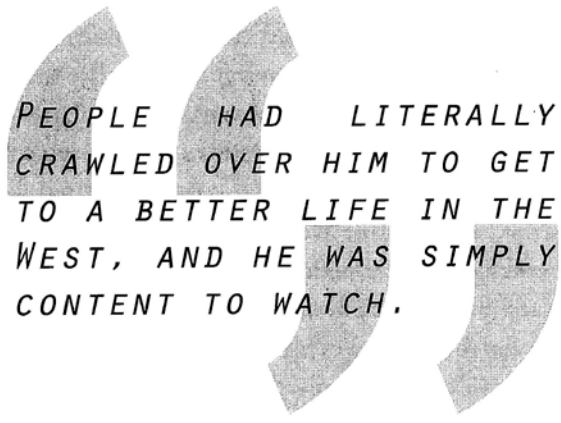
Frieda's dinners were not always so elaborate. The tradition began directly after the war, with Kurt only six months dead, Walter and his remaining brother, Maximilian, would show to comfort the grieving widow, each with a wax paper bundle to contribute to the meal. A good loaf of rye, perhaps, or a handful of turnips, and she would work her magic and something halfway respectable would result. The shelves of her grocery were mostly bare in those days, and many were going hungry in this Soviet sector of Berlin.

As the short years after the war progressed, so also did the quality of these meals. "You are a fool." Maximilian was eating a roll with both elbows on Frieda's table. His finger pointed at Walter. It was

1950, and his visits were growing further and further apart. There were two Germans, and the Soviets, "Ivans" Maximilian called them, were not about to pack up and leave. The two brothers were hotly debating the necessity of Walter and Frieda both relocating to the American side of Berlin. "You need to seriously consider leaving before it is too late."

"Leaving," Walter repeated, just to hear what it sounded like exiting his own mouth, "but this is home." Of course, Maximilian got out. He was a successful engineer, and all the successful citizens seemed, to Walter, to have bled out of this sector of Berlin. Maximilian would live his life with a wife Walter would never meet, in Munich.

"Home," Maximilian chuckled. "Just because you know where the streets go does not mean all this is still home." He emphasized with his fork at the window. "Look around you. The Ivans have taken everything of worth—they've dismantled the factories and shipped them back East. They've even taken the livestock. War reparations," he said to his ham and scalloped potatoes.



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It was true. Walter could not argue with Maximilian, he never could, it seemed, despite being ten years his senior. "I have more work here than I could accomplish in three lifetimes, and the new government was gracious enough to allow my



construction business to continue.”

His brother was having none of it. “Relations between Stalin and the West are souring, people are leaving in droves.” This also was true. Felix’s first floor apartment, once located in the center of town, had seemingly overnight become a frontier between increasingly untrusting neighbors. Outside his window, East German guards had unraveled a long coil of razor wire denoting East Germany from West. “It is not yet too late to leave,” he added. “The barriers set up are still temporary and crude. Also the underground train stations do not correspond with the aboveground boundaries, and one may safely cross to the other side in this manner, if he knew which stations to stop at.” Walter had heard of these, out of service abandoned stations used neither by West or East as they fell on the incorrect side underground. Ghost stations, they were called. Yet all Maximilian’s words were wasted. Walter knew he was not going anywhere. No more excitement, no more adventures. He had had enough of those during the war.

Felix had retained his leg. The doctor had given him a needle of morphine down in the dark, crowded bomb shelter that evening, bombs falling some indeterminable distance away, and bandaged the leg as best he could with all the gauze and cloth at his disposal. Felix still had a most pronounced hobble, though with the aid of a walking stick smoothed with age he would regularly meet with Walter during his friend’s lunch breaks in the park for a game of chess Monday afternoons. “Max called me a fool last night,” Walter said in greeting, offering Felix leftovers from Frieda’s table, as was his habit, this time a portion of the ham and potatoes wrapped in wax paper. “He says life will never be as good here as on the American side.”

“They came and bricked over my windows the other day,” he said in response while setting up his chess set. “People were knocking on the door at

all hours of the night, their arms full of suitcases, just to use our windows, my neighbors and I, to chance it over the razor wire to the other side, to the West. I’d watch from the window as they cut their best clothes to ribbons crossing to the other side, without so much as a look back. What do you make of that, huh? Twenty or so folks through my window alone, and not one looked back.” Walter listened to the tale, all the while trying to find some beauty there in the park, which had, over the few years after the war, become quite plain. “So the police came, and oversaw workers with a wheelbarrow of bricks as they sealed in the windows on my floor and the one above too.”

His pension as a common laborer was meager, Walter knew, and Felix had become rather poor. But neither that nor his being a cripple amounted to the change in Felix in the short years after the war; it was as if he had given up trying to progress. He had taken to the habit of collecting the used cigarette butts from the border guards and rolling them into new ones. Walter had seen with his own eyes Felix accepting handouts. People had literally crawled over him to get to a better life in the West, and he was simply content to watch. They had just bricked over his windows and yet he continued to live there in darkness but for a naked bulb hung from its wire.

“And do not call me a fool, Max” Walter pointed back. Despite his efforts, things had heated up.

“When exactly was it you became an old-timer? Too set in your ways to notice what’s happening around you. Where do you suppose all the doctors, scientists, and lawyers have gone? And the kids from the university, have you seen any of them? Anyone with half a brain or something to lose is either on the West side, or heading there real

soon." Frieda felt as Walter did: she had a decent job, a roof over her head, which was a lot more than some, and home was home. Things would get better, the two had discussed time and time again. It was hard after the first so-called world war as well. Jobs at his age aside, Walter did not particularly enjoy the topic of his intelligence discussed at the dinner table; just because he made a living with his hands did not make him a halfwit. "You have your life, Max, and I have mine. Let us leave it at that."

"Sure, Walter. It looks like I won't be getting through to you. Frieda. A lovely evening," he said by way of departing, and took his hat and coat and left for the nightly train to back Munich. As it turned out, Walter would never see his brother Maximilian again.

The pot roast was stellar. Frieda had once again outdone herself. Small talk had come and gone, and it was only a matter of time, Walter thought, before the subtle hints would surface, those about how they should marry; how he should move out of that dump of a place that she was not even allowed to see, and how she could take care of him and all the rest. But he was adamant. How would she handle the loss of another husband, another Schmidt, no less? After all, he was dying, was he not? And, as if those thoughts of his reminded his body of its ills, his heart was gripped by that weight again and he involuntarily began his coughing, deep and wet. "Excuse me," his eyes said, and he stumbled off to the bathroom where he spit up bits of roast and cabbage as well as a prodigious amount of yellow-green phlegm.

"Everything okay in there?" Frieda asked with a slight knock on the door.

"Yes," he said, though his voice sounded as if uttered by someone else. He made an effort to compose himself: "Yes. I'll be just a minute." He

was there in the bathroom hunched over the sink with both hands for support, and braved a look into the mirror. His face, red and blotchy, looked so very old just then, and it dawned on him that what he was seeing was a shade or two shy of panic. The bouts of pressure on his chest had never occurred so frequently, and that one was lasting and lasting. He tried to relax himself. He took a deep breath, a splash of cold water to his face and the back of the neck, which had become hot and tacky. He could feel Frieda's presence on the other side of the door. His reflection was unsettling, and so he opened the medicine cabinet with a squeak and fixated on the various creams and lotions found within. "So this is what a heart attack feels like," he said to himself, suddenly very much afraid of dying in a bathroom.

"Walter?" From the other side of the door, then a pause. "Is there anything I can do?"

The wall was immense. Construction was ongoing, but the section by Felix's apartment was nearly completed by the summer of 1961. Walter and Felix had abandoned the park and chess for walks along the wall, Walter having been forced to retire the year before when he reached sixty had plenty of free time, Felix took to always moving about on account of his leg stiffening uncomfortably otherwise. They walked, that warm Saturday afternoon, from one razor wired checkpoint to the next and then back. The guards at both knew Felix by name, which took Walter by surprise, and even offered both Felix and Walter cigarettes, which Walter declined due to his condition. Felix happily accepted at the second checkpoint and waited, bent, for the one guard to get his lighter to work in the breeze. Once lit, Felix made introductions. "Walter, meet Walter." They shook hands, the guard making a comment about their name being a touch too common. "And this is Karl," Felix continued.

"A pleasure," Walter said.

"And somewhere is baby-faced Conrad, who is only too generous with his cigarettes."

The two guards gave each other uneasy looks, before one, Karl, cleared his throat and said matter-of-factly: "He's gone. Defected. Over the razor wire."

"He was weak," the other Walter added. "They were playing American rock and roll," he said, pointing west, "and Conrad took to it like a moth to the flame."

"How about that," Walter said, and looked perhaps a moment too long across the checkpoint, because the guards began to adjust the gun straps on their shoulders. "They say you can pick up that music from the West despite the efforts of the government."

"Yes..." Karl said slowly. "But such things are discouraged, as you know."

"Of course," Felix said, turning to leave. "See you two tomorrow?"

"Will you not be at the meeting this evening?" Walter the guard asked, before realizing his folly. Karl and Felix both shot him the same piercing look.

"Of course," Felix said again.

Walter's eyes refocused and he knew the ailment had once again passed. After fearing for his life, he thought it funny that he then felt sheepish for peering at Frieda's toiletry. He splashed water on his face, flushed the toilet for the appearance of normalcy, and returned to the table. Frieda was there; her plate pushed aside, a worried look on her face. "Why did you not answer me? You know I worry about you." Dinner was already cold, and Walter began packaging a hefty portion as he always did for Felix, before catching himself. "All good things come to an end," he muttered to himself.

"What was that about?" he asked. "What meeting?"

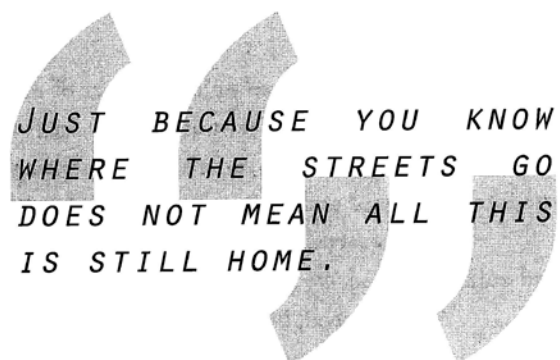
"Not now," Felix quietly warned. "We need some distance," he said, looking back at the wall. "He thought you were somebody else." Nothing was said the whole walk back to Felix's apartment, which in many respects resembled Walter's aside from the lack of windows. Felix dug into his wallet and produced a card for Walter to see.

"Stasi?" He was dumbfounded, then shocked. "The secret police? You're a spy?"

"Hush." A spy. Walter's mind was busy piecing things together: Felix's odd behavior all that time. His insistence on remaining in his horrid apartment there on the border that Walter seldom visited, yet there he was. "I am still Felix. Still your friend." His voice was low, quiet, and strange to Walter's ears, like hearing a close friend's professional telephone voice for the first time. "When it comes to matters of State, one must be discrete."

Walter tried to keep his heart rate down. "Be gentle, you know of my condition."

"Yes. I hope you will forgive me for keeping secrets from you. Now listen—"



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IS STILL HOME.

Frieda was standing then. "Why are you acting so strangely?" Walter had been about the apartment, touching the fine fabrics of her furniture and curtains, visiting all the various luxuries he felt in his damaged heart that he would not see again.

"I have come to realize, of late, what a poor thing it is to keep secrets." The words he spoke were aimed at the floorboards; his eyes could not meet hers. "The reason I have been so evasive these past months, why I have feigned ignorance to your affections is this: Frieda, I am dying." She was up then, away from the table and with arms outstretched to receive him, tears in her eyes, words trying to form amid conflicting blubbering sounds. "Hush. Hush." He tried to calm her with light pats to her back. Despite his best efforts, Frieda's emotions were affecting him. "Come now, how about a walk. I could use some fresh air."

"Okay," she agreed, wiping her eyes. "Let me get a light jacket."

"Frieda? Could you wear the fur?"

"My mother's fur? But it's summer, silly."

"For me? Please?"

"Now listen—your woman is to be arrested." Walter stood there agape until Felix carefully set him upon his cot. "Listen to me. She has been stealing food. Hoarding. As it is there is not enough for all the citizens of the German Democratic Republic. People go hungry."

"But—"

"I have also feasted on the hunger of my fellow citizens for many years now, as you have, and so I am giving you this warning: come Monday morning she is to be arrested and made an example of."

Walter was rushed with a muddle of concern and guilt. "My God, we must do something!"

"As your friend, I feel I have done much for you considering my current profession." Walter was up from the cot, pacing frantically around the small room. Felix continued: "She is a criminal. You would be a model citizen in allowing the law to reach her." Walter shook his head in dismissal. "Or, you could simply tell her of what is to happen, and watch her

take flight into the path of any number of agents lying in wait. Or..."

"Your heart?" Frieda asked. "Will you not get a second opinion? For me?"

"I have lived my life, Frieda, and I will continue doing so until it ends." Why was he talking like that, he wondered. It reminded him of how Felix lived after the war, like a piece of luggage bobbing in the ocean. "Let's not talk about it anymore. Come, let us take a train ride in the underground." They had walked quite some distance, having passed two closer stations before reaching Friedrichstrasse Station.

"Where are we going?" she asked with a nervous smile as they descended. "I feel ridiculous in this coat."

"But it is lovely and very expensive, and you may soon come to appreciate it more than you do now."

"And what is that supposed to mean?" But her question would go unanswered, as at the bottom of the stairs they were met by two stern looking border guards.

"Herr Schmidt?" his black-gloved hand thrust out to receive papers. "Have you the documents?" Walter handed the guard a sealed letter, who proceeded to open it with mechanical efficiency.

"What is this?" Frieda wanted to know.

"Frau Schmidt?" the guard inquired, reading. Her looking up was response enough. "All is in order," he said, pocketing the note as the arriving train rumbled in.

"What is this?" she repeated.

"You are fleeing," Walter said simply. "You have been discovered taking food, and were to be arrested." She looked crestfallen. The train was pulling up, making a terrible racket.

"I only did it for you," she said. And then, the guard with the note directed Frieda to the train,



and Walter towards the stairs, though their eyes remained locked until the doors hissed shut and the train pulled away.

“...you could simply tell her of what is to happen, and watch her take flight into the path of any number of agents lying in wait. Or you could escort her to the last remaining ghost station.”

“Ghost station?” Walter’s head was in a daze, too much was happening all at once.

“Yes, a ghost station. Friedrichstrasse Station is unique in that it operates solely in the West; aside from the one remaining optional stop here in the East. I already have in my possession a letter granting free passage for your troubled lady-friend, all you need do is escort her there, and present this letter to the guards on duty.”

“Thank you, Felix. I do not know what to say.” Walter felt the need to give a hug, but as such things were never passed between those two, the moment quickly passed.

“Do not worry about me. Favors are traded among the Stasi quite regularly. Now go home, and tomorrow save your woman.”

Emerging aboveground, the thought of going home and to bed never entered Walter’s head. He walked towards Felix’s, thinking of Frieda, and of what she did, and why. He patted his well-fed belly, and felt a pang of guilt. That pang began to creep up his chest, and Walter knew he was in for another bout. He gingerly placed his hands on his knees and tried breathing slow measured breaths, in through the nose, out through the mouth, over and over. After a minute or so of this, he felt weary and had to sit down on the sidewalk. He concentrated only on his breathing, though one morbid thought sneaked into his skull: “Is this what it is like in the end? Reduced to breathing?”

“Need a hand, friend?”

“Yes, Felix. Thank you.” They each hobbled in their fashion until they reached Felix’s stoop, where they sat in the summer night’s air. Off beyond the wall, American searchlights danced across the sky, a USO show about to start for the American GI’s stationed there. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Yes.”

“How long have you worked for the secret police?”

“I knew that was what you would ask,” he smiled. “I was given a choice that day when my windows were bricked over. I could become an informant, or go to prison for aiding in the transportation of defectors.”

“Ah.” The USO concert began then. Whether Walter and Felix knew it or not, they were listening to Bill Hayley and His Comets. He thought of Frieda. He thought of Maximilian.

“Rock and roll,” Felix said, simply. The sound carried over the wall, as if on purpose to taunt them, but at that distance, it sounded as if played underwater, and the nuances were perhaps lost.

“It seems more colorful over there, would you agree? Vibrant, maybe? I cannot put my finger on it.”

“It is another world,” Felix said, and left it at that. ❖