Nature's Whim

**[Scene One]**

It's Sunday afternoon coffee hour in German wine country. The room is filled with Syrian refugees and Germans. The *Schnorresänger*, a men's *acapella* group, is ready to take the stage. We're here to welcome refugees who are, *de facto*, our new neighbors. Clad in white oxfords and black dress pants, the *Schnorresänger* start their act with a German pop song--only the lyrics have been rewritten in the local dialect. They've transformed a teenage love song into a drinking song and an ode to Rheinhessen, Germany's largest wine growing region:

**[I'd like a clip here of this song from the *Schnorresänger* group, permission pending...]**

**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UuxaM-vNU-M -- [Here's a link to the real song that the group stole and rewrote…so you get the idea...]**

"*Please... gimme just one wine...please, please, one more glass of wine."* I find this an amusing choice, given the mostly-Muslim audience whose religion forbids them from drinking alcohol. But, one look outside and you see vineyards--Rheinhessen has been producing wine since the Roman Empire controlled this area. Wineries are almost as abundant here as fast food joints are in American suburbs.

The next song ratchets up the surreal quality of the coffee hour: John Denver's "Country Roads." The song fits the occasion—we're in the middle of rural Germany, and many in the audience have traveled by foot to reach this place; their longing for home and the journey they have behind them is a concept we just can't imagine. I start for a moment to wonder where the hell I am--German men are crooning in English to a group of Middle-Easterners who've fled their war-torn home. In their earnest barbershop style, they sing:

*Country roads, take me home*

*To the place I belong,*

*West Virginia,*

*Mountain mama, take me home*

*Country roads*

**[I'd like to include an actual sound clip from the group's song here too]**

Still, it's touching, to see them reach out, to see my daughter's friend's dad, welcoming strangers with his wit and song; I remember meeting his family in the weeks after we moved here, six years ago. His daughter befriended our middle child , Cecilia, when she showed up at the local kindergarten. Nine months later, when she finally spoke German for the

first time at school, Cecilia said his daughter's name.

This gathering has the feel of a church picnic, a quintessentially awkward social event, where the compulsion to speak to strangers or people with whom you normally wouldn't interact is overwhelming. I approach one of the Syrian men and introduce myself in German. He switches to English, "I'm Muhannad," he says. I plow through the awkwardness, and our conversation progresses.

"How did you land in Stadecken-Elsheim?" I ask. He explains that he was transferred here from Trier, a small German city two hours away. Pushing for more details, I ask how he got to Trier. He replies: "I went from Munich to Trier." I continue to pry, and he explains how he traveled from Catania to Rome; from Rome to Verona, then on to Munich. I want to know about the voyage from Syria to Stadecken-Elsheim. He says that he took a boat from Turkey to Greece; no one knew how to drive it; it was rescued by the Red Cross.

"There were many big waves. The boat was overcrowded. I didn't think I would survive. I paid 6000 Euros to make that passage." After waiting for two months, he's received asylum and that his wife joined him here last month. I introduce him to my daughters and husband. His green eyes glance towards his cell phone, and he shows me a picture of his 12-year-old sister. He says he's always on *What's App* with his family in Damascus.

Everyone here recognizes the daunting challenges of integrating more than a million refugees. Despite ever-mounting criticism from various directions, Angela Merkel stands by her decision to open Germany's doors to refugees last year. In the meantime, anxiety is mounting: Will Germany maintain its economic dominance given the financial burdens of resettling millions? The terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels, the sexual assaults on New Year's Eve in Cologne, and this summer's string of brutal terrorist attacks in Germany and France have only added to fears of more violence and culture clashes. Now my adolescent daughters realize that terror could strike them on their way to school in the city. For the first time in the six years we've lived here, my girls doubt their safety. Fears have fueled arson attacks on refugee shelters throughout Germany and the rising popularity of xenophobic political parties. These uncertainties mark a historical moment, an uncomfortable one in a culture where people always have a plan, one more detailed than Merkel's famous phrase, "*Wir schaffen das,"* (We'll manage.)

**[SCENE TWO:]**

My car ascends a steep inclining bend on a two lane country road in "the land of a thousand hills," Rheinhessen's other alias. I'm on my way to speak to Dr. Eva Vollmer, a vintner who "resembles her wine—rugged, always authentic and not at all introverted."--that's how one newspaper described her. I wanted to find out more about wine growing in Rheinhessen, and after my daughters' music teacher spoke highly of her wine, I asked if I could speak with her. I nearly miss the dirt road that takes you to her home and winery.Birch, apple trees and a weeping willow line the driveway next to her two-story beige stucco house.

Dr. Vollmer emerges from a small office with blond hair swept hastily back into a small ponytail. Her seafoam-green cotton shirt spans an almost impossible distance across her pregnant belly-- a contrast to her small stature. Clad in loose, cuffed bell bottom jeans, fleece-lined crocs, and glasses, she shakes my hand. Without a smile, she says, "*Hallo*," in a congested voice. After we sit down in her tasting room, she explains her less-is-more strategy: "Just as a chef carefully chooses her menu, I select just a few grape varieties." Vollmer produces sixteen wines from six different grape varieties and harvests by hand.

When I ask Dr. Vollmer what she's learned from Nature, she says, "You think you know her. You think that with enough experience, you can predict how things will go and plan for similar situations. But Nature does as she pleases. Every day, every month, every year is different, so much so, that you just can't prepare for anything because, in the end, she'll play a trick on you. There is no recipe. You have to react spontaneously and make the best of what you have. One year, our very best pinot noir grapes were intended for a *blanc de noir* (a white wine made from a red grape variety--where the juice is pressed out and separated from the skins). Frost crept in and killed half of them, so, instead of a *blanc de noir*, we made a totally different wine -- a *Dornfelder* rosé and we called it, '*die Laune der Natur*'(Nature's whim). I have to think hard about what to do when Nature plays her tricks. I have no free time; my head is always occupied with our winery. Frost, drought, hail, torrential rain, continuous rain, heat—these problems keep me awake at night. I lie there thinking until I can figure out a solution. You just have to deal with the situation as it is."

We discuss other tricks like climate change. "We live in the lap of luxury here," says Vollmer. "We need to move away from luxury back toward normalcy. Too little is being done about climate change. Right now, German wine is profiting from it." Over the last few decades, moderate rises in temperature and a subsequently warmer climate, have enabled German winegrowers to produce excellent Pinot Noir, a trend that just didn't exist thirty years ago. She says, "I'm afraid that eventually, the scales will tip. German Riesling will be endangered. Nature can be pretty rough. The climate is getting more extreme, and I worry about our existence."

**[SCENE THREE]**

Nature plays plenty of tricks, and humans continue to taunt her. Just over ten years ago, when my family lived in New Orleans, flood waters caused by Hurricane Katrina, levee failures and climate change, destroyed all of our family's belongings and devastated several neighborhoods in New Orleans. Water, chemicals and mold warped and destroyed the remnants of our past.

Katrina's devastation first brought our family to Germany since, at the time, the German government offered

research grants to displaced scholars; my husband was a fortunate recipient. Both of our moves to Germany were improvised solutions to secure our family's livelihood, done on a month's notice. We tossed our four girls into German schools and kindergartens. Because of their immersion and subsequent integration, they are able to speak and understand the language, as well as the cultural subtleties of this place. They favor German over English to argue with each other and tell each other jokes. They have climbed outward from their roots, like cordons that stretch along a vine trellis. Though they cling to this place as vine tendrils to a training wire, they still long for home.

**[SCENE FOUR]**

I ask Dr. Vollmer about pests. As an organic winegrower, she's got to be clever about fighting them. Rather than *Roundup*, she uses baking powder and grows herbs in between rows of vines. I'm particularly interested in finding out about the grape louse, or *phylloxera*, which originated in the Mississippi River valley. Related to the aphid, the louse feeds on grapevine roots and leaves, eventually cutting off the flow of nutrients to the vines.

In 1863, wild American grape vine cuttings, which had evolved to resist the vine louse, were taken to a greenhouse in Hammersmith, a posh London suburb. Whoever brought them to Europe had no idea that the tiny pests were along for the ride and would, in turn, devastate European grapes over the next three decades. The French indicated the degree of destruction this pest caused, designating its taxonomy as *phylloxera vastatrix*; you could translate her species name as "the devastator." By the turn of the twentieth century, the devastator had ravaged 70 percent of vineyards in Europe. Desperate for a cure, the French government offered enormous sums for anyone who could find one. The French botanist, Jules Planchon and American entomologist, Charles Riley, collaborated and discovered that if the European *vinifera* vines were grafted onto the American grape roots, which have naturally evolved to resist the louse, they could control her but not eradicate her. In 1884, the French government awarded these scientists the Legion of Honor in gratitude for rescuing Europe's wine. (No money since, technically, no remedy was found.)

Nearly a century and a half later, there's still no cure—just a treatment. Before vines are planted out in European vineyards, they attend what the Germans call "vine school" – a sort of kindergarten, if you will. Rows and rows of twiggy vines are planted out with white bandages to join the stock and scion until the graft has taken.

**[SCENE FIVE]**

Grafting vines in the nineteenth century saved one of Europe's most important cultural and agricultural treasures. Likewise, Germany's ambitious and difficult process of integration in the twenty-first century will be the key to securing Europe's livelihood over the next few generations. Even prior to the refugee crisis, I noticed how German society frowns upon the idea of parallel societies. The underlying idea is that parallel societies breed suspicion, and, in order for a society to thrive, diverse groups of people have to intermingle so as to minimise vulnerability to fanaticism--like the kind that ran so dreadfully amuck in Germany in the late 1920s and 1930s.

Only in hindsight will Europe's refugee crisis be fully understood. Like the German philosopher, Hegel's

famous insight, “The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk,” history can only be analyzed in hindsight. Until then, people will just have to deal with the situation as it is.

**[SCENE SIX]**

After the *Schnorresänger* finish their act, a young Syrian man sits down at a keyboard at the front of the room. The emcee explains that today is his birthday. My ears, unaccustomed to the Arabic scale, pick up an exotic melody.

**[INCLUDE MELODY]**

His compatriots rejoin his music as they clap to the beat. After, Muhannad and two other young men go to the front of the room. After their introduction, they tell the stories of their journeys from Syria to Stadecken. They tell their stories in English, which a local man translates into German. A young man, Yussef tells the crowd about dashing to the shore in Greece to get a spot on a boat, how his friend was caught by the Greek police. They let Yussef advance perhaps since he knew Greek, thanks to an internship he had done there earlier. Eventually, he was smuggled into Germany on a tractor trailer headed to Munich. A third young man tells his story. He didn’t want to cross the Hungarian border afraid he would be stuck there, so he travelled by way of Austria and was smuggled to Frankfurt. After he spent a few nights sleeping on the street, hunger, thirst and fatigue set in, so he turned himself in to the police. “Smiles are what strike me here as I walk down the street. After five years of war and then, leaving Syria, we’ve forgotten how to smile. Thank you for your humility. I hope somehow, someday, we can pay you back.”

We start home on our bicycles, pedaling out of the rec center’s parking lot. Two couples, parents of our daughters’ friends, stop us as we cycle slowly past the kindergarten. They’re standing under a chestnut tree, quiet but waving eagerly to us, insisting that we take a closer look. (It takes me a minute to catch on when I hear something out of context in German.) *Da oben in den Baum sitzen ganz viele Eulen!* (There are tons of owls sitting up in the tree!) Obscured by the leaves, I finally notice more than half a dozen owls roosting in the branches. The longer I look, the more I detect. In absolute stillness, their gaze pierces through the tree’s thick leaves as though their farsighted marble eyes were contemplating a serious matter.

It’s just two days before the autumnal equinox, when the sun crosses the celestial equator. Winemakers, like Eva Vollmer, are standing guard, measuring the sugar content of their grapes, preparing for their second vintage of the harvest. The sun casts luminous hues of red, gold- and aubergine on the vineyard slopes that surround this medieval town. I expect the owls will roost a while longer, mindful of this last hour of light. Then, they’ll spread their wings and fly in magnificent silence.