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*Eastward: A Selection from the Forthcoming Novel*

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*In the course of their earthly existence, humans have no freedom, except for the possibility of ending their own lives prematurely. To a certain extent, humans are taken into protective care from the first moment of their life. The orphaned baby only becomes such at the moment when he has been discovered by someone else—pushed away by his own parents, taken up by a stranger. Even he will be cared for. Teachers and doctors will attend to him. They will instill in him the great good of freedom, only after they have robbed him of it—that freedom he might have encountered in utter rejection. The freedom to remain a stranger. Fathers and mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers, uncles and aunts, older siblings. They will deter him from freedom. But how can one explain that feeling of loneliness that will accompany him throughout his life—in its most stealth and stolid forms?*

## **Chapter One**

I touch the blood of my father. The blood that he spilled upon his prayer rug. I never saw him kneel on this rug. There was no prayer mark on his forehead—the kind that might set in over the years from rubbing it routinely against the rug. After his death, I dug his rug out of the oak armoire where it had been stored—unused—among other unused things, and I spread it out on the floor in front of my writing table. It projects upward from the wooden floor, like a realm where one may not tread. Were one to step unwittingly upon this space, the act would not go unrequited.

Sometimes I hole myself up on this rug, I lose myself in the living pattern of the rug, I watch the gazelle that seems to leap outward from the border of the pattern, the fountain in the middle that springs from among the tulips. Tulips that have been covered in blood. With whose blood? The blood of the supplicant who carried this rug under his arm, over rivers and steppes, from one continent to another. Or strangers' blood spilled for the sake of survival during the passage, or maybe just to fulfill a more or less reasonable obligation in a war that was not his own, and one that was already lost.

“We were warriors just passing through,” said my father.

“We had no more ground under our feet, no homeland to defend, no land that someone could conquer from us. We were always retreating. We retreated into a foreign land whose people were foreign to us, whose language we had to learn while we learned to fire those guns. We were called up—only to find our way back to ourselves. But how could one find his way to himself with no country of his own, no king to admire, no belief, no fatherland—when no one will bury the dead he had to leave behind?”

The blood had seeped down into the fabric and left the bright-colored rug several shades darker. I stare at the colors until they begin to blend together. I stay at my desk. It gets dark.

My father was born east of Vienna. I could also say east of Munich, east of Paris, three thousand kilometers east of Vienna, three thousand five hundred kilometers east of Munich, four thousand two hundred kilometers east of Paris. The kilometers are of little relevance; but the “east of” is important indeed. The east defines distance all on its own. Distances may expand or shrink; on the map they differ according to measurement. Sometimes they take up the length of a finger, sometimes the span of a hand, sometimes a forearm. But the distance that defines the east is always the same.

I am in the west. West of the land of my father, west of his slaughters. But his blood mark did not happen in the east. It set in on his way to Paris. So the west was defiled too.

I live in Munich, the city of my birth. My mother was born not far from here, in the same place where her parents and her parents’ parents came into the world: a true down-home farmer’s daughter. My mother now lives back in the countryside, on her mother’s farm, which has since been shut down. Her father died in the World War. He was listed MIA. An MIA who had never left his home until he was drafted.

It could very well have been that my mother’s father crossed paths with my own father on the front; maybe he met those infantrymen of Turk Division 162 that Ritter Niedermayer had assembled—this man they called “the Lion of the East,” and before that “the Kaiser’s Oriental Warrior”—a researcher and cartographer turned strategist and spy, insatiably ambitious. Maybe my mother’s father told his comrade, my father, about where he was from, about his wife and daughter, about the fog that shrouds the countryside all day long and suddenly, the next morning, turns to snow.

Even if my grandfather and my father did stand on the same front, there is no evidence that they met one another. My father never mentioned such a meeting. It is a meeting in my imagination, but one that I cannot relinquish.

For those without a homeland, stories of rooted people always sound like fairytales.

Circumstances permitting, my father would sit down with us when my mother told fairy tales. “It’s how I recover. I can go to sleep better after that,” was how he justified his participation. My father survived that same war in which my grandfather went missing. What side did he fight on? The right one, as he claimed throughout his life? On the wrong one, as I saw it? Or neither? After all, he was fighting in a foreign brigade. Men like him are only seldom seen in those old *Wehrmacht* photos: slight of build, thick dark hair, almond eyes. Certainly not some Aryan, but a Lance Corporal nonetheless. A Tartar who got his stripes when the Germans took him captive at Kharkiv. The Muslims and Jews were divided up, though doing so wasn’t always a simple affair. As sons of Abraham, the Muslim and the Jew had both been circumcised. An ancient tradition that presented the SS with a difficult task. They were not equipped for such subtle differentiations. Until word went around that Hitler was liberating the Muslims and killing the Jews: *Man, things are going to go great with these Germans; now we get double daily rations and you can pray again too. You don’t have to go to your death without praying, like you did with Stalin.*

## **Chapter Two**

Two moustached men were fighting by the side door of the train station.

They were slight of build, but they had conspicuously large upper arms. I made a wide arc around them; they noticed me anyway. When I approached them, they lowered their voices. Do they think I am one of them? One of the enemy? Do they recognize me? From where? I almost never leave the path prescribed for me, the path between home, school, and the library. Maybe when I have to go to the doctor. These men never go to the doctor, unless a fight gets way out of control.

I travel only seldom, and only for research purposes. I have my collection of maps; that’s enough for me. Looking at a map leaves me awash with wanderlust—with that sensation that I just might be able to decode the world, even if I can’t know it. Hundreds of maps, countries, cities I’ve never known—I have it all. In drawers. Many of them were printed before my time. I can’t say whether all of the borders demarcated on them are still correct. I notice them and that’s enough for me. Countries extend outward from under my hand, the mountain ranges marked in dark colors, the blue lakes, seas, oceans. Green and

yellowish surfaces indicate fertility and drought. I don't collect political maps. I am not interested in states; human as I am, I have never succeeded in imagining what these are. Natural phenomena are a different story altogether. Nature as it is sketched out on physical and topographical maps—forests pictured as lungs—this I can imagine. Water as life essence, the endless prairies as a woman's lap, their depth—a hunting ground, a breeding pasture tilled with devotion; the rainforests with their almost nocturnal green offering up a pendant to the human soul, to those who believe in the existence of unproven, speculative realities. These maps are my keys—for the world, for earthly being, for the existence of humans at all. Even if I don't find anything there that reminds me of the human mind—that organ that fascinates me almost as much as the heart—these maps are products of it: this mind that stows knowledge and channels observation. Borders between states are not marked on them. And when they are, only awkwardly. They are—given their biological meaninglessness—dealt with unfavorably.

I am standing in front of a geography and biology blackboard. In my eyes, these two realms are intimately entwined. What interests me more than anything else is the teaching materials that are available for these subjects. It is always a gratifying moment when I enter a space set aside for teaching materials. I linger as long as possible among the skeletons, the visual aids, sketches of human organs, and all manner of colorful maps. In order to remain inconspicuous, I pretend to look for something I cannot find. A map where the water has disappeared and the cities smell like algae, where schools of fish jostle through mountain passes. A human heart that sees like an eye can.

When I travel, I always take the train.

For sentimental reasons, I enter train stations from the side door. It's always a bit quieter, and the local commuter rail tracks are closer there. Those local trains from my childhood in the south of the city, the southbound trains leaving the city toward the mountains, alongside the lakes between the city and the foothills, lakes whose depths I came to know with time. I have drawn what surrounds me into my body; it took me years to search out every spot, to apprehend all the details in word and image. Only when I begin to dream about a place do I open up to it. By now, my dreams reach all the way into the Balkans, and so I have to leave the Balkans behind and open up to some new terrain.

At the new central station, the train tracks stand empty. Today, one can travel only to the most distant destinations.

As night falls, I climb into a train that will cross the Balkans until it reaches Istanbul. A city I have never been to, a city that is sure to afford me passage into a world I never knew. My father went to Istanbul often, ever since he was no longer allowed to travel into the Soviet Union. He always traveled alone. Maybe he had something to take care of there that he wanted to keep secret from my mother and me; maybe the reason he gave for these trips—that there he could feel the homeland he would never get any closer to—was just a pretense.

I am alone in the train compartment. I sink into Nabokov's *Asian Travels*—his venture into the realm of unknown butterflies—written in a basement apartment in Berlin in 1934. The poet dreams of being the researcher Konstantin Gondunov en route to East Turkistan, a landscape that makes even the most peculiar kinds of disappearance appear credible.

Someone has left a small black suitcase on the baggage rack. It is light, but sealed tightly. Seeing how the train has stood at the station for several hours since arriving and has been cleaned in the meantime—though not very well, apparently—it would seem the passenger has not even noticed his suitcase is missing. One must conclude that the suitcase has been left on the rack for a reason. Maybe it is meant for someone who will board here in Munich and take possession of it. Since there's no sign of this person yet, I'll have to keep an eye on this suitcase myself.