



END OF THE AFFAIR
(FRAGMENTS FROM A SEASON)
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Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor is an author and world pilgrim (some family members prefer the word “vagabond”) from Nairobi, Kenya, a city with which she has a troubling relationship. The muses seduced her on her way to gainful corporate employment circa 2003, when they gave her a prize for a story she wrote. She believed their vague promises of easy and unceasing story flow. That is how she ended up toiling pitifully at the furnace of the imagination, daily lighting incense and offering burnt sacrifices to secure from them a mere word. She has a few essays, short stories and speeches circumnavigating the globe. Two and a half of her novels have been published: *Weight of Whispers* (2003) *Dust* (2014) and *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019). She is creating another with the working title “The Long Decay”. Her parents sold their bodies and souls to secure a very, very good education for her and her siblings. For this she is eternally grateful. Her parents had hoped she would be the owner of a Fortune 500 company by now, having paid Fortune 500 rates to raise her. – Address: Yvonne Owuor, Box 52224, 00200 Nairobi, Kenya.
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First Bookend

The intent: to seriously, determinedly, unequivocally write and complete a 100,000-word manuscript for a new novel with the working title “The Long Decay”. And wondering, vaguely, who the other souls who will be on board the ship will be. And if the food will be good. And what the Berlin winter – given a bad rap – will offer to a person who is, to all extents and purposes, a Tropicana.

What happened?

Since you ask.

Crime scene: The Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. The entire Wallotstraße.

Primary Criminals: The cohort of 2018–19.

Instigators: Look up the Wiko site. Study the faces of Wiko Staff. All of them.

Crime: Tumbling into one other's hearts.

Accessory to the crime: Berlin.

Accomplice: Grunewald and Bus M19.

Victim: All pre-arrival intentions, presumptions, assumptions, resolutions and their deadlines.

What happened?

Among other things – there is a German word for this – *Gemütlichkeit*. (There is no English equivalent to it that does not seep into the maudlin – anyway – look it up.)

Consequences: Varied. Career changes. Project changes. Human changes. Story changes. Loyalty to place of birth changes. And when the dawn comes in the place to which a person returns after the season in Berlin, a temptation to sing the blues in a long, nostalgic lament, like a heartsick wolf moaning at the once-in-a-lifetime blue moon.

Also, dreams. Sometimes, the soul, released by sleep, traverses worlds to return to the crime scene to look for the red fox that sometimes traverses the Grunewald lakes. Sometimes the soul enters the buildings to knock at doors that it had known; it imagines that the familiar voices that still resonate within it will sound again.

How do you know you have been changed?

Just. Go. Home.

Then.

Look back.

Visions of a time.

Longing. And then, soon after, surprise that there was such a place, that there was such a time, that there were such a people in Grunewald, Berlin. That it happened. That you were there. That indeed, it was a nine-month session. That there were such souls, such minds, such lifes that crossed with your own, that you dared to call so many “friend”.

Part One (sort of).

As noted earlier, I walked in with a carefully planned scheduled, an outline of absolute ideas, a road map. I knew with the certainty of self-experiencing that by March 22, 2019 I would have a full new manuscript to send to my agent. That was two nights before I took the plane from a chilly Nairobi to land in a city I was not entirely aware of. Intended German lessons necessitated an earlier arrival. The idea, of course, was to acquire enough so that the world in which I would frolic for a bit would not be so obscure to me. One should have expected that the language that delivered the Brothers Grimm and the worlds they revealed would deliver a plot twist.

But first, about the Brothers Grimm:

On the very first day of my arrival, I locked myself out of the room (to the newbies: the doors know when you have left the key in the room. They watch you. They monitor the whereabouts of the key. Once they are certain you do not have them, they summon a sneaking wind to shut them inside and you outside). So I had locked myself out of the room and then, out of the house. Barefoot, in the summeriest of shorts and a tank top. I clung to the walls heading towards the main house at Wallotstraße 19. Peering through windows. But fortunately, a most distinguished looking personage stepped out of the main door. In mild shame, I said, “I have locked myself out of house and room; could you help me?” His name: Professor Dieter Grimm. Soon after, after he so very kindly gazed very gently amused, he secured the contact of the most patient human being in Berlin, the other Mr. Grimm. I know. I know. But this was merely a precursor to assorted strangenesses that today, make me start with surprise, make me still ask, what illicit vegetable was I smoking?

German Lessons.

What was intended as a dip in the shallows has turned out to be an immersion into deeper waters. For a person for whom the mystery of maths failed to reveal its secrets, to derive pleasure in this language because it “feels like an equation, a pleasure puzzle” (yes, me. I actually said that. I am still reeling) was the oddest sensation. It still is.

But there it is.

Ich lerne jetzt Deutsch.

Für mich. Für die Bücher, die ich gerne lese.

Was ist mit der Sprache? I did not expect to acquire yet another unexpected relationship. I did not expect to realise here that language is alchemy. That you do not walk into a language and expect to remain the same. To announce with the fire in your heart: I will return to enter the bones of this tongue in order to feel it properly on my skin. *Ich lerne das für mich selbst (und zwar für Berlin).*

Still,

What the season of imagining in Berlin brought.

Life in unexpected ways.

Passion.

For a city.

(This is a cautionary tale.)

I thought by now the fever for the ghosts of Berlin would have subsided, imagined that the phantoms of the city of my love-hate, Nairobi, would have devoured these, too, and restored me to her wicked bosom. But no, at least not yet. (Beware, new occupant of the Grunewald secret place, beware of Berlin. She is sly in her seduction. Pretends to be non-descript and benign. Aloof even. But she has a plan. She seeps into bones, the marrow, the blood. And one day, to your surprise, your head will swivel 360 degrees like the possessed in *Rosemary's Baby* in order to cuss out (politely) three English persons on a plane to the United States who have presumed to *criticise* Berlin and *denigrate* (yes, it is awful, but still ...) Tegel.

And you will drip sarcasm. They will stare at you at first in bemusement, then confusion, then pure fear. And you hear your voice using words like "charming, compact, intimate, accessible, unpretentious, distinct in the world" about Tegel, Berlin. And you are convinced that you are right. (It could be the water.) Now, listen, that is one of the symptoms of a city that has burrowed itself into your soul so that it gives itself permission to take over aspects of your dreams. It does not care about your creed or race or your politics. (You have not been warned.)

What else ...

[The sense of the loss of the community of souls encountered and delighted in during the stint at Wiko is still far too raw (in the time of the writing of this report). It is not possible

to write about them, include them here without feeling the tearing of portions of the heart. Suffice it to say, nothing of the experience would have made any sense, would have meant anything without those who gathered, who appeared, who conversed and debated and discussed and imagined, and listened with such openness, such tenderness, such kindness and launched adventures from the Autumn farewell to migrating cranes, or past midnight dips into cold lakes after squeezing through a fence. Concerts in the park, and the once-a-month Thursday dance party. Berlin would not have swooped upon and gathered this person to her seductive shadows if it had not been for these, the fellow experiencers. (Oh yes, there were also some rigorous and vigorous intellectual pursuits happening. Seriously. Honest. Sometimes.)

The book-in-progress (The Long Decay): a status update

It acquired its spirit and soul in Berlin. It found the characters and voices it needed from among the Fellows. Naturally, all similarities to persons living or dead will be denied when it comes out. Only half of it got done. But in the process, another book that had been stuck in the imaginative ethers came tumbling forth, aided and abetted by the formidable, the daring, the extraordinary sniper team of The Librarians. [Small anecdote here; in the orientation session, they said “Challenge us. We relish a challenge. Dare us.” I was confident. I was bold. I was certain. My trump card was an Africa-connected challenge. I knew they would flounder. I suspected that they would raise a white flag. It was with glee that I made the request that had stumped other venerable institutions and libraries: *Any references and materials connecting ancient Zar rituals and practice to Eastern African coffee culture, including samples of rites.*

It took the library team just three days to fill my inbox with the results. It was I who took myself to the Library to kowtow in respect and offer my white flag. To the new arrivals; I envy you your experience with this team. The magical sense of wish-receive, wish-receive. (Do let me know in confidence if you find evidence that they are not escaped genies. I have my suspicions.) Well the book, *The Coffee Mistress*, erupted to compete with *The Long Decay* for imagination space. As a consequence, I had the delightful, unexpected and guilty (infidelity to the other muse) experience of finally beginning it. It seemed to feed off the shadows of Berlin in order to acquire the voice it had sought but not found in seven years.

Berlin

(or what I really want to talk about to you).

Confession:

I return often to this city in my sleep. I traverse its streets again as I snore in my Nairobi bed. When I am not walking, I am aboard the M19. Sometimes it becomes the S7. I step off the bus to stoop over the city's Stumbling Stones, reading names I remember seeing. I sit next to its icons, eavesdropping on old memories, mine now included. I sit on its benches. I watch the faces of its souls in the autumn light. I know some of its contradictions, its paradoxes, its venality, its beauty, its ceaseless self-reckoning. I am still confused by its persistent beckon. This city that is not my own. And yet I long often for the stories that I tell only when I am close to her. They have faded from me. I cannot hear their voice where I am.

Wiko, all its people (I am being careful about not singling out anyone, calling each by longed for name); the 2018–19 Fellows, Grunewald (its foxes and boars and squirrels – oh my!), the City. The Germanies elsewhere ...

Gratitude.

What a season.

What a gift.

I have not said goodbye.

That is not possible.

That is impossible.

Bookend.

An outcome (after nine months that feel that they were one long day broken into morning, noon, night, midnight and dawn).

A cliché.

Looking out the window at the Nairobi August rain, its chill.

Sighing (as a bad actress in a melodrama might).

For a memory, a time and a street called Kurfürstendamm. For the shape of Thursday evenings. There is a German word for what is happening (there is always a German word for what you are feeling): *Sehnsucht*. (Learn it, dear newcomer. You will most probably need to settle into it.)