



Historical Association

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Berlin

By Rose Mullane

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As I roll slowly out of bed, the spine-chilling air bites at my face. The heaters haven't been working most days, and since Papa works almost all the time, he never has a moment to fix them. Honestly, all he ever does is work, eat, sleep, and work again and again. Mutti says that without him working, we would be out on the streets, but right now, I would like my Papa back.

Urging myself to put on more layers over my rag-like nightdress, I pull on my new denim jacket. Well, actually, it's my Oma's sister's jacket, and the reason I got it is because a week ago, I turned eleven. Even though it isn't the right size — too small on the arms and too big around my torso — the denim is thick and warm, and I think I look cool. As I shove my freezing hands into the pockets, a sharp pain shoots through my left index finger. Taking my trembling hand out to examine it, I realise it is only a paper cut.

Checking the pocket, my palm closes around a folded piece of paper. The sheet is old and discoloured, but the writing is legible. The letter reads...

August 13, 1961

Dear Margarete,

I am writing to tell you that our family is all safe. Although our world has changed, try to remember that I love you. I woke in a panic, not knowing what was happening. The sirens of police cars made my heart pound. The wall is going up. What can we do? Through my window, I saw Jürgen, my neighbor, being jostled roughly away from the barbed wire and Frau Schmitz was just standing there, tears running down her face.

Jürgen is missing and word has it that he was shot at when he tried to go through the barbed wire for a second time. Also, the family next door is split up because David was on a business trip to East Berlin, and when the wall was made, he was still there. They aren't letting him come home to his family. This is really unfair but we can't do anything about it. Remember, I love you. Are you okay? Please write back.

Love always,

Annamarie.

As my chest tightens, the thought of split-up families and broken friendships freezes me in place. My eyes well up at the thought of the two sisters not seeing each other for almost thirty years. With a lump forming in my throat, I think about how lonely they must have been without each other. Oh, poor Oma.

"Stefanie, breakfast is ready," calls Mutti.

Quickly snapping out of my haze and stuffing the worn-out letter into my jacket, I make my way to the kitchen and put on an enthusiastic smile. In the centre of the dining table lies an off-white plate stacked with Brötchen. The crispy bread is overflowing with marmalade, and one soft-boiled egg sits on the side. Even

though the food is tempting, I reach for the already-opened Vita Cola instead.

Before I leave, I risk a glance at Oma. She is facing away, sitting on a wooden armchair, probably deep in thought. As if she senses me staring, my grandma slowly turns to face me.

“Guten Morgen, Stefanie,” Oma says, giving me a warm grin.

“Guten Morgen. Also,” I feel like asking my Grandma if she misses her sister, but change my mind at the last point possible, “have a nice day.

Saying goodbye to my family, I exit the front door and skip through the corridor. I jump down the apartment stairs, two at a time; after a couple of seconds, I am looking past the dusty double doors that opened to my neighbourhood.

Stepping out into the street, I find that the eerie silence is not uncommon. Patches of barren grass make the rectangular grey apartments look bland and almost sad. Without the soft murmuring of neighbours or the distant sound of engines starting, my little corner of East Berlin feels abandoned.

“Weise! Where are you?” I call. I think the name suits her and it means to be wise. She leaps off the ivy-covered brick wall and struts towards me as though she does not have a care in the world. Then she abruptly turns around. Weise swishes her puffy tail as she trots ahead. Every now and then, she turns back to meow in my direction. It is as though she wants me to follow her.

Without anything to do for the day, I follow Weise. The feline and I stroll casually through the streets of Berlin. Walking through Schönhauser Allee, the five-story buildings loom above us, casting

shadows across the street. It is quiet and calm except for the Barkas B 1000s passing by. I know the type of car because Mutti and Papa keep whispering in hushed voices about how there are more Barkas B 1000s patrolling the area near the wall.

Since Papa works throughout the day and Mutti is busy with her own things, nobody notices when I am gone for hours. I do this because it is more fun than sitting at home on weekends, listening to Mutti hum to herself while cleaning.

For most of the day, we aimlessly wander through the streets of Berlin, comfortable together. But by evening, we are swept into the bustling crowds, unable to break free and head home. The setting sun drifts towards the horizon, painting the sky pink, purple, and dark blue, making it impossible to look away.

The tension in the air makes my heart race. In a way, the crowds are a total telltale sign that something is up. Even though we have no idea where we are going, we can hear a commotion up ahead. Weise weaves in and out of legs, earning annoyed groans from nearby people.

Before long, we are swallowed by the noisy crowds. Familiar faces like Frau Schröder, Dirk, and Kerstin bob through the crowd, but adults block my way whenever I try to reach them.

When Weise disappears, probably after being in the wrong place at the wrong time, I feel no reason to stay. It is late, and Papa will probably come home soon. I take every opportunity I get to be with him.

On my way back, halfway through the journey, cheers erupt near Bornholmer Straße, stopping me dead in my tracks. Though my

parents try to keep information from me, I know that if there is cheering near a checkpoint that is heavily guarded, something is happening.

Racing back home, I notice more people also becoming aware of the commotion, poking their heads out of windows.

Knocking on my front door, which has Müller written across the middle, I breathe raggedly. It is eight o'clock, and when Mutti opens the door, I stumble inside.

"What is happening, and why are there so many people around the wall?" I ask, panting rapidly.

Nobody answers me. Everyone is staring at the boxy television with its crooked antenna. I see Günter Schabowski holding a press conference, sitting calmly and formally, but glancing down every now and then to look at what he plans to say.

"He is announcing a new temporary travel regulation to allow GDR citizens to apply for travel permits to the West," Papa stated, unusually formal. Without turning around to face my family, I catch one interviewer asking when this will be put into action, and Schabowski replies,

"Ab sofort, unverzüglich — there's no time to waste."

At first, I don't understand what has happened. It doesn't make sense. Why is this so important that they have to put it on TV? I think he holds conferences often because of the protests, but those are never shown on TV. Also, what does it mean to let GDR citizens apply for travel permits?

Scanning through my memories of conversations that I wasn't meant to hear so that I can understand what it means, one stands out in particular.

It was last Tuesday, early in the morning, and Mutti and Papa were talking. For the first bit, I couldn't hear them, but I did catch a few sentences.

"I have heard rumours that soon, some citizens can apply for travel permits and go to the West!" Papa declares, buzzing with excitement.

"Shush. People can hear. But I hope the person you heard it from isn't lying," Mutti says.

That is why it is on TV! Travel permits allow East Berliners to go to the West! Nobody in the room moves. Even the dripping of the tap sounds loud.

They are finally going to open the border.

That is the wall that separates East and West. The wall that separates families, relationships, and our family. Joy rushes through me. Halved families can reconnect. Split-up friends can reunite. Oma and Annamarie can see each other again!

"Oma! You can see Annamarie again. After thirty years!" I cry.

At first, surprise is the only thing on her face, but then a smile appears. It is like she is enveloped in happiness.

Glancing around the room, I see Mutti and Papa hugging each other with more emotion than I have seen in a long time, and Oma is weeping, as though she has kept her feelings locked up inside for more than a decade. Gazing back toward the TV, which

is no longer showing the interview but crowds of celebrating people. I gasp as I see the outline of a familiar black cat slinking across the wall before suddenly dropping to the west side.

At that moment, I am filled with hope for my cat and for my family.