

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/1

Misak Workneh

EVERYDAY PEOPLE

The Friday everything shifted was like any other. I was sitting on a corner bench at Soka, my usual haunt, where the chairs squeak like old bones and the music is always a decade behind the global charts. The place was nearly empty except for a young woman with her face buried in her phone, cycling through TikTok clips that clashed with the old R&B overhead.

Her hair was tied up, exposing the nape of her neck. I looked longer than I meant to. She noticed, turned, met my eyes, and frowned.

Fair enough.

I checked my watch. 4:30 p.m. Too early to smoke indoors. Nicotine worked at my ribs like a small animal.

Then Marqos walked in.

He moved with the careful, top-heavy gait of a man newly aware of his gut. His eyes were small and quick, always scanning. A baseball cap sat low on his shiny, balding head. He looked like an angry pigeon. I noticed the sharp crease in his charcoal cargo pants. The man ironed his cargo pants. He always had. Meticulous to the point of vanity. We'd been folded into each other's lives for seven years. He was ambient companionship. Persistent. Familiar.

"Yo, what up my nigga," he said, extending his hand.

"What up."

"Good, good." He wasn't good. His hand kept patting the pocket for his phone. It was always one of three things—his girlfriend, Arsenal, or work.

"Did you watch the Arsenal game?"

"Yeah. Nice one," I lied. "You want to smoke?"

"Oh yes."

Downstairs, the toilets smelled like something that had died twice. There was no light. only a table and two high chairs. I bent over the standing table, lit a Nyala, handed him one.

"She called earlier," he said. "Now she's not answering. I think she's with him."

He dragged hard. His cheeks hollowed.

"How do you know?"

"I feel it in my gut."

"That gut's been wrong before."

"This is different."

We smoked in silence. I'd learned early that silence could be useful. As

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a child, it had been my only real possession.

I grew up with books because there was nothing else. No internet. No games. One television channel that started broadcasting at six in the evening. I read on the floor. I read in the kitchen until my mother's cooking fogged the windows. Reading was a way of staying still while going somewhere else. It trained me to watch without intervening.

The ladies' room door opened.

"Hey, Medussa," I called.

She giggled. "I told you to stop calling me that."

She hugged me—warm, firm—and I kept a hand on her lower back maybe one second longer than polite. The air between us seemed to thicken. I could smell the faint, clean scent of her soap, a scent that was suddenly more important than the nicotine in my lungs. She sat and plucked out a cigarette from her purse. She kneaded it gently between her thumb and index finger.

I pulled out a lighter. I sparked it.

She lit the cigarette, crossed her legs elegantly.

"You know," she said, "you can be a nice guy."

"I am a nice guy."

"You just play at being an asshole."

"Well," I said, "assholes get things done."

She winked, finished her cigarette, then headed upstairs.

"She's into you," Marqos said.

"Drop it."

He smiled. He liked getting reactions.

Upstairs, the place filled. Mike the Mulato arrived with an old German man—upright, loud, carrying himself like someone who once issued orders and expected them obeyed.

"Tena yistilign," the old man said. Great. One of those foreigners who learns three Amharic phrases and uses them like badges of honor.

They sat. The German is boisterous and loud.

They spoke in German, then English. I let the conversation pass around me. I gripped the beer tightly. There were three of them now. I picked up my phone and opened a new document. I wrote three sentences before I was tapped out. The faucet was dry. A line rose unbidden from memory: I whispered it. "There's nothing to writing. You just have to sit down and bleed."

"Hemingway," the German said, turning.

"But bleeding is difficult."

"You need something worth bleeding for."

"And a blood"

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He laughed, gravelly, denture-heavy. I looked away. The place was filling up. A couple leaned into each other in the corner. A group of men laughed too loud, already tipping toward drunk. The woman with the TikTok videos was gone. I wonder what her name was.

The old man suddenly exclaimed.

"There is always something. If you have nothing, invent something. If you cannot invent, observe.

If you cannot observe, then you are blind—but still, blindness is something to write about."

He leaned closer.

"Are you a writer?"

"I try to be."

"There is no trying," he said, frowning. "Only doing."

Before I could reply, he pointed at my smartphone.

"You have a world inside that. No excuses. You write. I'm only in town for the week. Send me something before I leave."

He slid a card under my beer bottle. It was a heavy cardstock, almost as if it were made out of wood.

Dietrich Müller

Prosa Herausgeber

HanserLiteraturverlage



When he left, the bar felt emptier—like he'd taken all the air with him. Mike confirmed his

identity: an editor, a stubborn one, currently house-hunting.

I stared at the card. It seemed too improbable, too cinematic. Was it fate? Or just another old man

The music changed.

I am everyday people...

The night slipped into memory.



"Send me something. Before I leave town."

A week.

Tuesday, a quivering Marqos showed up at my apartment vibrating.

"I need a thousand," he said.

"For what?"

"To know."

"You already know."

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"I need proof."

I shook my head. "I don't have it."

He looked at me for a long moment, then nodded as if confirming a private suspicion. He left without another word.



Wednesday, I went back to Soka. Medussa was there, sitting alone. No TikTok. No noise. Just her, nursing a Bedele beer. A paper back laid face down on her lap. She sat with her legs crossed. Her black dress was simple. It was a good dress. She was calm, and the air around her felt thin.

"You read here?" I asked.

"When it's quiet enough."

"That's rare."

"So is honesty."

She didn't look at me when she said it.

"You ever write?" she asked.

"I think about it."

She smiled faintly. "That's what readers say."

We sat in that for a while.

"Come outside,".

I stayed seated. My feet were planted on the floor.

"You're very good at not crossing lines."

"Someone has to be."

"Maybe," she said. "Or maybe someone has to choose one."

She stood, left the book behind by accident—or on purpose. I didn't follow her. I didn't call out.



Two days later, Marqos disappeared. No calls. No messages. Just absence.

.A week passed before I picked up the German's card again. I punched in his number on WhatsApp.

Deleted it. Typed it again. Deleted it. The third time, I let the words remain:

Dear Mr. Müller,

We met at Soka. You told me to write. So...I'm writing. I don't know what comes next. But I'm trying.

Regards—

You know who.

I hit send.

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An hour later, my phone lighted up. a reply had arrived.

Good. Finally.

Now send me a story.

Any story.

Yours preferably.

I stared at the text. My fingers trembled.



Maybe I have been writing all along, in my head, waiting for permission.

Maybe no one becomes a writer. Maybe you decide to become one.

So, I picked up my phone. I opened a blank document and typed the first line:

I can never recount the exact moment when Marqos and I met.

And for the first time in a long time, the words didn't fight me.

They came willingly – as if they had been waiting.

As if they were relieved.

As if they, too, were everyday people.