

In 1993, while living in Regina, Saskatchewan, my wife and I took our two kids on an epic European trip. We visited Paris, newly-unified Berlin, Vienna, the Tyrol, and the Rhineland, and spent some time in London with my late chum John Sessions. We had a very interesting time, and the kids broadened their horizons in more ways than one.

Europe with / avec / mit Kids: May-July 1993

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It's Saturday 29 May 1993, and we – Son (12), Daughter (9), Wife, and I – are setting out for Europe. We live in Regina on the Canadian Prairies, a place so remote from the main current of human life that Europe might be on a different planet. Few of my students at the University have ever been out of Saskatchewan. Our friends are incredulous that we are undertaking such an adventure, but (we suspect) also envious. We're removing our children from school a month before the summer vacation begins, and expected resistance. But their teachers are awestruck and completely acquiescent. The kids themselves assure us they won't miss a thing. Son is bored with Grade 7 and Daughter doesn't like her teacher, who yells a lot.

I'm having an academic midlife crisis and have decided to abandon science fiction for a more conventional subject of study. I have vague plans to write a book on the literature and culture of the Modernist period. I want to sell more books and be taken more seriously by colleagues. But if truth were told I need a good excuse to visit three great European capitals and look at fine art. And Wife and I hope to expose the kids to the full Euro experience, now they're old enough.

As I have a publication record that's stellar for my university (that's not saying much), I've been given a travel grant, though it doesn't cover my family's expenses. So, in Europe we'll be going by rented car whenever possible, as that way four can travel for the same cost as one. We'll start by driving our own vehicle 2,600 km to Toronto to get a flight to Paris. That saves us about \$1,000, as flights from Regina to Toronto are expensive and children over two get no discount. We buy a portable Game Boy to keep the kids amused for the three and a half days on the road, and we dose them with Gravol to keep them mildly tranquilized.

The journey to Toronto is uneventful. Thankfully it's cool and rainy, as our car doesn't have a/c. Our suitcases on the roof rack get soaked so I have to swathe them in plastic en route. We overnight in Vermilion Bay, Wawa, and French River, all in northern Ontario. The Trans-Canada Highway is in poor condition, but there's little traffic until the outskirts of Toronto itself. In Toronto I leave our car at a self-storage depot, cheaper than long-term parking at Pearson. Our overnight flight is punctual though crowded. Son, who dislikes flying, sleeps for most of the journey, which includes a stopover in Birmingham, England, where most of the passengers deplane. We land at Charles de Gaulle at 11:00 am, I having slept not a wink. We find a capacious taxi to accommodate us and luggage, and are in Montmartre thirty minutes later.

Paris. Our rented apartment, on the fourth floor at 53 Rue Custine, is in a typical Parisian five-storey block with a small supermarket on the ground floor. You go through the street door into the inner courtyard to access the staircase. No elevator, so we haul everything up the polished hardwood stairs. Daughter sits in a window niche halfway up to catch her breath. Our front door has three separate locks, each with a different key. Off the narrow hallway is the living room, where the kids will sleep in a pullout bed, and a round dining table. On the window ledge there's a droopy potted plant. The view is of the courtyard, at back of which is a jungly little garden where cats prowl. Well, we don't expect to spend too much time indoors.

Aiming to beat jetlag by staying awake till nightfall, we scale the Butte, visit the Place du Tertre, check out the view over the city from the terrace of the Sacré-Coeur, then descend in a straight line to the Seine. The kids snack on *sonveesh*, Wife has a *tarte au Grand-Marnier*. The weather's changeable and we shelter from sudden downpours en route to Notre-Dame. Then the sun comes out and Daughter says the view of Montmartre from below, blue sky behind the creamy dome, is "picture-postcard." In the great Cathedral Wife lights a votive candle for luck in her job search, and we sit watching the sun illuminate the rose window in the north transept. Then we take the Métro to Château Rouge at the eastern end of Rue Custine. That night we all sleep for fourteen hours.

Breakfast croissants from the boulangerie across the street. Then Métro to Les Halles and the Parc Océanique J. Cousteau ... but it has closed down! Kids disappointed, parents relieved: admission would have been a steep 75F each. On to the Modern Art Museum on the top floor of the hideous Beaubourg. Conclusion: each Modernist art movement became bankrupt ten minutes after it began. Matisse remains an inspiration to contemporary kitchen designers. Picasso's talent for deformation quickly palls. The "discovery" of abstraction was a desperate response to the advent of cinema around 1895. We all enjoy the ride on the outside escalators.

The kids drag us into a toy store called Ba-Bi-Boum, where Daughter falls in love with a stuffed baby leopard (180F), while Son covets all the Lego sets unavailable in Regina. We have lunch around 5:00 pm: Daughter a *croque monsieur*, Son a hot-dog and the first of many Oranginas, Wife and I share a *salade niçoise* with beer. Then we pop into a photo exhibition of well-dressed cats at Place des Vosges. At Bastille, where the new Opera looks like an enormous *pissoir*, we get the Métro to Tuileries. We cross the gardens to the Seine, pausing only for ice creams and a glance at the shockingly bad *Hommage à Dreyfus* statue.

At the Musée D'Orsay. What a poor artist Cézanne was till he discovered apples! Degas drew beautifully. Van Gogh – the insane colours are everything. Manet – I've loved that black stripe on the fifer's red pant leg since I saw it in *Look and Learn* as a kid. Monet – national flags dissolved to a blur of colour is positive deformation in contrast to the negative Picasso variety. We return exhausted to Rue Custine, too late for the food stores, so we write our postcards with bread and butter and half a chocolate bar each for refreshment.

Insomnia. Wife and kids have tea in the middle of the night. We're all up at 9:30 am, though, trying to normalize our routine. Daughter and I go shopping for bread, salami, fruit and veg at one of the three small food stores within a hundred yards of our street door. Then down the Rue des Martyrs to a post office. Each of our twelve postcards to Canada requires three stamps. It's hard to stick them all on without obscuring our messages. Lots of little specialist shops, such as one devoted to the charcuterie of the Auvergne. Our destination, the Musée de la Mode at the Louvre, is closed, so we walk along Rue de Rivoli to La Samaritaine, advertising three floors of toys. Daughter adores the displays of *animaux en peluche*: cuddly boa constrictors, snails, ladybugs. She spends her birthday advance on a stuffed Siamese kitten. Son is so overwhelmed by the number of Lego sets he's never even heard of that he cannot commit to a purchase.

To Forum des Halles where we lunch on takeout sandwiches while sitting on benches watching the waddling pigeons. Daughter notes that they're almost always beaten to thrown crumbs by speedy sparrows, because "the pigeons are so fat their bellies almost touch the ground." Then Métro to the Eiffel Tower. The kids and I ascend, while Wife, who dislikes heights, waits below where she's harassed by gypsy kids begging for coins. We take the 52F ride to the *troisième étage*, and the view is spectacular, though a little blurred by haze.

Then we cross the Pont d'Iéna to Trocadéro Métro. The Palais steps are disfigured by graffiti and there are paramilitary police with submachine guns everywhere. Back home, we dine on delicious Montbéliard sausages (which the lady at the charcuterie told us to boil for twenty minutes), fried potatoes, and a ratatouille made from fresh veg. The 13F bottle of rosé from the Superette on the *rez-de-chaussée* is excellent. In the evening I take the kids around the back streets of Montmartre. We find the vineyard, the Lapin Agile, the site of the Bateau Lavoir, the Moulin de la Galette, Erik Satie's house, and the cemetery. We return with a few choice items from a late-opening pâtisserie. We try to live sparingly, but 200F lasts about two hours in Paris.

Breakfast is bread and salami, then we walk to the Musée G. Moreau, formerly the artist's gloomy townhouse. Some of his male subjects, for example, the bull in *The Rape of Europa*, have the artist's own face, but none of Moreau's faces is very interesting. His over-elaborate *Jupiter and Semele* anticipates sword-and-sorcery paperback covers. The two floors of Moreau's atelier are connected by an wrought-iron spiral staircase and is full of sketches of animals in the Jardin des Plantes. But all Nature is thoroughly denatured by the time it appears on a Moreau canvas. The spiral staircase is the highlight of our visit.

Wife and kids go pigeon-watching, cemetery-visiting, and shopping while I take in the Musée Rodin. One of Rodin's *trucs* is to have smooth flesh emerge from rugged stone, emphasizing the astonishing distinction between the living and inanimate realms. Another is to show foreplay and afterplay but never the sexual act. The few pieces by Rodin's lover Camille Claudel here are very accomplished, such as the four chatting women in onyx. Rodin's greatness and Claudel's

major talent are evident by contrast with Bourdelle, a mediocre sculptor who has a museum devoted to him near the Tour Montparnasse. Aside from *Hercules the Archer*, his pieces seem lifeless, his scowling Beethovens mannered compared to Rodin's phallic Balzacs. I walk back to Custine via the Boulevard Saint-Michel (very crowded), Rue St-Denis (a hooker in every doorway), Blvd. Magenta (a Turkish enclave plastered with angry posters condemning Neo-Nazi attacks on Turks in Germany) – Paris is so lively *partout*! Back home I announce to the family that I intend to move here *dès que possible*.

We all love the cemeteries. At the one in Montmartre, the grownups pause at Zola, Berlioz, Heine, and Truffaut, while the kids scramble among the multilevel graves and into the cavelike *sepultures* in search of feral cats. It's sunny and hot in the world of the living but nice and cool among the dead. We then take the Métro to the Louvre. The absurd glass pyramid impedes the view of the magnificent opposite façade, and inside it's as torrid as a greenhouse. Like everywhere else the Louvre won't take my traveller's cheques in francs. Tourists rush madly about to see the famous trio – Mona, Venus, Nike – bypassing innumerable masterpieces without a second glance. In the horde scrambling to get a glimpse of La Gioconda, an American mother is loudly lecturing her four-year-old on "ohrt."

On our way to the Étoile, I go to get cash from an ATM in the Place André Malraux, then lose the other three. Reuniting after a panicky few minutes when we're all trying to find each other, we get into a row about who was to blame for disappearing. It's hot and we're tired and hungry. At last we find a McDonald's on the Champs-Élysées. The kids get cheeseburgers and fries to go, but almost immediately Daughter accidentally drops her burger in the sand ... we give up on the distant Arc de Triomphe and head home. After supper we feed the pigeons on the Butte, and have ice-cream, pastries, and Turkish delight, the last of which "tastes like bubble-bath" according to Daughter.

Next day is hotter. At Son's request we visit the Musée de l'Armée at Les Invalides. Wife remarks on the elaborate needlework in the brocade on the uniforms on display – all so they could have holes shot in them. Napoleon's tomb looks as if it were carved out of chocolate. Wife and kids then take off for the Boul' Mich' where they have "superb" *croques messieurs* at the Café de Flore. I go to the Picasso Museum, which I find impressive in spite of my dislike of the sociopathic Iberian dwarf. He may have wanted to be a matador but his bullfight images, especially the one of the bull goring the horse, express intense sexual anxiety. We reunite in the Luxembourg Gardens where the kids can't figure out why they're not allowed on the grass: "it's a *park*!" Feeding *les pigeons* on the steps up to Sacré-Coeur is now their well-established evening ritual.

Our last day in Paris. As cemeteries are free to enter, cool in hot weather, and the kids love them, we go to the Daddy of them all, Père-Lachaise. We find the tombs of Proust, Oscar Wilde, Edith Piaf, but it's Jim Morrison's that's the star turn. It's surrounded by young toughs and old

hippies, adorned with candles and drug paraphernalia, and ringed by graffiti. At a nearby corner restaurant we have lunch; now Daughter has *un hot-dog*, Son *un croque monsieur*.

I take the kids to La Villette while Wife has an afternoon as a free woman in Paris. La Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie is shopping-mall architecture on a grand scale, and so overrun with school parties that Son waits in vain to get into the submarine. The Géode spherical movie theatre is booked solid all afternoon. All the interactive displays have instructions in French only, and the kids have no patience for my painful translations. Only the gift store is not disappointing.

To make amends, I take them by Métro right across Paris to the Jardin d'Acclimatation in the Bois de Boulogne. It's almost deserted, so we get to spend quality time with the crowned macaques, the peacocks, and (especially) the bears. A mother grizzly and her baby are trying to sleep on the concrete surface of an old-fashioned bearpit. Daughter feels sorry for *maman*, who is panting heavily in a niche too small for her. Upset by the bear's discomfiture, Daughter gets her leg stuck in the railings, and I have to pull her out by main force – she has a large bruise as a souvenir.

The kids are too tired for the adventure playground, so I take them to the McDonald's near Les Sablons Métro. Manna from heaven! Daughter wolfs down her *Ménu Royal Cheese Combo*. There are 38 McDonald's in Paris, and each provides an excellent city map for free. Everything, including fast food, is expensive in Paris except the Métro – and wine, you can get a good bottle for 12F. In the evening, after taking the kids to say *au revoir* to the pigeons, Wife and I have dinner at an Italian on Rue Custine: seafood lasagne, tagliatelle, crème de caramel, sorbet citron, chilled white wine. We are reluctant to leave Paris, which aside from its well-known aesthetic charms has many unexpected virtues. It's efficient, clean (except for the ubiquitous dogshit), courteous, and honest.

Next morning we clean the apartment and water the potted plant, which is thriving since Wife started putting it out on the balcony during the day. We'll miss the flat, not really big enough for four. Only two towels were provided in the bathroom, and the kitchen was too small to swing a cat, though it was well-stocked with implements and had garlic cloves hanging from a nail. Considering the high-density living in these parts, we weren't much bothered by noise, except once when a local garage band laid down the worst-ever cover of the Kinks' "You Really Got Me." But the Montmartre location was unbeatable.

We take a taxi to the airport, 50F well spent as it's much easier than dragging four suitcases and four bags onto the Métro and then the RER. We're going to CDG to pick up a rental car for the rest of our trip, which we'll return there when it's time to fly back. We'd requested a car with a roof rack, but this is news to Hertz, and so we must wait 45 minutes while their man goes somewhere five km away to pick one up. Which he does. *Et voilà!* We have a smart Peugeot

rather than the cheapo Ford Escort we'd ordered. And all our luggage somehow fits in its trunk, so we don't need a roof rack after all. Onward!

Paris to Berlin. We take the Lille autoroute, cutting through a hundred km of Belgium, where the drivers are as bad as legend has it. At the German border near Aachen there are no guards at all. The new Europe *sans frontières* ... how long will that last? Unrestricted immigration is a hot topic, and some in the UK are trying to resurrect Enoch Powell as a prophet before his time. We spend the night in Remscheid, not far from Solingen where there was a recent Neo-Nazi arson attack against Turkish immigrants. Daughter and I go for a walk on what starts out as a lovely nature trail. She is outraged to discover that the whole area is being excavated to build a dam. Wife's too tired to eat, the kids have *Wienerwürst* and *Pomme frites*, and I have a bowl of lardy pea soup with slices of greasy sausage in it. We are no longer in Paris!

Next day we take the autobahn towards Berlin. It's very hot and we drive with all the windows open. The going is fast but we are held up by three successive accidents. The autobahns have only four lanes and no speed limit, and there are lots of heavy trucks from Poland, Latvia, even Iran. No obvious trace of the former DDR border, though around Magdeburg there are many derelict factories. The slip roads, used to handling nothing faster than a Trabant, are now far too short to allow safe merging with all the Mercs, Beamers, and Audis doing 150+ km/h.

Berlin. We approach through a dense forest ... the *Urwald* of German legend? Our goal is Zähringerstraße, a quiet street in Wilmersdorf, four blocks south of Kurfürstendamm. The apartment block (ca. 1927) is much less elegant than its Parisian counterpart and seems completely unrenovated. However, there's an antique elevator, which helps as we're on the fourth floor again. Our landlady is Frau Tentscher, in her seventies. She owns a three-bedroom flat, one room of which is rented long term to an Indonesian woman, the other two rooms short term to tourists like us. In the evening we walk up to the Ku'damm, which resembles a crowded high street in an English provincial city. At Churasco Burger we wait for an hour for overpriced hamburgers with seven fries each. We resolve to eat at Imbiss food stalls in future.

The kids are bursting with energy after a day in the car, so we walk to the Siegessäule and then through the Tiergarten eastwards. The great park is deliberately being allowed to devolve to a jungle. The grass is uncut, and we see a hawk, rabbits, and mice, but very few people. In London parks you can walk on the grass, in Paris you can't, in Berlin you wouldn't want to. The *Urwald* has surrounded and then invaded this almost wilfully ugly city. The kids find it hard to grasp that three years ago we'd have been shot dead for walking through the Brandenburg Gate. The Gate itself isn't very imposing and there are vacant lots on both sides of it, so we get a bus back to Zoo Station.

Next morning our hostess provides a fine breakfast: rolls, three kinds of cold cuts, two cheeses, sour cherry jam, boiled eggs, coffee. We've done well to lodge with Frau Tentscher, whose

address I got through the tourist board. There wasn't a hotel room available in Berlin when I started to book this trip; the nearest was in Frankfurt-an-der-Oder on the Polish border. Now we see why: most Berlin hotels haven't been built yet, and the ones that do exist are surrounded by scaffolding and construction sites smelling of sewer gas. Our first task is to get cash, but there are no ATMs in Berlin, so we must line up in a bank. Then to an English bookstore so Son can get the sequel to his latest *Star Wars* novel. No success, though there are plenty of copies of *Lesbian Bedtime Stories* on sale.

We split up. I go to the Bröhan Museum where there's an exquisite collection of Jugendstil objets d'art and paintings. There's a room designed by Guimard in which a wooden dresser has curves like his Métro station entrances. Beautiful glazed pottery by Gallé. You get a good sense of liberal *Bürgerlich* taste between 1890 and 1939. Then I get the S-Bahn, the graffiti-daubed overhead railway, to Alexanderplatz in former East Berlin. Names have changed since my map was printed: Marx-Engels-Platz Station is now Hackeschermarkt. Alexanderplatz, architecturally reminiscent of central Birmingham, is full of toughs in leather jackets. Newspapers on sale are German or Turkish.

I walk to the Old Nationalgalerie. The buildings on Museuminsel are pockmarked with bullet holes and there's scaffolding everywhere. The Gallery is only DM2 to enter, and the best stuff is in the first room: a fine Segantini, a Böcklin, and several von Stucks, including a mermaid with a spaced-out expression and two fishy legs riding piggyback on a satyr. Burly female custodians stand silent guard in each gallery. Paintings of military parades in Berlin at the time of Frederick the Great capture the origin of this city as a Prussian encampment in a flat marshy forest with absurd aspirations to be a northern Paris. I then walk up Unter den Linden ... never elegant, now "in transition." The buildings lining it resemble Victorian railway stations. Today, perhaps to deflect attention from conditions on the ground, the municipality is pushing an Olympic dream – "Berlin 2000" is touted everywhere.

In the Tiergarten, an elegant Prussian nobleman poses on his pedestal, a drunken bum is slumped on the bench beside him. The garbage bins overflow with beer cans. Young Berlin must cavort here after dark, as there's nobody around in daylight. At the New Nationalgalerie, a good if small selection of paintings, many unfamiliar, from Cézanne to Rothko. A splendid waterlily triptych by Monet. Truly horrific images by Francis Bacon, a kind of inverted Renoir. Anselm Kiefer captures the bleak spirit of Berlin in an image combining sanded furrows and a monochrome photo of a distant village. Along with the Picassos, Legers, and Klees, there are African, Polynesian, and Indian wood carvings, much more powerful than the European stuff. The Modernists tried to appropriate the force of The Primitive, but aside from a desire to signal pettish contempt for the contemporary world, it's unclear to what end. Visual art is at its most powerful when serving an overt purpose, capturing a personality or a historical moment, conveying a moral lesson. Modernism seems to me an attention-seeking non-serviam gesture in response to technologically improved means of reproduction.

I go to meet the others, who've been at the Zoo meeting "hundreds of bears," one of which waved at Daughter. She now wants a pet serval, as a cute one rubbed up against the glass like a big spotted pussycat as she passed its enclosure. The symbol of the Berlin 2000 Olympic campaign is a yellow happy-face bear, and we buy baseball caps with the logo but cannot find a mug with it on for Son. He has discovered a new tippie to alternate with Orangina: Schweppes Bitter Lemon. In a food hall ("not a patch on M & S," says Wife) we sample paprika-flavoured chips, to Daughter's disgust. Exhausted, we return to the flat, where the adults drink DM4 Spanish rosé, and we all write more postcards.

Breakfast this morning: *Brötchen*, dark brown rye bread, boiled eggs, marmalade, cherry jam, *Schinken*, quark cheese, tomato slices, a banana each for the kids, coffee ... all included in the DM120 per night for our rooms. The temperature has dropped overnight from 30C to 15C and it's pouring rain with cold gusts of wind. We drive to the nearest post office, then (at Son's request) to a tin soldier store on Kneesebeckstraße. Nowhere to park. So we head for the Technology Museum, can't find it, and end up in desolate Alexanderplatz. Eventually we park in the lashing rain by the Reichstag, bullet-riddled and gloomy, isolated in a dead end. We wander through an exhibition inside called "Questions about German History." Questions, but no easy answers. Hitler's bunker and Spandau Prison were both obliterated quite recently, their locations unmarked.

We drive west to the Brücke-Museum at the edge of the Grunewald. I was hoping for a permanent exhibition of German Expressionism, but the small gallery is devoted to a long-lived mediocrity, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, whose lurid daubs seem like painting-by-numbers done by a child too uncoordinated to colour within the lines. And he painted the same way for 65 years, without getting any better or worse! So we drive on to Potsdam, once elegant, now crumbling, where we wait for twenty minutes at the traffic light on the road in, which displays green for only ten seconds at a time. We stop at Sanssouci, lunch in the carpark Imbiss, then walk to the front of the Palace, where overweight nymphs display their leaden charms. We descend the terrace at back and wander through the Sicilian Garden in the gusty rain. The greenhouse collection is exceptional: cacti, coffee plants, acanthus, and the stars of the show, *Riesenseerosen*, giant waterlilies three feet across.

Then we drive to Spandau, a trip impossible a short time ago. The old town centre is restored and pretty much empty at 5:30 pm on Saturday. We eat at Wienerwald, serving a hundred varieties of Viennese chicken. The kids are impressed by glasses of iced tea with sugar-crusts rims, and redcurrant-filled crepes with whipped cream. It's actually cold now, the first time since Canada. Wife and I have hot goulash soup, which the kids keep sampling though it's got lots of paprika in it. Then we drive back home but can't find any food stores open at 7:30 pm on Saturday evening. Bars and restaurants on Ku'damm are mainly deserted. Dismal.

Next day it rains heavily till 6:00 pm. Frau Tentscher apologizes for the behaviour of her Indonesian lodger, who has been accusing all and sundry of stealing her bag. "*Es ist sehr asiatische, dieses Verhalten,*" says Frau T., who was born in Indonesia herself. Meanwhile she feeds birds outside her window – blue and coal tits, sheltering from the rain, pecking at bacon fat spread on a suspended pine cone. Her son stuffs birds as a hobby ... a bedraggled crow was his first attempt, then pigeons, owls, and a buzzard, pride of her collection.

We drive a few blocks to the Käthe-Kollwitz Museum, which turns out to be the cultural highlight of Berlin. Kollwitz was an artist who can move you to tears. She strove against the many forms of inhumanity characterizing her times. She lost her younger son in WWI and her only grandson in WWII. A room full of wonderful self-portraits, from about age thirty to old womanhood, is painful to experience. One single dash of colour: the bloody head wound of Karl Liebknecht on his deathbed. Her marvellous bronzes ... *Tower of Mothers*, a *Group of Children* no more than six inches tall, big sister carrying the baby. The signs tell you that you may touch the sculptures, and we do. Her chief subject is mothers and children – few male Modernists deigned to depict the most fundamental human bond.

After this we wander around the Lipstick and Powder-Box looking for a bank to get some DM. Most stores are closed, this being Sunday. The kids lunch at Burger King, but we grown-ups are still full from Frau T.'s *Frühstück*. Then at last we find Son's goal, the Museum für Verkehr und Technik, in a converted railway shed, full of rotting engines, scale models of canal locks, stereoscopic vision apparatus, old counting machines. A very unGerman place, most of the interactive buttons don't work, but Son is pleased we persisted, and we all find enough to interest us for two hours.

Then on to the last museum on my list, the Bauhaus-Archiv, to examine a compendium of styles all of which were aesthetically exhausted by 1935 but are still being perpetrated in the 1990s. Complex plans for useless objects, deeply uncomfortable modular furniture. All trivial after Kollwitz, though Kandinsky's *Kleiner Welten* would make interesting wallpaper. Then home to park the car in a place easy to load tomorrow morning. We find a deserted Italian resto for supper. Both kids are developing a taste for food they'd never have tried in Regina: minestrone, goulash, crepes.

Berlin to Vienna. Frau T. has included a whole Brie in today's breakfast feast. As we say our goodbyes, a mother bird is feeding her young in a nest just outside the window. One last stop on the Ku'damm to buy the Berlin 2000 mug that Son craves. Then we head south to Nuremburg. The area south of Berlin is so thinly populated that only a madman could have claimed that Germany needed *Lebensraum*. We cut cross-country hoping to pick up the autobahn to Regensburg only to find that it hasn't been built yet. The former DDR is marked by coffee stalls instead of service areas, stinking portable toilets, and puttering Trabants.

At Passau a Holiday Inn boasting a pool catches the kids' eye and we decide to stay the night. At the desk the clerk says a room will be DM267: the kids stay free and breakfast is included. I say that's too much, so the clerk instantly reduces it to DM167. The kids love the pool surrounded by fake palms, and play with a toy shark for an hour. Then we walk into the Altstadt, a quaint and attractive maze of narrow streets. We eat at McDonald's and then each have two ice-cream cones at two different parlours in the old city. We watch the Danube flowing east, high from the recent rain, tour boats sweeping by.

Next morning after breakfast we walk to the Modern Art Gallery where the Donau and Inn converge so I can see a Franz von Stuck exhibition. A heavy shower forces us to shelter in the cathedral, baroquely magnificent for such a small town. Stuck is no great artist and after 1910 produced only kitsch. But there is a really fine portrait of his wife Anna, another version of the Nixe on the Satyr's shoulders, and inevitably one of the many versions of his calling card, *Die Sünde* (sultry nude Eve plus serpent). Apparently Hitler lived in Passau in his youth, and Wife and I recall the film *The Nasty Girl*, which paints an unflattering picture of the townspeople. But Passau's very atmospheric, with its two great rivers, its swans, its Dom, its fourteenth-century round tower. On to Vienna.

Vienna. The border guards barely glance at us as we enter Austria and three hours later we're in Vienna. I'm baffled by the one-way system in the Innenstadt and, scattering pedestrians, impatiently drive over the courtyard of Stephansdom, the only way I can see to get to the Hotel-Pension-City. Our single room with two double beds is not nearly as luxurious as the Passau Holiday Inn but reasonable given its central location. We find a smoky resto round the corner and have asparagus soup, chicken schnitzels, and potato salad for AS100 each. Son is now in "try anything once" mode and enjoys food he'd have avoided like the plague at home. Kids then get ice-creams and Wife a slice of grand marnier torte at a *Konditorei* but it's pouring down so we return to the hotel.

I move the car to a parking spot on Bauernmarkt visible from our hotel room, but there are No Parking signs everywhere. The hotelier assures me that it'll be fine there for the duration of our visit. Next day our windshield sports a AS300 ticket. The hotelier snorts and tosses it in the garbage: "Here no clamps, no towing away, yours is French car, will be OK." We walk down Kärtnerstraße to the Opernring, briefly visit the Karlskirche, dripping baroque gilt. Then up Prinz-Eugen-Straße to the Belvedere. The Lower Palace is shrouded in scaffolding. We continue to Son's choice, the Heeresgeschichtlichesmuseum. This brick edifice has been sandblasted clean and looks like a Turkish railway station. The highlight is the car (with bullet holes) and uniform (with rips and bloodstains) of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, assassinated in Sarajevo almost exactly 79 years ago, precipitating the bloody first half of the twentieth century. (Archduchess Sophie, also killed, doesn't figure at all.) There are photos five minutes before the assassination and a few moments after showing nineteen-year-old Gavrilo Princip being arrested. We watch a hedgehog trundle under some rotting relics of a Nazi Panzer division. Then

to the nearby Schweizergarten where we sit outside at a café and have goulash soup. The kids wolf it down ... they love it, paprika and all.

A major UN Conference on Human Rights is on in Vienna. There are heavily armed troops on street corners and huge red-faced goons in suits hanging about at strategic spots. Some colourfully dressed South American Indians are being interviewed outside an exhibition of Mayan art, and oddballs abound. A man on the Graben is dressed as a biblical prophet. He presses a portable phone to his ear into which he shouts, "*Allo? Allo?*," trying to open a direct line to God.

Then to the art gallery in the Upper Belvedere. David's equestrian portrait of Napoleon, in which the Little Corporal looks at least seven feet tall. A roomful of Klimts, including *The Kiss*, *Water Serpents*, *Judith and Holofernes*, flowery landscapes. The Schieles are fine, but the other Viennese like Kokoschka don't measure up. There's a Segantini with a very un-PC message: Bad Mothers caught in trees in an icy landscape with vampire-babies clamped to their breasts. Then to the Lower Belvedere, where there's an exhibition of baroque sculptor G.R. Donner. The main piece, *The Rivers of Vienna* fountain, was cast in gunmetal so that in an emergency it could be turned into cannons. One of the *Rivers*, personified as a nude man waving a fish, has a frog smiling impudently up at him. Daughter immediately identifies Donner's versions of the Judgement of Paris and Prometheus having his liver pecked out by an eagle. Son wants to know how she knows. She explains that Dad told her those stories on walks around the lake in Regina.

After a brief rest stop at the hotel, we head east along the Donau Canal to the KunstHausWien, the striking conversion of an apartment block by Hundertwasser. The artist is shamelessly self-promoting but sincere, his colouring is Klimtisch done with children's acrylics. The grass-roofed utopian projects upstairs are fascinating. We decide to save money by dining from an Imbiss stall: the kids want pizza, Wife craves a hot dog, and I order a doner kebab, which looks so good that the kids want one each too, and devour them, hot paprika sauce and all. Ice-creams then, *zwei Kugeln* at AS14 per cone. Vienna is very pleasant after Berlin.

Next day I check local parking garages. One wants AS380, another AS480 for a 24-hour period. It's cheaper to pay (or not pay) the daily AS300 fine. I learn that the our hotel was the birthplace of the poet Franz Grillparzer. We visit the catacombs of Stephansdom, ending with a glimpse of a bone pile from two thousand plague victims. The catacombs were closed after the stench of death filtered into the cathedral and nearby wine cellars. I go alone to the Sezession building in the rain. I like the Beethoven frieze by Klimt in the basement, in spite of the ridiculous King Kong monster. On the main floor, in a well-proportioned white room, there's a show of coloured squares in glass cases. A side room contains close-up photos of vulvae, some with fingers stuck in. Upstairs there are photos of naked men with superimposed erections, so it looks as if they're sodomizing each other.

I suppose vaginas and penises have an inherent interest, compared with the exhausted minimalism on display at the Museum des 20 Jahrhunderts: a yellow canvas; a pile of rocks; old guttering; photos of Pennsylvania mining apparatus. Then I wander down to the Danube, find an English language bookshop, and buy copies of hard-to-find 1890s fiction. I get a nice bottle of wine for AS28 (\$3). The others have had a pleasant trip to the Doll Museum, Wife's bought an Austrian cookbook, and Son some Lego. On Stephansplatz the kids each buy snowstorms (*Schneekugeln*), and we eat at an Italian where the kids order tagliatelle with four kinds of cheese. We decide not to go to Venice but to save Italy for the future: something to look forward to over the Regina winter. We get delicious *drei Kugeln* ice-cream cones. We give our loose change to a female singer under a dome in the Hofburg, where the acoustics make her voice sound spectacular.

At last, a fine day. We walk to Freud's house, Berggasse 19. No furniture ... it was moved to London in 1938. You're given a black folder with a numbered key to interpret the documents and artefacts on display. A photo of the Nazi flag above the entrance to this house in 1938. Freud was a significant force for good, an enlightener, as per Auden's great elegy. Then we walk to Schottenring station and take the clean, modern subway to Schönbrunn. The zoo features orang-utans, spectacled bears from Kamchatka, a panther with a eerie gasping bark, and an aquarium with moray eels. We all eat schnitzelburgers, but are too exhausted to do more than wander through the palace courtyard. In the evening Wife and I dine at the Gulaschmuseum on Hungarian pork goulash and beer. Feeling quite at home in Europe, we make plans for future visits.

My three-city research trip is done. The next morning is fine, and for once there's no ticket on the car. At a nearby bookstore I try in vain to find anything in German or English by Hermann Bahr, the chief Austrian critic of the Modernist movement. It's a confirmatory sign. I've already concluded that most of the art I've seen, liked, and want to explore further, was produced during the nineteenth-century fin de siècle, and that subsequent Modernism (first so named by Bahr) was an aesthetic disaster area. Daughter wants something good to read so we get her *The Hobbit*. Then we set off for the mountains.

Söll, Austria. We make good time to Salzburg, then take the scenic route rather than the autobahn. We arrive in Söll in the late afternoon – no sign of the Grandparents yet. We sit outside the Hotel Austria and drink beer. Eventually the old folks arrive in a minivan. After supper we sit on a terrace and chat, watching swallows wheel around the church tower with onion cupola that dominates this village, so picturesque it could be a Tyrolean theme park. The hot day ends with a violent thunderstorm.

We are awoken at seven the next morning by a Stockhausen sonata played by the church bells in the tower. I buy a map of the area and plan an ambitious mountain hike, three hours to the Hintersteinersee. Through the narrow village roads, then a remorseless ascent of about 250

metres, enlivened by roadside wild strawberries, *Heidelbeer*, and Alpine wildflowers. The lake is too far, so we stop after two hours at the Achtleitner Gasthof, about two-thirds of the way. There we're refreshed by *Gulaschsuppe*, beer, *Mineralwasser*, cokes, etc. The weather rapidly changes for the worse, terrace parasols are taken down and sheathed in giant green condoms. The next valley is obliterated by a grey veil. Fortunately we all have English cagoules to shield us from the downpour and it's downhill all the way back. Scrabble after dinner: Grandma delighted to win the last game.

Next day we drive to the Achtleitner Inn and take the forest walk to the Hintersteinersee. A farmer and wife are scything a slope too steep for a lawnmower. The lake's a beautiful glacial turquoise like those of the Rockies. Heavy clouds roll in as we have lunch by the lake. Son's order of *Mickey-Maus-Schnitzel* is forgotten by the waitress and he waits, more patiently than the rest of us, for thirty more minutes to be served. Wife and Daughter decide to walk back to Söll, so I drive the others home and, as the weather worsens, drive back to rescue the walkers, who I find nonchalantly threading wild strawberries onto straws in the rain.

Söll is small but well endowed. Its English-style pub serves sausages, baked beans, and potatoes-in-their-jackets. The church is an austere white on the outside, but inside every inch is covered with baroque frescos, paintings, statuary, and gilt. The graveyard is almost full and the remaining spaces are reserved. We walk to the foot of the cable car at Hohe Salve. The kids are full of manic energy, then Daughter trips and lies screaming. Has she broken her leg? No, just a slight bump on a rock. Back home Grandpa makes English tea with his little immersion heater and we all play Scrabble. I win, to Wife's annoyance.

We're awakened as usual by the bells, Wife counts seventy-two dongs. I phone Ron in Germany to tell him of our arrival on Saturday. He says the Austrians are all waiting for Hitler's return. He saw *Wann kommst Du, denn?* scrawled under a photo of the Führer on a billboard in Innsbruck. Grandpa thinks the Austrians have reached a state close to human perfection but are maddened by their failure to achieve it. They don't condescend, aren't hostile, but make it clear that their tourist industry is for their benefit, not yours. At the hotel you eat dinner between 6:30 and 7:00 pm or not at all. But the food's pretty good: leek soup, bean salad, beef goulash with spätzle, custard.

We all pack into the Peugeot and drive 75 km to Innsbruck. The Altstadt is very attractive and there are no billboard photos of Hitler. The old square at the head of Maria-Theresien-Straße is a perfect location for witch-burning. We wander round the stores and Son is delighted by an exhibition of Lego scenes of famous explorers, while Daughter finds the roller-skates she's been craving. We cross the high and rapidly flowing Inn and ascend to the Alpenzoo via funicular. At the small, steep zoo the kids admire the "amorous bears" but as we're all tired by now, we stagger back to the car and Söll. For the first time it's fine enough to play Scrabble on the hotel balcony and the kids join in for the last round. Son wins!

June 23 is Son's thirteenth birthday ... he's a teenager! He doesn't want us to dwell on this landmark, but is pleased and a bit awed by the present of a Swiss Army knife. Weather terrible, heavy rain all morning. In the afternoon it brightens and we take a damp walk to the splendidly-named village of Scheffau am Wilden Kaiser. On our return we buy birthday cakes, borrow plates and forks from the bar, and rearrange the furniture in our room so we can all sit and enjoy them. Son uses his new knife to cut his cake and draws blood by licking the blade. The weather improves briefly so Daughter gets a chance to test her skates, but it's pouring down by bedtime.

As usual, we're woken up by the bells at 7:00 am, rise at 8:00, breakfast at 8:15. Another day starts cold, wet, and miserable. Kids not up for a walk, so we set out for Schloß Itter without them. We're blocked by a main road, huge trucks throwing up spray, but find a detour through a new housing development. Söll's location on a broad valley floor beneath ski slopes will surely lead to massive growth in a few years. Itter is a hamlet with a large inn and church, and its castle, once commandeered by the Waffen SS, is closed to the public. At the inn I have *Knoblauchsuppe*, a delicious garlicky cream broth. Another walk of about 12 km. At the *Konditorei* we have *Sacher-* or *Fruchttorte (ohne Sahne)*; the coffee's delicious. I take Daughter roller-skating. She likes Söll as she feels she can't get lost in it, and is intrigued by a maypole with three wreaths and waving ribbons.

June 25th counts as Daughter's unofficial tenth birthday, as Grandparents won't be around on the 30th. She gets a stuffed rabbit called Benjamin and a Waterstone's book token. It's the first fine day all week, so we decide to do a last mountain hike. Very scenic on the way up ... Wife fantasizes having a little Tyrolean farm with a few animals and a large garden. We take the spectacular fifteen-minute gondola ride up to Brandstadl at 1,650 metres. It's mainly downhill thereafter on the Panoramaweg, and we go for two hours before stopping for lunch. I have *Backerbsensuppe*, which I assumed was pea soup but the *Erbsen* are actually pea-sized balls of dough. It's another hour to Hochsöll, and Daughter gets exhausted and a little faint, so needs to be assisted for the last two km. Finally we descend via gondola into Söll. The walk's our longest yet ... about 15 km. Birthday cakes from the *Konditorei, mit Sahne* this time, help restore us.

Next morning we say our goodbyes to the Grandparents. The weather in Söll has been poor, the church bells disruptive, but we've had good exercise and eating. We adults have stayed on reasonably good terms for the past week by restricting ourselves to impersonal topics of conversation and activities we all enjoy: country walks, eating cake, Scrabble. Grandma (64) and Grandpa (71) seem in good physical shape. None of us could have guessed that the strenuous mountain hike yesterday would be the last one they would ever take.

Dettenheim, Germany. It pours all the way to Munich, where we're caught in heavy traffic. A man wearing a long blond wig and print frock riding a motorcycle-with-trailer cuts in front of us on the Mittelring. Thereafter it's plain sailing and we reach Karlsruhe by 3:00 pm. We cut north

through dense forest, some of it evidently dying (acid rain?) Then, following Ron's elaborate but misleading directions, we find ourselves on the west (wrong) side of the Rhine. Eventually we find the Crowley house in a characterless commuting village barely three km east of the great river. Gisela tells us that their next door neighbour has asked Ron not to drink beer in the back garden "as my husband is a professor." How German is that?

Ron is ampler of girth and greyer, Gisela is tense as she's marking final exams. Ron's son Sam (18), whom I haven't seen since infancy, is six-four, a pleasant, articulate young man, nose broken from basketball. He plans to visit his "hare-brained" mother in New Mexico this summer, and hopes to go to Durham Uni in the fall to read archaeology. Sid and Den, R. & G.'s younger sons, are very different. Tiny Sid (6) claims to be able to read palms and tells Daughter she'll have four children, no husband, many animals. Den, eleven months older than Sid, is taller and quieter. Later Kurt, their older, pubescent son, arrives. He tells us that hair is growing on his penis and that the Earthsea Trilogy is his favourite book. He's impressed that I have met Ursula Le Guin.

We spend two days with the Crowleys. On the first we go to Speyer, Gisela's home town, climb the Altpörtel, then visit the Cathedral, a great Romanesque barn. In the crypt there's the crown of Charlemagne, a symbol of domination that has tantalized German-speaking Europe for centuries. We are bidden to silence before the tombs of the Salian emperors who ruled from Speyer before the Hapsburgs moved the Holy Roman Circus to Vienna. We're amused by the posters all over genteel Speyer advertising a punk concert by Putrid Scum and Puke Pakis. We then go down to the banks of the Rhine and watch the barges go by. We find a tiny lost kitten there that appeals to us plaintively. Daughter wants to cuddle it but we explain that to pick it up is to accept responsibility for it, which we're in no position to do.

Next day we visit the European School at Karlsruhe. It serves the children of Eurocrats and offers classes taught in English, German, French, Italian, and Dutch. Gisela teaches here and all the Crowley kids, Sam included, attend. Karlsruhe is a pleasant medium-sized city, with a fine eighteenth-century palace built by the Margrave of Baden-Durlach. The centre of Karlsruhe is completely traffic-free, except for hundreds of cyclists and electric trams so silent that one almost runs over the easily distracted Sid. Ron admonishes him lengthily for his carelessness; Ron always picks on Sid, says Gisela, as they're so alike.

Ron's more insufferable than ever. He's an expert in everything from asparagus-growing to ornithology. He spots a hawk and identifies it as a heron: "you have to look carefully to see its long neck." We quickly tune out his tedious bullshit, but the flow is unceasing. How does he make a living? Nothing *specific* at present. In the future? Freelance ecological golf club design ... teaching English in Karlsruhe ... finishing his PhD thesis (begun twenty years ago). Why do we put up with this blowhard? Because he and I have had a two-decade friendship that initially arose out of expat solidarity in Hamilton. Because Wife feels sorry for Gisela, married to Ron.

Because we have all shared some good times over the years: in Yugoslavia, Greece, the Peak District, Dorset, Herefordshire. We promise to meet the Crowleys in Derbyshire in July, on the tenth anniversary of our vacation together there.

France. Ron claims that he can be on the Champs-Élysées avoiding *péage* five hours after leaving Dettenheim, but of course that's utterly impossible. We take the fastest option, the toll autoroute through Lorraine and Champagne, and it takes us five hours to Château-Thierry, more than an hour east of Paris. We're distracted only by some unexplained roadside installations of coloured spheres, pyramids, cylinders, as if chromatically obsessed aliens had left inscrutable signs of their landing. The kids are delighted to be back in France, Daughter raving about the *beignets de poulet* in the service area. Château-Thierry was the hometown of fabulist Jean de la Fontaine. It's quite undistinguished, though our randomly chosen resto provides excellent *fricassée de poissons* and a bottle of our beloved rosé d'Anjou.

Next morning, Wednesday 30 June, is Daughter's birthday, but she's running a raging fever. We decide to fly her and Wife to Manchester to convalesce with the Grandparents. We dope her up with Tylenol to reduce her temperature and drive through a terrific rainstorm to CDG. Having seen them off, Son and I return the rented Peugeot, take the shuttle to the RER, get off at Gare du Nord and drag our cases up to the surface. It takes an age to get tickets to London and the departure platform isn't announced till ten minutes before the train leaves. But we score good seats in an uncrowded carriage in a fast train. At Boulogne, we take the Seacat, a high-speed catamaran, to Folkestone, a journey so quick Son barely has time to feel queasy.

London. The English countryside looks exquisite in the summer sunshine. We pass the massive excavations for the impending Channel Tunnel. The contrast to efficient French railways is stark, however. The Region Southeast train crawls backwards out of Folkestone, stops, then the driver, holding a lighted cigarette, walks through the carriages to his cab at the front. We trundle through Kent and into a quiet Victoria Station after 7:00 pm. I call John to warn him of our arrival, then we get a "fast black" to SW18 with a driver who's listening to an audio book about Wormald's encounter with Negresses. In the evening we dine at the local French restaurant. I'm starving, and devour seafood pot-au-feu. Son, exhausted, falls asleep with his head on the table and John and I share his uneaten steak between us. At the next table is John's neighbour Jane with one of her married lovers, a loud, drunk, ex-public schoolboy who actually uses the word "bally" as an intensifier.

We take a cruise from Westminster Pier to Greenwich. London from the Thames is so historically resonant, though the great dockland warehouses east of Tower Bridge have all been converted into flats. A volunteer guide gives us a personal tour of Cutty Sark. We eat at a pie café on Greenwich High Street that has the sausage rolls Son adores. John leaves on an errand and Son and I visit the National Maritime Museum. The highlights are a Pirate Exhibition and the *Reliant*, a 1907 paddle tug, centrepiece of the Neptune Hall Gallery. Later we dine with John at a

Soho restaurant owned by Pierre, whose son is the object of John's latest infatuation. The son (20), a former child actor, lives in my fantasy London flat; it's on the corner of Charing Cross Road and Denmark Street and is reached by an ancient lift. The three of us walk through the West End as far as Buck House and then get a taxi back to SW18. John and I stay up talking till 3:45 am.

On Friday we get the tube to South Ken to see the dinosaurs at the Natural History Museum. Baleful pterosaurs glare from cornices. Deinonychi tear lumps off a dying herbivore whose massive thigh twitches. Kids today delight in scenes of violence that would have left us sleepless with terror at the same age. We dine at an Italian then walk to Kensington High Street and spend an hour at an enormous Dillon's bookshop. We walk on to Notting Hill Gate just for the delight of being in London, then take a bus back to Oxford Street. The weather is tropical and people are sunbathing in the parks.

Through Soho to the Groucho Club, where Son becomes completely absorbed in a Nintendo magazine and John and I have a drink or two. Then to the Colony Room, as John, in the mood for slumming, wants us to meet "the nastiest man in London." That's the barman, who has a great brandy-swollen nose and spitefully snarls, "Are you bringing that child in here?" when we enter with Son. A drunken old Soho character at the bar regales us with slurred anecdotes and informs us that "Theda Bara" is an anagram of "Arab death." The Colony Room was the painter Francis Bacon's hangout, and the walls are covered with execrable daubs by his acolytes.

Squalor and Soho go together. In the Groucho the silver is coming off the mirrors, the walls are covered with bad art. Why don't the British just admit they can't paint? To the Comedy Theatre for *The Invisible Man*. It's the first-ever stage adaptation of Wells' novel, and is heavily reliant on illusions: drawers opening unbidden, a gun floating about. I find it pleasantly amusing and Son likes it a lot. John lasts only ten minutes and goes home to make supper. What does Son make of this metropolitan life so utterly different from his usual routine? The Nintendo magazine helps stabilize things, but (he freely confesses) he's missing his mother. I hold his hand as we battle through the crowds in Leicester Square. Big city life is very far from normal for me too these days. John and I stay up talking till 3:00 am.

A hot evening. We're sitting in the garden at Melrose Road near midnight, John's reading the Sherlock Holmes story "The Devil's Foot" to Son by candlelight. Suddenly there appears, in the window of the flat above John's, a brilliant light that manically strobes for twenty minutes before ending as suddenly in darkness. John can offer no reasonable explanation, except that a strange, uncommunicative woman lives there. John's other neighbours, young and unsupervised Spaniards, have a habit of throwing used condoms into John's garden, and after he reproached them, now they too don't speak to him.

We take Son to visit HMS *Belfast*, then lunch at a bistro in a converted warehouse mall by London Bridge. Next day Wife and Daughter arrive at Euston, and we get a taxi to The Ivy, where we're treated with astonishing deference by the staff and eat very expensive fish and chips. John points out the great and good and we chat briefly with Simon Callow.

Daughter wants to see the dinosaurs too, so I take her. She loves them, and I love them even more the second time. Then we meet the others at Pierre's on Frith Street, where John treats us to lunch at the window table, our bags piled around. We all go to Euston to see Wife and kids off to Manchester. I go alone to see Rattigan's *Separate Tables*, which has a good cast, but the play's too stuffy and doesn't ignite, in spite of the audience willing it to do so. John confers with a friend at the BBC about a proposed radio show about H. Rider Haggard. In my new role as late nineteenth-century literature expert, I assure them Haggard is worthy of resurrection.

John and I have lunch at the Groucho with John's older brother Bill, formerly a merchant seaman, now a shipping broker in the City. Then to the Pissarro Exhibition at the Royal Academy: luminous scenes of Paris, Dieppe and channel ports, several studies of the fountains near the Louvre where we all managed to lose each other last month. In the evening we attend the press night of *Much Ado about Nothing* at the Queen's Theatre, the first Shakespeare on Shaftesbury Avenue for a generation. John's eager to see his old RADA chum Mark Hadfield as Borachio. Mark Rylance is superb as Benedick with a thick Ulster accent, and Janet McTeer, an amazon who towers over Rylance, is his equal as Beatrice. Rapturous reception by the audience and, next day, the critics. At the crowded reception I spot Eleanor Bron, Alan Rickman, Geraldine McEwan. But I'm exhausted and return to Melrose early leaving John with the luvvies.

I go to the British Museum to get a library card and put in orders for obscure novels of the 1890s. It'll take time, as they are "outhoused." Nice to work under the famous dome, which soon won't be possible as the British Library is moving to a new building on Euston Road. I meet John on the steps of the National Gallery, where we view an exhibition of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century paintings from Lille. No masterpieces, but French painterly competence is deep. In the evening to the Fulham Road to eat at a low-key Italian. I have seafood salad and a tuna steak, the latter a culinary highlight of the trip. I have a sharp pain in my right lung, my body telling me I'm overdoing it. An early night.

I visit the Cousins in East Molesey. The weather turns and I'm drenched on the walk from Hampton Court Station. A drowned rat, I buy a brolly at Woolworth's, much to the amusement of the lady at the till. Sister has an ear infection that makes her feel seasick and stops her from driving. Back with John in the evening, we go to Nosh Bros, a joint in Fulham recommended by John's interior designer. I have wild boar sausages and bubble-and-squeak. John is appalled by the violence and cruelty of the décor. The dominant motifs are sharpened knives. The bill comes with a postcard photo of one of the owners in a butcher's apron with a naked woman slung over

his shoulder and holding a cleaver. Back in Melrose we listen to Lou Reed and watch the brilliant movie *If..*, bringing back schoolboy memories repressed by us both.

Manchester. I go up by train. Grandpa and I take the kids to see Roald Dahl's *The Witches* at the Opera House. All amused at the transformation of the main character into a mouse. Wife arrives from Copenhagen. The weather's typical Manc: either drizzling, just stopped drizzling, or just about to drizzle.

We spend a long time in Waterstone's on Deansgate, having gone into town on the new Metro tram system. Wife and kids buy a great stack of books to see them through winter. Grandma, Wife, and I go to see *Maybe*, a free adaptation of a Russian play at the Royal Exchange. A young American girl is determined to go to Bosnia to "do something" about the situation there, while her mother tries to stop her. The crisis precipitates flashbacks in the mind of her grandmother who had "named names" during the McCarthy era. Interesting play, well acted except for star Vanessa Redgrave who "fidgeted around the stage," as a critic put it. Wife notes that Vanessa (56) kept on displaying her ass to the audience. Vanessa evidently feels her ass is ... an asset. Next day, as if to apologize for her exhibitionism, Vanessa leads an appeal at the Royal Exchange for the victims of Yugoslav violence that raises several thousand pounds.

We're invited to Uncle J.'s, where I hadn't been since childhood. We're warned by Grandma that Aunt M. allows guests only one potato each. Surprisingly, the food is ample and good. Cousin R. must have done the catering – she seems better than two years ago, when she was diagnosed with terminal breast cancer. She's been taken on as an experimental subject by Christie's Hospital, but perhaps her survival should also be credited to her indomitable will.

A crisis. I go into Manchester to buy train tickets for our trip to Derbyshire to meet the Crowleys. Grandma has told me, incorrectly, that Rail Card tickets have to be bought a day in advance. I call Grandpa to find out if anyone's heard from the Crowleys, and he says, "There's a slight problem ..." Wife developed a UTI earlier that day and Grandma, who always knows best, prescribed Mist Pot. Cit. and Robinson's lemon barley water. The UTI then became acute and Wife had to force Grandma to take her to emergency by threatening to fly immediately to Sweden if she didn't. Wife waited two hours, saw a doctor, got an antibiotic, it did the trick. Forever afterwards, "lemon barley water" is our shorthand for Grandma's delusional panaceas. The rest of us go to Aunt B. and Uncle P.'s for dinner, meet Cousin M.'s new husband, who, billed as "a real bore" by Grandma, strikes us as a presentable but shy young man.

Grandma plans to sell the Waterpark Road house and move, but Grandpa is in a sulk about this. Broughton Park has been colonized by Haredi Jews from all over the world, who look on outsiders as intruders. Hasidic children, passing my parents' gate, stop and stare at our kids, as though at exotic animals in a zoo. Grandma drives us to a 1970s suburb on the edge of the green belt where she's thinking of moving. Meanwhile, Cheetham Village, lively as ever by day,

is steel-shuttered and sinister after dark. The gas station at Halfway House closes its little store at dusk and thereafter the attendant cowers behind armoured glass. Boots has a uniformed security guard constantly on duty. I have to walk miles to find a store open at 8:00 pm.

So this will be the last time we visit the house where I lived for fifteen formative years. I don't feel much nostalgia for the place, and haven't once ventured into the back garden, where Grandma has devised a beautiful floral display. Hoping to drive a bargain, the Haredis wanting to buy the house sent over a surveyor the day after they'd heard that a torrential rainstorm had flooded the cellar for the first time in thirty years. Now Grandpa, whose view of ultra-Orthodox Jewry doesn't bear repeating, tells me he feels trapped in Broughton Park, while deeply resenting having to move at all. The potential buyers (American) say they can't make an offer until the "Nine Days" are over. The Grandparents are worn down by these tactics and will sell the house for well below its appraised value just to get relief from the pressure.

Buxton. Wife has recovered enough to make the train trip to Derbyshire. Grandma, claiming traffic is "nose to tail" at that time in the morning, deposits us at Piccadilly Station an hour before the train leaves. Weather wet and dark, brightening only at Buxton. Ron is barely able to walk, having strained something reaching from the bath. All ten of us eat at the King's Head in the Market Place, then go to Poole's Cavern, a show-cave, with myriads of fine hairlike stalactites and one massive thick one, emasculated by the Victorians. A poached-egg chamber has stalagmites with pink-yellow centres that run all the way through, like Blackpool rock. The young female guide notes with a wink that the chamber has "other names which I won't go into."

We have cream teas overlooking a park. Gisela is more relaxed than she was in Dettenheim and Sam is pleased to have been accepted by Durham Uni. Ron informs us that National Parks are currently "restricted by law to the north of England." He and Grandma are strong competitors for the Bullshit Trophy. Grandma now insists on diluting the kids' drinks with half water as "concentrated fruit juice is known to be highly toxic." However, bananas, formerly nutritionally fatal in her eyes, have now been rehabilitated.

To Canada. I have been given the wrong number for Air Transat, so it's not till the morning of our departure that I learn our flight's two hours later than scheduled. Grandma has already ordered the taxi, so we have a four-hour wait at the airport. Everything else has changed too, from the flight number to the planned stopover in Glasgow. We are now lugging five suitcases, six pieces of hand luggage, and a large package containing some of Grandpa's paintings. But we're lucky: our early arrival means we're first in the queue for check-in and the already harassed agent has a broken weigh scale. So we get away without paying extra for our seriously overweight baggage.

Our plane has no external markings, a coat of white paint covering the livery of the airline from which it was evidently purchased the previous day. It has only two working WCs for more than two hundred passengers. A long, increasingly desperate queue for the toilets lasts the entire flight. But we leave and arrive on time. In Toronto it takes me only thirty minutes to get our car from storage, and us another thirty minutes to haul our bags up the crowded elevator to the parking level, load the car till it's groaning, and set off through rush hour traffic. We make it as far as the Best Western in Barrie and sleep for ten hours. Our Grand Tour is over. Next morning the weather is warm and the vast blue North American heaven is sprinkled with high cloudlets. Son approves the generous width of Ontario roads and is pleased to be back in Canada. He wants me to make him a Caesar salad as soon as we get back to Regina.