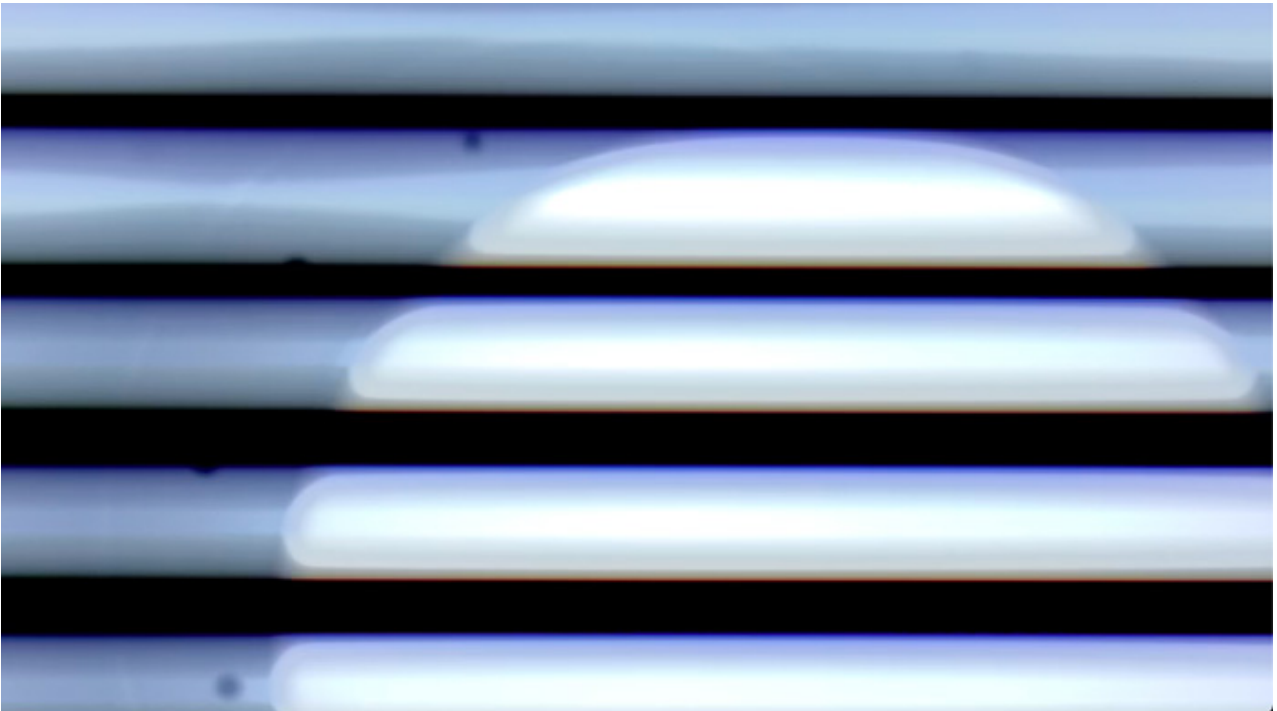


SHORT STORY

Wälderstraße

by Wambui Waldhauser



"Behind My Eyes" by Megan Markham

If I am to tell you about the murder, I will have to tell you about the black wedding, because no matter what everyone purports and pretends to believe, I know that the murderer was here to attend that wedding. Everyone on Waelderstraße from house number 1 to house number 13 had been invited. Well, that is everyone besides old Limburger who lived in house number 11c, right next to the Walders and directly opposite us. What a thing to do! Invite a whole street and not invite an old, lonely man! To be fair, old Limburger was not present when we all received an oral invitation to the wedding, on New Year's Eve. We were gathered on the hill that rises up the Knie-Weg and were going to light up fireworks and watch others explode above the town that lay below us. It is a beautiful view from up there. I remember sitting there in my teenage years, playing at being grown up with boys, stealing kisses and smoking cigarettes in hiding. The Eastern Bloc boys would bring back cigarettes in cartons from summer holidays spent in their communist countries. Despite the indecipherable languages on the cigarette packets — Romanian, Croatian or one of the Slavic ones, I could never tell which was which — the cigarettes tasted quite decent. I endured disgusting kisses from those Easterners for a few packs, up on that hill behind the wild elderberry bushes.

Everyone brought their fireworks and the young men arranged them in a potluck. There was alcohol too and a lot of it. The Vögels had made mulled wine by the gallon, trying to impress everyone. They had recently moved here from Germany, surely for the better pay on this side of the border. If it is not the Swiss driving in to take advantage of the lowered prices in Vorarlberg, it is the Germans coming to take the best jobs for better pay, like all the other foreigners. The new European open borders are simply scandalous! The Vögels are both doctors and even with lesser pay in their home country, they are still much better off financially than the rest of us. Greed! They bought the house perched right above the hilly stretch, with the best view of the town down below. On this night, we were all gathered right below their garden.

Just before the countdown, when our senses were slowed by copious amounts of drink, a group of the younger women screamed and formed Os with their mouths, as the bride-to-be flashed her newly ringed finger. I do not know how they do it where she comes from, she is black you know, but it is customary to wait a few weeks, months even, before announcing a wedding. Of course, I knew that Philipp Walder asked her to marry him right before Christmas. When exactly did they settle on a wedding date, between a Christmas full of Walders coming home from all over, and New Year's Eve? If you ask me, she planned it all, and Philipp was a mere actor in a production she was directing. A little drunk perhaps, Philipp invited everyone there and then to their wedding. We laughed and congratulated him of course, but we all understood that is the thing you have to say after such an

announcement. You are all invited! Two weeks later, each of us found an elegant wedding invitation in our letterboxes. The Walders do not spare any expenses in such matters. Elisabeth Walder is very particular. The invitations were on the best of vellum, embossed and edged with gold. Old Limburger could not be bothered to attend such things as neighbourhood New Year celebrations, but still, to invite everyone and leave him out! I knew the black one was trouble, the first time I saw her directing the window cleaners in the Walder house like she owned the place. If I stand in a particular way at the back window up in my attic, I can see the whole Walder place. The things I could tell! She has put a spell on dear Elisabeth Walder, though Elisabeth was never the strongest of characters. It is a good thing, a lucky thing, that she had her good looks to fall back on. We had all envied her back then, for getting married to the Walders. The things I could tell!

My sister has wondered what Philipp sees in such a woman. A young man of brilliant talent from such a good Austrian family could have had any girl. The disappointment his mother must feel! Elisabeth Walder will not say an untoward word though, she is far too well brought up for that. She bats her eyes and says “I have never seen my Philipp so happy!”, and I smile and say how lucky she is to see her children happy. Not that I would know, but I do have nieces and nephews whom I dearly love. She smiles like she knows something that I do not.

I tried to ask Elisabeth about her future daughter-in-law’s family. I told her how beautiful the younger woman was, that glowing, dark skin and one like her to be so educated! She wouldn’t say much, would not let herself be drawn into a conversation. I tried with her dearest friend too, and as though sworn to secrecy, she too could not be charmed or tricked into giving anything out. The black girl has cast a spell on them all! It is clear though, that she comes from a good family, whatever that means down there where she comes from. I heard that her parents are teachers, and that she has a brother studying in London. What she came to look for here then, no one knows. I tried to make conversation that evening on New Year’s Eve after congratulating her on her betrothal.

“And where do you come from, originally?” I asked her.

“From Kenya,” she said. I could see she was looking past my shoulder, perhaps for someone she deemed better than I, to talk to.

“Ah, my husband and I once went to Namibia on a holiday way back in our youth,” I said brightly, trying to hold her attention.

“I see. You know, Namibia is thousands of miles away from Kenya,” she said. Was that irritation in her voice? The gall!

“Is it? We simply loved the continent and the exotic culture. My husband especially loves Africa. We financially support an orphanage in Mali. Isn’t it awful what is happening there?” She simply stared at me, then as if in afterthought said, “Yes, it is,” and moved away without so much as an excuse. Now, I am a very open-minded person, but theirs is simply a different culture. What manners!

A few days prior to the wedding, her family — a group of three men and four women — arrived from Africa. They arrived on a Tuesday morning, driven by Phillip in the family company’s van. After I watched them lag in their oversized luggage, I did not see them come out of the house for the rest of the day. When the postman came the following day, I offered to help him deliver a package to the Walders. The Polish cleaning woman opened the door and I simply walked in. There was no use talking to her. Even after living here for ten years, she has still not found it necessary to learn our language and assimilate herself. I found them all in the dining room seated at the table. The breakfast spread was still there, though it seemed that no one was eating. I said my hellos and welcomed them in Vorarlberg. They spoke English, an English I could not seem to understand, and so our conversation was reduced to wide-toothed smiles and wild hand gestures. I learnt from the bride-to-be that her parents were among the group, and the rest were uncles and aunts. They were all around my age except one younger couple. The young man was quite loud in his foreign gibberish and if you ask me, behaved in a manner to suggest that he thought himself quite important. I was informed that they had planned an outing that day and were in fact on their way out, though surely no one seemed dressed for it. I had no choice but to say my goodbyes and wish them a lovely time in Austria.

That evening was the first night that I witnessed the strange happenings that led up to the murder. I had earlier observed the Africans come back from their outing. Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary and after they were inside, I did not see any of them come out again. However, before I went to bed, I fancied another look, for you never know when strange things might happen. I put on my robe and climbed the stairs to the attic as I did most nights. It was a clear night and the moon hung low, almost touching the tips of the mountains. All was quiet and dark in the Walder compound. I was just about to let the curtain fall back and close the window, when on the street side of the Walder fence, a movement caught my eye. I tried to take a closer look and was about to dismiss it as the movement of a small animal or a trick of the eye, when I recognised the figure of a man crouching in the shadows. I watched him move down the street, crouched and keeping to the unlit areas, then dashing across the street to disappear in the woods on old Limburger’s land. On the quick dash across the street, for a split second, the figure appeared in the half light of the moon. He seemed to be wearing

a black bodysuit, sheathed from head to toe. His face though — or was it a face mask? — appeared to have white streaks across it, much like primitive tribes paint on themselves before battle. I spent the rest of that night in bed wide awake, alternating between fright and doubt. Going out was out of the question and calling anyone at that time of the night would not only be foolish, but rude. I did write my sister a text that she did not read. I called her the next day at half past six in the morning, as I could not contain myself any longer.

My sister upon hearing what I had to say, bless her heart, came immediately. She brought with her bread rolls from Café Huelmer. Ingrid Huelmer had said the queerest thing to her while wrapping up the bread. In her advanced age and her husband gone these past ten years, she hardly gets any sleep at night. I have observed for the past year or two how life has slowly evaporated from her. She has grown even more sour as she has aged, and she says the obscenest things to her customers. I hear she only greets the old Stammkunden, those potbellied, greying men that sit from dawn till evening in her Café sipping beer and cheap spritzers. If you are a new face, she will barely look at you and will serve you with seeming reluctance. Ingrid told my sister that morning, that someone had been running round and round her house, at first scratching the windows then throwing what sounded like pebbles at them. She had looked outside her window and had only seen a retreating shadow. She ended up calling the police who were dismissive and condescending, advising her to drink some milk and try to sleep! I only fleetingly considered the odd chance that what Ingrid had said was connected to what I had seen, but only a mad woman could have given it further thought. Well, I did give it more thought though a few days later on the morning of the wedding, as ambulances, screaming police cars and the bridal limousines jostled for space on our narrow street.

Despite my sister gently chiding me about making mountains out of molehills before leaving that day, I had the most convincing feeling that the figure of a man would be slinking around again that night. I waited for nightfall almost with eager anticipation. Promptly, an hour before midnight, I was seated in the attic, two cups of hot tea in the thermos at my feet and a warm shawl on my shoulders. Again, all was quiet in the Walder home, and I watched as the last lights went off behind the large windows. I was quite sleepy from staying awake the previous night, and perhaps also from my nerves the whole day, that at one point I was afraid I had dozed off and missed something. I was almost giving up an hour later, when I saw something move in the woods. It was the same figure in what I thought was a very fitting all body suit. The moon was much lower on this night and some of its light shone weakly under the dark branches in old Limburger's woods. This time, I had my binoculars ready. They do not have a night light, but are still better than the naked eye. I quickly turned to lift them to my eyes and quite forgot that I was too close to the window, my face almost pressed to the

glass. The tip of the binoculars banged on the window glass in a loud clang that seemed to reverberate through the whole neighbourhood. I frightened myself so badly that I kicked the flask at my feet, sending it rolling on the wooden floor until it was stopped by something invisible in the dark room. The sound must have been quite loud, for when I eventually placed the binoculars back on my eyes, I was just in time to see a figure struggling to get up from what I assumed was a frightened fall, partly hidden by trees and brushes. He darted from tree to tree with what seemed like a limp, as if he knew that someone was watching him. Once, I even doubted whether what I was looking at was a man or mere shadows swaying in the night breeze. It seemed he was following the little stream that flowed down the street. Perhaps I would go down to Café Huelmer myself tomorrow, and see if anything queer had been seen or heard.

I told my sister of course, of my latest adventures, but I only earned an admonition from her. It was the Friday before the wedding and there was quite some activity going on in the Walder compound. After the church ceremony barely a kilometre from their home, the reception would be held in the large Walder garden. There were trucks parked in their driveway and as early as seven in the morning, men and women could be seen hurrying back and forth, preparing for the celebrations the next day. I had spoken to quite a number of our neighbours and it seemed everyone who was invited to the wedding was attending. There are some invitations that simply cannot be turned down. I suspect too, that everyone, just like me, was curious about what an exotic wedding consisted of. Elisabeth Walder had done most of the planning of course, but the black woman's people had come to attend the wedding all the way from Africa, so we were hoping to have a little exotic show at least.

I was very much bothered by what I had seen the previous nights. No one seemed very much interested in what I had to say. When I mentioned that the person I had seen seemed 'all black', they seemed to lose any interest. I confess, that business last summer with the Yugo boy was unfortunate. But how was I to know, upon seeing him climbing onto the Vögels balcony, that he was not a burglar, but a visiting relative of the Vögels who was trying to get to some forgotten house keys? He also did not look as young as I later learnt he was. You can never tell age with foreigners; their children lose their innocence before they outgrow the playground. I was being a good neighbour by calling the police. Such a small thing, and one is branded *Fremdenfeindlich!* I have no problem with foreigners, but we all agree that one needs to be observant these days. And that episode with the begging Romas is hardly worth mentioning. I know that I do speak a lot, sometimes perhaps too much, but this was something entirely different. I was quite pained that even old Limburger had held his door only slightly open, when I went to tell him that I had seen an intruder on his lands on two consecutive nights.

“A black figure from head to toe. Must have been wearing one of those body con things...” I said. His milky grey eyes glazed over.

“It must sound wild, but two nights now I have seen him,” I said, and waited for a reaction from him.

He hrrmmphd as if clearing his throat, then watched the woods behind me down the slope.

“If you had a gun, I would tell you to shoot at sight,” he said, still not looking at me.

I threw my head back and laughed and I could hear my own laughter end in a shrill even as he turned his head, for the first time since I had rung his doorbell, to look into my face. Old Limburger had never been a people’s person. After his wife died, he became even less so and the last few months, no one I knew had talked to him. He hated people and he did not care to hide it. After the Vögels had moved here from Germany, no one had cared enough to warn them about their new neighbour. On their first winter they had shovelled snow and pushed it minimally into his land. There was nowhere for them to put it, other than physically carrying it to the bottom of their snow-laden garden, a short but treacherous journey since the whole garden is a slope. Old Limburger had rung their doorbell in the evening while they were at the dinner table having their Abendbrot. They had to borrow a wheelbarrow and shovel the mountain of snow into it and carry it all the way to the bottom of their garden, in a number of trips. He had loved his wife though. In his own way he had loved her though he had treated her like dirt, but woe unto the person who ever dared breathe a mean word towards her. He would go after them like a caveman. He now looked at me, his colouring sallow, the eyes hollowed and almost unseeing. He was a pitiful, old man not long for this world. Even now, there was contempt and disdain in his eyes. How dare I ring his bell uninvited? And for something as trivial as an intruder, in the middle of the night, on his lands? He once called me to my face the ‘Wann und Wo’ of Wälderstrasse, that local rag of a paper that only writes gossip. I should never have forgotten. I excused myself and wished him a good day.

On the afternoon before the wedding, I was almost dying with curiosity and so I rang the Walders’ bell and asked whether there was anything I could be of assistance with. It was Philipp who met me in the large dining room and pointed outside through the large glass doors, to where the African party was seated, being entertained by one of the older Walders. I hesitated before joining them, weary of the little English I had learned in school being taxed again. My curiosity eventually winning, I decided to exchange a simple greeting with everyone. I observed them carefully and duly noted that the young African man, as he went to pour himself a drink in the shade, was favouring one of his legs. A thought entered my mind but I filed it away as quickly as it came. Some things, even for me, are quite beyond reaching.

That night, I was not quite sure I wanted to stand by the window in the attic. I was slowly beginning to doubt my mind. Perhaps as my sister had advised, it was time for me to pack and join her in our late parents' home. I lay in bed and was pleased when presently, my eyes grew drowsy. If I fell asleep, the decision to watch the Walders and the woods would be taken out of my hands. Something woke me up though. I found myself wide awake, my head so clear of sleep that I had to roll over and check the time on the bedside clock. The clock said exactly ten minutes before midnight. I got up, put on my bathrobe and without haste, took the stairs to the attic. Although the moon was not visible in the sky, the night was ghostly bright. One of those nights whose late hour might be mistaken for the breaking of dawn, as grey clouds allow pale yellow moonlight to filter through. I ignored my binoculars and sat leaning on the window. I was still feeling quite foolish for telling it all to my sister and to that old grump opposite the street. I was staring out into the quiet night, caught in a carousel of thoughts when I saw the exact moment that all the lights in old Limburger's house went on, including the flood lights all around the garden. And there he was, a black man, stark naked, doing what looked like a wild dance, gyrating and jumping around the house. He only stopped momentarily when the lights came on, then dashed away from the bright front of the house so fast that, had I not clearly seen him do it, I could easily have believed it was my imagination. Within the blink of an eye, he was on the other, darker side of the house and he continued with his wild dance. He would momentarily stop to scoop gravel or soil from the ground and hurl it towards the house. The front door opened and I partly saw old Limburger silhouetted in the doorway, for there was a pear tree in his garden that was blocking my vision. All stopped and was quiet, until he closed the door and turned off the lights. I then heard what must have been soil, hitting the glass window. I could also distantly hear choking, guttural sounds, like those made by an animal, though I could not see the black man anymore. The light had either blinded my eyes, or the black man was keeping to the one side of the house that I could not see. It all stopped as suddenly as it had begun. I could hear nothing, nor see anything. The Limburger house remained dark and silent. After staring into the darkness for a long while, I slowly went back to my bed, half convinced that I was certifiably out of my mind.

I had been up for close to an hour on the following morning, when the sound of approaching sirens drew me to the kitchen window. Old Limburger had been discovered dead by the young Polish male nurse that visited him every other day. The nurse had discovered the old man lying in his hallway, just inside the front door. They said he had a heart attack so sudden and so severe, that the organ had been blown to smithereens. They insisted the door was still locked from the inside when the Polish nurse forced his way in. I told them it was murder and that I was a witness. They took me down with them to the police station, although I kept

telling them I could identify the black murderer, and that he was right next door. I relayed everything that I had seen all week. They wrote it all down and promised to be in touch with me. No arrest was made. I later learnt that they questioned a few neighbours, more about me and my state of mind than about the murder and the recent nightly affairs on Walderstrasse.

I missed the church service and attended the wedding reception. By the time everyone was standing around the ornate tall tables, clutching their glasses of champagne and waiting for the wedding lunch to commence, it seemed they all knew about old Limburger's death and more than that, they knew that I had said something to the police about it. I could see them whispering behind napkins held surreptitiously in front of their mouths. The bride's family looked like a pack of peacocks, their printed ethnic clothes big and loud. I saw him in that group of glaring colours and loud laughter, trying to laugh with them but every now and then, his laughter ending with a quick search of the faces beyond the group, as if waiting to be sprung upon. I sipped from my glass and said to no one in particular, for everyone I had tried to speak to had quickly pretended they had somewhere else they urgently needed to be, "Naked, dancing murderer". Our eyes met and he looked away then looked back at me, before being engaged in conversation by someone. I took another sip, the bubbles deliciously dancing in my mouth. The next day, the bride's family was gone. Perhaps it was time for me to move in with my sister, in our deceased parents' home.