



OKTOBER

BY MARTIN AMIS

I sat drinking black tea in the foyer of the hotel. (This was in Munich.) A lady wearing a lustrous purple trouser suit was seated at the keys of the baby grand in the far corner, her rendition of “Hungarian Rhapsody” (with many adornments and curlicues) for now unable to drown out the inarticulate howling and baying from the bar beyond the lifts. It was the time of Oktoberfest, and the city was playing host to six million visitors, thereby quintupling its population—visitors from all over Bavaria, and from all over Germany, and from all over the world. Other visitors, a far smaller contingent, were also expected, visitors who hoped to stay, and to stay indefinitely; they were coming from what was once known as the Fertile Crescent.

“Let’s see if we can make a bit of sense of this,” an itinerant businessman was bleakly saying, bent over his mobile phone two tables away, with clipboard, legal pad, gaping laptop. He spoke in the only language I could understand—English—and his accent derived from northern regions, northern cities (Hull, Leeds, Grimsby). “I should’ve rung two weeks ago. Three. All right, a month ago. But that doesn’t affect the matter at hand, now does it? Believe me, the only thing that’s kept me back’s the prospect of having to... Listen. Are you listening to me? We need to resolve the indemnity clause. Clause 4C.” He sighed. “Have you got the paperwork in front of you at least? Quite honestly, it beats me how you get anything done. I’m a busy man and I’m accustomed to dealing with people who have some idea of what they’re up to. Will you listen? Will you listen?”

The photographer arrived, and after a minute he and I went out into the street. In great numbers, the Oktoberfesters were streaming past, the women in cinched dirndls and wenchy blouses, the men in suède or leather breeches laced just below the knee, tight jackets studded with medals or badges, and jaunty little hats with feathers, rosettes, cockades. On the pavement, Bernhardt erected his tripod and his tilted umbrella, and I prepared myself to enter the usual trance of inanition—forgetting that in this part of Eurasia, at least for now, there was no longer any small talk. But first I said, “What do

they actually do in that park of theirs?”

“In the funfair?” Bernhardt smiled with a touch of skeptical fondness. “A lot of drinking. A lot of eating. And singing. And dancing—if you can call it that. On tabletops.”

“Sort of clumping about?”

“The word is *schunkeln*. They link arms and sway while they sing. From side to side. Thousands of them.”

“*Schunkeln*’s the infinitive, right? How d’you spell that?”

“I’ll write it down for you. Yes, the infinitive.”

Our session began. Broad-shouldered and stubbly but also delicately handsome, Bernhardt was an Iranian-German (his family had come over in the nineteen-fifties); he was also very quick and courteous, and, of course, seamlessly fluent.

“Last week I came by train from Salzburg,” he said as he began wrapping up. “There were eight hundred refugees on board.”

“Eight hundred. And how were they?”

“Very tired. And hungry. And dirty. Some with children, some with old people. They all want to get to this country because they have friends and family here. Germany is trying to be welcoming, trying to be kind, but... I took many photographs. If you like I’ll drop some off for you.”

“Please. I’d be grateful.”

And I remembered that other photograph from the front pages a few days ago. Fifteen or twenty refugees disembarking at a German rail station and being met with applause from sympathetic citizens; in the photograph, some of the arrivals were smiling, some laughing, and some were just breathing deeply and walking that much taller, it seemed, as if something had at last been restored to them.

I shook Bernhardt’s hand and said, “Trying to be kind. When I was in Berlin, the police closed a crossroads in the Tiergarten. Then bikes and a motorcade came through. The Austrian head of state. Faymann. For a little summit with Merkel. Hours later, they announced they were sealing the border.”

“The numbers. The scale.”

“And the day before yesterday I was in Salzburg and there were no trains to Munich. All cancelled. We came here by car.”

“Long wait at the border?”

“Only if you go on the highway. That’s what the driver told us. He took the parallel roads.” I hesitated. “On your train to Munich...”

I felt the impulse to ask Bernhardt if at any point he had found it necessary to disengage himself from the eight hundred. I didn’t ask, but I could have and should have.

Bernhardt said, “You know, they won’t stop coming. They pay large sums of money to risk their lives crossing the sea and then they walk across Europe. They *walk* across Europe. A few policemen and a stretch of barbed wire can’t keep them out. And there are millions more where they came from. This is going to go on for years. And they won’t stop coming.”

It was one-fifty. I had forty minutes. (My book tour was winding down and this was not a busy day.) In the bar, I waited at the steel counter. When Bernhardt asked me how I was bearing up after three weeks on the road in Europe, I said I was well enough, though chronically underslept. Which was true. And actually, Bernhardt, to be even more frank with you, I feel unaccountably anxious, anxious almost to the point of formication (which the dictionary defines as “a sensation like insects crawling over the skin”); it comes and goes. ... Home was four thousand miles away, and six hours behind; pretty soon, it would be quite reasonable, surely, to return yet again to my room and see if there were any fresh bulletins from that quarter. For now, I looked mistrustfully at my phone; in the in-box there were more than eighteen hundred unopened messages, but from wife, from children, as far as I could tell, there was nothing new.

The heroically methodical bartender duly set his course in my direction. I asked for a beer.

“Nonalcoholic. D’you have that?”

“I have one-per-cent alcoholic.”

We were both needing to shout.

“One per cent.”

“Alcohol is everywhere. Even an apple is one-per-cent alcoholic.”

I shrugged. “Go on, then.”

The beer the Oktobrists were drinking by the quart was thirteen per cent, or double strength; this, at any rate, was the claim of the young Thomas Wolfe,

who, after a couple of steins of it, acquired a broken nose, four scalp wounds, and a cerebral hemorrhage in a frenzied brawl, which he started, in some fun-fair mud pit—but that was in 1928. These male celebrants in fancy dress at the bar had been drinking since 9 A.M. (I saw and heard them at breakfast), before setting off for the Theresienwiese, if indeed they ever went there. I saw them and heard them the night before, too; at that point they were either gesticulating and yelling in inhumanly loud voices or else staring at the floor in rigid penitence, their eyes clogged and woe-ful. Then, as now, the barman attended to them all with unconcern, going about his tasks with practiced neutrality.

I was carrying a book: the forthcoming “Letters to Véra,” by Véra’s husband, Vladimir Nabokov. But the voices around me were unrelaxingly shrill—I could concentrate on what I was reading, just about, but I could extract no pleasure from it. So I took my drink back into the foyer, where the pianist, after a break, had resumed. The businessman was still on the phone; as before, we were sitting two tables apart, and back to back. Occasionally I heard snatches (“Have you got any office *method* where you are?”

Have you?”). But now I was slowly and appreciatively turning the pages, listening to that other voice, V.N.’s: humorous, resilient, full of energy. The letters begin in 1923; two years earlier, he sent his mother a short poem, as proof “that my mood is as radiant as ever. If I live to be a hundred, my spirit will still go around in short trousers.”

When January dawned in 1924, Vladimir (a year older than the century) was in Prague, helping his mother and his two younger sisters settle into their cheap and freezing new apartment. (“Jesus, it’s called basic *gumption*. Do you know how you spell that?”) These former boyars were now displaced and deracinated—and had “no money at all.” (“5C? No. Obviously. 4C. 4C, for Christ’s sake.”) Vladimir himself, like his future wife, the *Judin Véra* Slonim, had settled in Berlin, along with almost half a million other Russian fugitives from 1917. And in Berlin the two of them would blithely and stubbornly remain. Their lone child, Dmitri, was born there in 1934. The Nuremberg Laws were passed in September, 1935, and they began to be enforced and expanded after the Berlin Olympics of 1936; but not until 1937 did the Nabokovs hurriedly decamp to

France, after a (seemingly never-ending) struggle with visas and exit permits and Nansen passports.

“I bet you don’t. O.K., here’s an idea. Why don’t you pop on a plane and come and tell them that, here in Germany? With your approach, so-called? They’d laugh you out of town. Because here they happen to understand a thing or two about efficiency. Unlike some. And that’s why they’re the powerhouse of Europe. Because they can handle the ABC and the two times two.”

I put the book aside and briefly reminisced about Angela (with a hard “g”)—Angela Merkel. I was introduced to her (a handshake and an exchange of hellos) by Tony Blair, in 2007, when she was two years into her first term (and I was spending several weeks on and off in the Prime Minister’s entourage). The top floor of the titanic new Chancellery, the full bar arrayed on the table, the (as yet spotless) ashtrays, Angela’s humorous and particularizing smile. The Chancellery was twelve times the size of the White House—where Blair would also squire me, a week or two later, but I had no more than a sudden moment of eye contact with President Bush, as the two of them emerged from the Situation Room. (This was the time of the Surge in Iraq.)

Merkel, raised in East Germany in the early days of the Cold War . . . So far, there have been several dozen female heads of state, and I thought then that she was perhaps the first who was capable of ruling *as a woman*. In the summer months of 2015, in the world’s eyes she became the brutal auditress of the Greek Republic (and the compromiser of its sovereignty, in the name of fiscal rectitude); by late September, they were calling her *Mutti* Merkel, as she opened her gates as wide as she could to the multitudes of the dispossessed.

This is to some extent true of every human community on earth, but the national poet here said of his Germans, with a strain of agony, how impressive they were singly (how balanced, how reflective, how sardonic), and how desperately disappointing they were plurally, in groups, in cadres, in leagues, in blocs. And yet here they all were (for now), the Germans, setting a progressive, even a futuristic example to Europe



“Would you like to try some of our over-the-counter drugs while you wait for your prescription?”

and to the planet (for now), both as a polity and as a people.

With the refugee crisis of 2015, Europe, Chancellor Merkel (commonly referred to as “the Decider”) said, was about to face its “historic test.”

“Will you listen to me? Will you listen to me?”

But, like a washing machine, the businessman had moved on to a quieter cycle. Still tensed, still crouched, but reduced to a sour mutter. The pianist’s shift was apparently at an end, and I was grimacing into a phone myself, fielding supplementary questions from a studious young profelist I had talked to in Frankfurt. Eavesdroppers and those active in identity theft might have been tempted to draw near, but the foyer continued to be more or less empty.

“Nineteen-forty-nine,” I said, “in Oxford. Not Wales—that was later. Yes, go ahead. Why did we move to America? Because . . . it sounds complicated, but it’s an ordinary story. In 2010, my mother, Hilary, died. She was eighty-two. My mother-in-law, the mother of my wife, Elena, was also eighty-two at the time. So in response to that we moved to New York.” Yes, and Elena ended a voluntary exile in London which had lasted twenty-seven years, returning to where she was born and bred (Greenwich Village). “Us now? No. Brooklyn. Since 2011. You get too old for Manhattan.” We made our way to the final question. “This trip? Six countries.” And ten cities. “Oh, definitely. And I’m reading all I can find on it, and everyone’s talking about nothing else. Well, I only met literary types, no politicians, no experts. But of course I have impressions.”

Our call wound up. The businessman was going on in his minatory whisper, “You know who you remind me of? The hordes of ragamuffins who’re piling into this country even as I speak. You, you just can’t stand on your own two feet, can you? You’re helpless.”

An angular youth from the reception desk approached and handed me a foolscap manila envelope. In it were Bernhardt’s photographs. Registering this, I felt the rhythm of my unease slightly accelerate. I moved next door into the restaurant, and I fanned them out on the table.

The Europeans you talked to offered

different views and prescriptions, but the underfeeling seemed to center on an encounter with something, something not quite unknown but known only at a distance. The entity accumulating at the borders, the entity for which they were bracing and were even rousing themselves to greet with good will and good grace, seemed amorphous, undifferentiated, almost insensate—like a force of nature.

And it was as if Bernhardt’s camera had set itself the task of individualization, because here was a black-and-white *galère* of immediately and endearingly recognizable shapes and faces, bantering, yawning, frowning, grinning, scowling, weeping, in postures of exhaustion, stoic dynamism, and, of course, extreme uncertainty and dismay. . . .

When you glimpsed them in the train stations, they were configured in narrow strings or little knots, always moving, their gaze and gait strictly forward-directed (with no waste of attention, with no attention to spare). But in Salzburg two days earlier I saw seventy or eighty of them lined up on a street corner, very predominantly very young men, in international teen-age gear: baseball caps, luminous windcheaters, dark glasses. Soon they would be approaching the German border (just a few miles away)—and then what? Theirs was a journey with charts and graphs and updates (those cell phones) but with no destination. Dawn had just arrived in Austria, and the buildings shone sheepishly in the wet. And you thought, How will all this look and feel a few weeks from now—after Oktober?

At four o’clock, as scheduled, I was joined by my penultimate interviewer, an academic, who began by reminding me of a salient historical fact. She was middle-aged, so it was not in her living memory, but it was in the living memory of her mother. In the period from 1945 to ’47, there were ten million homeless supplicants on the periphery of what was once the Reich, all of them deported (in spasms of greater or lesser violence, with at least half a million deaths en route) from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Romania. And they were all Germans.

“So your mother remembers that?”

“Well, she was at the station. She was seven or eight. She remembers the iced-up cattle cars. It was Christmas.”

I had been gone for seventy-five minutes, and the businessman was still in mid-conversation. By now, his phone had a charger in it, and the short lead, plugged into a ground-level socket, required him to bend even tighter—he was jackknifed forward, with his chin an inch from the knee-high tabletop.

“You carry on like this and you won’t have a roof over your head. You’ll be on the street and you’ll deserve it. The wheels are coming off your whole apple cart.

And I’m not surprised. Bloody hell, people like you. You make me sick, you do. Professionally sick.”

The pianist had gone but other noise-makers were taking up the reins—a factory-size vacuum cleaner, a lorry revving and panting in the forecourt. I went back to my book. August, 1924, and Vladimir was in Czechoslovakia again, holidaying with his mother in Dobřichovice. The hotel was expensive, and they were sharing a (sizable) room divided in two by a white wardrobe. Soon he would return to Berlin, where Véra . . .

All ambient sounds suddenly ceased, and the businessman was saying, “D’you know who this is? Do you? It’s Geoffrey. Geoffrey Vane. Geoffrey. Geoff. Yeah. You know me. And you know what I’m like. . . . Right, my patience is at an end. Congratulations. Or, as you’d say, *super*. . . . Now. Get your fucking Mac and turn to your fucking e-mails. Do you understand me? Do you understand me? Go to the communication from the fucking agent. The on-site agent. You know, that fucking Argy—Feron. Fucking Roddy Feron. Got it? Now bring up the fucking attachment. Got it? Right—fucking 4C.”

The often used intensifier he pronounced like “cooking” or “booking.” At this point, I slowly slid into the chair opposite me, so I could have a proper look at him—the clerical halo of quite thick gray hair, the head, still direly bowed and intent, the laptop, the legal pad.

“It’s the fucking liability. Do you



understand me? Now *say*. 4C. Does that, or does that not, square with Tulkingshorn's B6? It does? Well, let's thank the Lord for small mercies. Now go back to fucking 4C. And fucking O.K. it. O.K.? O.K." He added, with special menace, "And woe betide you if we have to go through this again. You fucking got that? Sweet dreams. Yeah, *cheers*."

And now, in unwelcome symmetry, the businessman also moved to the seat opposite him, though swiftly and without rising above a crouch; with his meaty right hand he appeared to be mopping himself down, seeing to the pink brow dotted with motes of sweat, the pale and moist upper lip. Our eyes met inexorably, and he focussed.

"Do you understand English?"

... Do I understand English? "Uh, yeah," I said.

"Ah."

And I speak it, too. Great Britain no longer had an empire, except the empire of words—not the imperial state, just the imperial tongue. Everyone knew English. The refugees knew English, a little bit. That partly explained why they wanted to get to the U.K. and Eire, because everyone there knew English. And it was why they wanted to get to Germany: the refugees knew no German, but the Germans all knew English—the nut-brown maid who was brushing the curtains knew English, the sandy-haired bellhop knew English.

"You're *English*," he announced, with reluctant admiration.

I found myself saying, "London, born and bred." Not quite true, but this wasn't the time to expatiate on my babyhood—with the mother who was barely older than I was—in the Home Counties, circa 1950, or to dream out loud about that early decade in South Wales, mostly blissful, when the family was still nuclear. But, for half a century after that, yes, it was London. He said, "I can tell by the way you talk. ... That was a tough one, that."

"The phone call."

"The phone call. You know, with some people, they haven't got a clue, quite honestly. You've just got to start from scratch. Every—every time."

"I bet." And I cursorily imagined a youngish middle manager, slumped over his disorderly workstation in a depot or showroom by an airport somewhere,

loosening his tie as he pressed the hot phone to his reddened ear.

"Look at that," the businessman said, meaning the television—the eternally silent television. On its flat screen, half a dozen uniformed guards were tossing shop sandwiches (cellophane-wrapped) into a caged enclosure, and those within seemed to snap at them—and it was impossible to evade the mental image of feeding time at the zoo. "Amazing," he said with contented absorption, as he made some calculations on his yellow pad. "Amazing the lengths people'll go to for a handout, in't it?"

The "in't it?" was rhetorical: this truism anticipated no reply. In Kraków and Warsaw (I recalled, as the businessman immersed himself in his columned figures), everyone was saying that Poland would be exempt: the only homogeneous country in Central Europe, the only monoculture, blue-eyed Poland thought it would be exempt because "the state gives no benefits." I heard this from a translator so urbane that he could quote at length not only from Tennyson but also from Robert Browning; and in answer I nodded, and resumed work on my heavy meal. But when I was dropped off at the hotel (and stood on the square facing the antique prosthetic leg of Stalin's Palace of Culture), I slowly shook my head. Someone who has trekked across the Hindu Kush would not be coming to Poland for a diet of shop sandwiches.

"Where are we? What country's this?"

He meant the country where dark-skinned travellers were being tumbled and scattered by water cannon (followed up with tear gas and pepper spray).

I said, "Looks like Hungary."

"That bloke there's got the right idea."

He paused as he closed his eyes and his bloodless lips mimed a stretch of mental arithmetic. "What's he called?"

"Orbán."

"Yeah. Orbán. We ought to be doing likewise in Calais. It's the only language they understand."

Oh, no, sir, the language they understand is much harsher than that. The language they understand consists of barrel bombs and nerve gas and the scimitars of incandescent theists. That language is what they are fleeing; it speaks to them only of fear and futurelessness. He said, "Merkel. Merkel should

take a leaf out of Orbán's book. Merkel should do an Orbán. Look. See?"

He meant the footage evidently posted by the Islamic State—a truck exploding in slow motion, three prisoners in orange jumpsuits kneeling on a dune, multipronged fighters tearing by in S.U.V.s.

"Then there's *that*." He achieved some climactic grand total on his pad, underlined it three times and circled it before tossing the pen aside. "Jihadis."

"Might be complicated," I said.

"Complicated. ... Hang about," he said, with a doubtful frown. "Silly me. Forgot to factor in the twelve per cent. Give us a minute."

Perhaps a better name for them, sir, would be *takfiris*. The *takfir* accusation (the lethal accusation of unbelief) is almost as old as Islam, but, in current usage, *takfiris*, Mr. Vane, is sharply derogatory, and it means Muslims who presume to kill Muslims. And these *takfiris* don't and won't mind, Geoffrey, when the Muslims of Europe suffer, because their policy here is the same as Lenin's during the Russian Civil War: "the worse the better." Is it fanciful, Geoff, to suggest that this lesson derives from the witches in the Scottish play—"Fair is foul, and foul is fair"?

"*Complicated*? That's the understatement of the year."

Suddenly he became aware of the phone he had reflexively reached for. He inhaled with resignation and said, "You know what gets me? The repetitions. You go through the same things again and again. And it just doesn't sink in. Not with that one, oh, no. Not with her."

Her? I sat up straight.

"Tell me something. Why're they all coming *now*? They say despair. Despair, they say. But they can't all have despaired in the same week. Why're they all coming at the same time? Tell me that."

I regrouped and said, "That's what I've been trying to find out. Apparently, a safe route opened up. Through the Balkans. They're all in touch with one another and then there it was on Facebook."

He went blank or withdrew for a moment, then he returned. "I'll give them bleeding Facebook. I'll give them bleeding Balkans. They ... They've turned their own countries into, into hellholes, quite honestly, and now they're coming

here. And even if they don't start killing us all they're going to want their own ways, aren't they? Halal, isn't it. Mosques. Uh, Sharia. Arranged marriages—for ten-year-old cousins. Yeah, well, they'll have to adapt, and quick about it, too. They'll have to look sharp and bow their heads and fall into line. Socially. On the women question and that."

He closed his computer, and gazed for a moment at its surface.

"You know, I'll have to call her back." And there was now a sudden weak diffidence in his smile as he looked up and said, "It's my mum."

I had to make an effort to dissimulate the scope of my surprise. . . . Shorn of context (the business hotel, the business suit, the expensive orthopedic shoes, like velvet Crocs), his bland round gray-fringed face looked as though it would be happiest, or at least happier, on a village green on a summer afternoon; that face could have belonged to anybody, an alderman, a newsagent, a retired colonel, a vicar. With a nod, I reached for my electronic cigarette and drew on it.

"Eighty-one, she is."

"Ah, well." After a moment, I said, "My mother-in-law's eighty-six." And you see, sir, it's a long story, but she was the reason we left England; and we never regretted it. The process was entirely natural for Elena, and, as for me, there was filial love left over after the death of Hilary Bardwell, and it had nowhere else to go. "My wife's mother. Five years older than yours."

"Yeah? And what's the state of her, then, eh? Can she hold a thought in her head for two minutes? Or is she all over the gaff like mine? I mean, when your bonce goes, I ask you, what is the sense of carrying on?"

I gestured at the instrument he still held in his hand and said, "Just wondering, but what was that—what was that to do with?"

He sat back and grunted it out: "Lanzarote." Sinking deeper, he reached up and eased his writhing neck. "For her eightieth, see, I bought her a beautiful little time-share in Lanzarote. Beautiful little holiday home. Maid looking in every morning. Gardener. Good place to park her in the winter. Roof terrace overlooking the bay. And now she's meant to renew the insurance. That's



"At first, I was teaching Job a lesson, but now I'm just messing with him."

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all it is. The contents insurance and that. Shouldn't have taken but a minute."

"Well. They do find it hard to . . ."

"You know, I've got four brothers. All younger. And not one of them'll touch her with a bargepole. They won't have anything to do with her. It's true the old—she does drive you mad, there's no question. But you've got to grind it out, haven't you? And the four of them, they won't go near her. Can you credit it? They won't go near their own fucking mum. Pardon the language. Yeah, well, they haven't got my resources, admittedly. So answer me this. Where would she be without her firstborn?"

With a glance at my watch, I said, "Damn. I'd better pack."

"Oh. Long journey?"

"Just the airport. Early tomorrow morning. I thought I'd do it now and try and get a bit more sleep."

"Here for a day or three yet, me. Rest up. Look in at the gym. There's that restaurant I've heard about on the corner. Where're you flying?"

"Home. Nice talking to you."

II.

As I bunched and crushed various items into the splayed bag, I activated my computer. And saw that there was still no message from my wife (nor from a single one of my children). Yes,

well, it was the same with Nabokov; he went through it, too. "Don't you find our correspondence is a little . . . one-sided?" And, in my case, it was curious, because when I was away like this I never fretted about my other life, my usual life, where everything was nearly always immobile, fixed, site-tenacious.

Otherwise, I felt fine, and even quite vain of my vigor (health, after all, unbroken), and buoyant, and stimulated, and generally happy and proud; the tour had awakened anxiety in me but even the anxiety, I have to say, was not unwelcome, because I recognized it as the kind of anxiety that would ask to be written about. At odd moments, though, I seriously questioned the existence of the house in Brooklyn, with its three female presences (wife, daughters), and I seriously questioned the existence of my two boys and my other daughter, all grown, in London—and my two grandchildren. Could they, could any of them, still be there?

"Good morning, this is your wakeup call. . . . Good morning, this is your wakeup call. . . . Good morning, this is your—"

It was early, and I had one final appointment. A radio interview with a journalist called Konrad Purper; it took place in what they called the Centre d'Affaires, with its swivel seats and cord

carpets. When it was over, Konrad and I stood talking in the foyer until my chaperone promptly but worriedly appeared. There had been many chaperones, many helpers and minders—Alisz, Agata, Heidi, Marguerite, Ana, Hannah, Sophie.

"There are no taxis!" Sophie said. "They can't get near us. Because there's too many people!"

Normally I am very far from being an imperturbable transatlantic traveller. But at that moment I sensed that my wristwatch was moving at its workaday pace; time did not start speeding up, did not start heating up. What was the least good thing that could happen? Nothing much. I said, "So what do we do?"

"Walk."

"To the airport."

"No—sorry. I'm not clear. To the train station. We can get there from there."

"Oh, and the station's close, isn't it?"

"Five minutes," Konrad said. "And every ten minutes a rail shuttle goes to Munich International."

Sophie and I started out, rolling our bags, and with Konrad perhaps coincidentally rolling his bike, and the three of us often rolling aside onto the carless tarmac in deference to the pageant of costumed revelers coming the other way. This narrow thoroughfare, Landwehrstrasse, with its negotiations between West and East—Erotic Studio, Turkish Restaurant, Deutsche Bank, Traditional Thai Massage, Daimler-Benz, Kabul Market. . .

We came out into the air and space of the Karlsplatz, where the stronglimbed mannequins stood in lines or streamed by in biblical numbers—many of the women, in the second week, dec-

adently wearing the despised "Barbie" alternative (a thick-stitched bodice and a much shortened dirndl showing the white stocking tops just above the knee). How did it go in the funfair? According to Thomas Wolfe, they had merry-go-rounds, and an insane profusion of sausage shops, and whole oxen turning on spits. They ate and drank in tents that could seat six thousand, seven thousand, eight thousand. If you were in the middle of this, Wolfe wrote, Germany seemed to be "one enormous belly." Swaying, singing. Germans en masse, objectively ridiculous, and free at last of all irony.

Sophie, I saw, was talking to a policeman stretched out in a parked sidecar. Konrad stood by. She turned and said to me, "It's—you can't even get there by foot!"

For many years I lived in Notting Hill, and sat through many Carnivals (in earlier times, often attending with my sons); I knew about cordons, police gauntlets, closed roads (for ambulance access), and panics and stampedes. Once, I was in a crush that comprehensively assured me that you could face death because of a superfluity of life. Yes, there were affinities: Carnival was like Oktoberfest, but the flesh there was brown and the flesh here was pink. Hundreds of thousands of high-esprit scoutmasters, hundreds of thousands of festive dairymaids in their Sunday best.

"The only way is underground. One stop."

Soon we were looking into the rosy deep of the stone staircase. Getting on for a month ago, in Brooklyn, while she was helping me pack, Elena remarked that my family-sized suitcase was "not full enough." Well, it was certainly heavy

enough, by now, with its sediment of gifts (typically chocolates) and reading matter and things such as Bernhardt's portfolio, in its stiff brown envelope. Humping that big load through the underground—I can do it, I thought, but I won't like doing it. And yet, once again, Konrad, having tethered his bike, was quietly at our side, dark-haired, stocky, and calm, and my bag was now swinging easily in his grip.

In the Hauptbahnhof itself, the crowd was diversified by thin streams of dark-skinned and dark-clothed refugees, their eyes haunted and determined, their tread leaden but firm, dragging their prams and goods-laden strollers, their children. Then came a rare sight, and then an even rarer one.

First, a mother of a certain age, a grandmother, probably, tall, dressed in the rigid black of the full abaya, with her half-veiled face pointed straight ahead. Then, second, a lavishly assimilated young woman with the same coloring, perhaps the granddaughter of a Turkish *Gastarbeiter*, in tight white jacket and tight white jeans—and she had a stupendously, an unignorably full and prominent backside. For half a minute, the two women inadvertently walked in step, away from us: the glide of the black edifice like a towering wheelie, the hugely billowing orbs of white.

When he had pointed us to our platform, Konrad took his leave, much thanked, much praised. I turned to Sophie. "The two women—did you see that?"

"Of course."

"Well. She's not embarrassed by it, is she? Looking so cheerful. Swinging her arms. And dressed like that? She's not trying to hide it."

"No."

"I mean she's not shy about it."

"No," Sophie said. "She likes it."

The Nabokovs were refugees, and three times over. As teen-agers, they independently fled the October Revolution; on her way out, Véra Slonim passed through a pogrom in the Ukraine involving tens of thousands of mob murders. That was in 1919. They fled the Bolsheviks, horsemen of terror and famine, and, via the Crimea, Greece, and England, sought sanctuary—in Berlin. Then France, until the Germans followed them there; then the



"Don't ask where it comes from. Just be glad I can provide."

eleventh-hour embarkation to New York, in 1940, a few weeks ahead of the Wehrmacht. (On its next westbound crossing, their boat, the Champlain, was torpedoed and sunk.) V.N.'s father (also Vladimir Nabokov), the liberal statesman, was murdered by a White Russian fascist in Berlin (1922). In the same city, his brother Sergei was arrested in 1943 (for homosexuality) and rearrested the following year (for seditious talk); he died in a concentration camp near Hamburg, in January, 1945. That was their Europe; and they went back there, in style and for good, in 1959.

Yes, and I met Véra, too. I spent most of a day with her, in 1983, in the still center of Europe, the Palace Hotel in Montreux, Switzerland (where they had lived since 1961), breaking only for lunch with her son, the incredibly tall Dmitri, whom I would meet again. Véra was a riveting and convivial golden-skinned beauty; on sensitive subjects she could turn dauntingly fierce, but I was never really frightened, because I thought there was always the light of contingent humor in her eyes.

Vladimir died in 1977, aged seventy-eight. Véra died in 1991, aged eighty-nine. And Dmitri died in 2012, aged seventy-seven.

He was childless. And now his ashes (marking the closure of this genetic line) are interred with those of his parents, in the cemetery in Montreux.

I got to Munich International with an extra half hour to spare. And there in the terminal, bathed in watery early-morning light, behind the little rampart of his luggage (a squat gunmetal suitcase, a tan valise with numerous zips and pouches), and leering into his cell phone, stood Geoffrey the businessman. I greeted him and said, "Why are you here? I thought you were going to take it easy for a few days."

"Who, me? Me? I should be so blessed. Nah. Her fucking bungalow burnt down last night. Electrics. It's always electrics. Burnt down to the fucking ground."

"Really? She wasn't in it, was she?"

"Her? No, snug as a bug in Sheffield, thanks very much. It's muggins here that has to go to fucking Lanzarote. See if we got any contents insurance. Or any insurance at all."

"Will it be hard to get to Lanzarote?"

His face narrowed shrewdly. "You know what you do when something like this happens? When you're a bit stranded? You go down under. Under here." And he soundlessly tapped his padded shoe on the floor. "That's where the airline offices are. Under here. You go down there and you go around and you sniff out the best deal."

"Well, good luck."

"Oh, I'll be all right. It's only money."



So there was time for lots of coffee and for delicious and fattening croissants in the lounge. Then the brand-new, hangar-fresh Lufthansa jumbo jet took off, on schedule. Soon I was gorging myself on fine foods and choice wines, before relishing "Alien" (Ridley Scott) and then the sequel, "Aliens" (James Cameron). I landed punctually. Would-be immigrants and even asylum-seekers often had to wait two years, but after two hours, in the admittedly inhospitable environs of Immigration, I was allowed into America.

III.

And what I returned to, eerily and almost tremulously, still held, Elena and the daughters—who went far and wide, as they pleased, who boldly roamed Manhattan, where their grandmother (I now heard it confirmed) was still installed in the deluxe sunset home that, very understandably, she kept mistaking for a hotel.

How solid it all was, this other existence. How advanced, how evolved, with its devices, its machines, which all seemed to work. How tightly joined to the earth it was, with its steel and concrete, the five-story house on Strong Place.

The anxiety in me was deeply layered and durable, because it went back to before I was born. Coming to terms with this involved work of mind, most of it done in darkness. I

was home in America, the immigrant nation, stretching from sea to shining sea, and I couldn't sleep. "Night is always a giant," the champion insomniac Nabokov wrote in "Transparent Things," "but this one was especially terrible." I had another book on my bedside table, a short, stylish study by the historian Mark Mazower, called "Dark Continent," and I would sometimes go to the next room with that for an hour, before defeatedly returning.

When I closed my eyes, I was met by the usual sights—an abstract battlefield or dismantled fairground at dusk, flowers in monochrome, figures cut out of limp white paper. And the thoughts and images verged encouragingly on the nonsensical. But no—my mind was in too low a gear for the cruise control of unconsciousness. . . .

And so many possible futures were queuing up and jockeying to be born. And, in time, one or other of them would go thundering clear of the rest.

And they were coming here, the refugees, in the eye of a geohistorical convergence—their exodus on the one hand, and, on the other, Al Qaeda and Al Shabaab and Boko Haram and the Taliban and Sinai Province and ISIS.

And even now it was as if a tectonic force had taken hold of Europe and, using its fingernails, had lifted it up and tilted it, politically, causing a heavy mudslide in the direction of old illusions, old dreams of purity and cruelty.

And that force would get heavier still, much heavier, immediately and irreversibly, after the first incidence of *takfir*. And then Europe—that by now famously unrobust confederation—would, in fact, meet its "historic test."

And what they might be bringing, the refugees, was insignificant when set against what was already there, in the host nations, the spores and middens of what was already there. . . . "Dark Continent" is not a book about Africa; the rest of Mazower's title is "Europe's Twentieth Century." ♦

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Martin Amis on Europe's crises.