

# My Way to Canossa

by Dave O'Meara

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## **1: The Rental Car**

First thing I'll do, I'll pick up the rental car at the Mannheim City Airport. I've got an Opel Zafira waiting for me, a minivan. I've never seen one in the U.S.--I don't think they sell them here--but I've checked it out on YouTube. Pretty nice.

I won't visit Mannheim at all, because I'll be heading straight to the nearby medieval town of Speyer. Actually Speyer is older than medieval, it goes way back--it's an old border town between the Romans and the barbarians. The main attraction now, just as it was in December 1076, is the Romanesque cathedral, *Dom zu Speyer*. The cathedral is old now, almost a thousand years old, but back then it was less than 50, still unfinished, a baby as cathedrals go, a sprawling, soaring raw new symbol of the holiness, the Romanness, and the imperium of the Holy Roman Empire.

There, in the town of Speyer, my passengers will be waiting for me.

## 2: Patricius

To understand the journey that began at *Dom zu Speyer* in December 1076, to understand the conflict between King Henry IV and Pope Gregory VII that led to *Gang nach Canossa*, the Walk to Canossa, *l'umiliazione di Canossa*, to that image so ripe with contradictory meanings--a king kneeling in the snow--you really have to go back a generation, to an earlier Henry and an earlier Gregory, to the year 1046, when Henry III, King of the Romans--which means a king of the Germans who hasn't yet been anointed as Holy Roman Emperor--came down to Italy to clean up a mess.

In 1046 there were three popes, all with sordid back stories--even Gregory VI, the supposed reform pope, had actually purchased the papacy from one of the other popes, a guy who wanted to get married, but then she dumped him so the dude decided he wanted to keep his old job, and meanwhile the other guy, etc., etc....

A real mess, disgusting even, so Henry III deposed all three of them and picked a new pope, his own personal confessor in fact, a fellow German, who took the name Clement II and promptly christened Henry as Holy Roman Emperor and for good measure gave him the title of *Patricius*, which basically meant he had the right to appoint popes. This was a big deal to Henry, for while it was obvious to everyone that he had the *power* to appoint popes, Henry III was as devout as he was power-hungry, and he wanted the *right*.

### 3: Speyer: First Passengers

I ease the Opel Zafira out of the Mannheim City Airport, and onto a few frontage roads--at least that's what I think "Landstraße" means. My directions tell me that very soon I'll be on A656 and then on A6, and I know that if it begins with an "A", it's an autobahn. And the smaller the number, the bigger the autobahn.

There's something very odd about this minivan--it has a manual transmission. For an American, a stick shift in a fully equipped minivan seems like a detail from a crazy dream--it doesn't fit with the cognitive structure of the world as I know it--it's like a violation of some unarticulated but intuitively obvious Law of Automotive Categories. But hey, I guess that law doesn't apply in Europe. Still, I can't help thinking of all the authority figures of Germany, responsible people like parents and coaches and bureaucrats and safety engineers, winding out those RPMs from third to fourth, from fourth to fifth, just like I'm doing right now, as I hit cruising speed on the autobahn.

Speyer's about 20 km to the south. Before I visit the cathedral, I need to swing past the train station (the efficient suburban station of Speyer Nord-West, *bicycle parking: Ja, WC: Nein*) where I've arranged to meet two medieval German writers, Lambert of Hersfeld and Bruno of Merseburg (also known as Bruno the Saxon).

For most of the last millennium, Bruno and Lambert were trusted sources on *Deutches Mittlealter* (the Middle Ages in Germany), although their reputations took quite a beating during the 19th century, the heyday of German scientific historiography. As for me, given the choice of hanging out with a good story-teller or an impeccable philologist, I'll take the story-teller any day, even if I have to make occasional allowances for a partisan point of view.

Although Bruno and Lambert are both, technically, "monks," they've warned me not to expect not to expect any hair shirts or hoods or traditional habits on this journey. In fact, when I hold up my "Bruno" sign, after the regional trolley drops off a dozen

passengers, I'm approached by a typical German hiker-type: jeans, t-shirt, Adidas, and an immense, high quality, internal frame backpack. Bruno's about thirty, with a scruffy beard, and looks like he's been hosteling his way around Europe for a decade.

Lambert arrives about half an hour later, the lone passenger to disembark from the inter-city train. He's an older man, with a more formal style--umbrella, overcoat, a single leather suitcase. After I introduce them to each other--surprisingly, they've never met before, although they each claim, a little too warmly, to be a great fan of the other's work--I load their luggage into the back of the Zafira, and we drive through city streets toward the spires of *Dom zu Speyer*.

#### 4: Hildebrand

Needless to say Henry III's display of imperial prerogative in 1046 pissed off a lot of people in Italy, oh for example the people in the reform movement, the backers of the now-deposed Gregory VI, and one reformer, an ambitious monk named Hildebrand, took it very, very personally. This Hildebrand was a blacksmith's son from a small town, who had risen from his humble origins through brilliance and hard work to become Gregory's chaplain and the toughest ecclesiastical operative in Rome. Well some people say he wasn't a blacksmith's son at all, but Gregory's nephew, part of the same rich half-Jewish Roman family, one of the two richest families of Rome. Maybe Hildebrand made up the blacksmith story after his uncle got bounced out of the pope job for acting too rich, too entitled, just too damn *obvious* in trying to buy the papacy. Or maybe he actually was a smart hard-working poor kid. It's possible. But one thing is clear, Hildebrand was the kind of reformer who would have fit right in with *la politica di Chicago*, if the earth had remained habitable long enough for Chicago to have earned *una certa fama di corruzione*.

## 5: Speyer: Domgarten

In the minivan, I'm driving through the streets of Speyer with two medieval chroniclers, Lambert of Hersfeld and Bruno the Saxon, whom I've just met at the Speyer Nord-West train station. As host and driver, it's my job to start the conversation, so I ask Bruno and Lambert if in fact the town's name refers to the spires of the cathedral (the English name of the town used to be "Spires"), and they immediately fall into scholarly disputation: Bruno being of the opinion that the name, from the Latin *spira*, or *breath*, could not possibly refer to the spires of the cathedral--as said structure was not built until the 11th century and the name was in use as early as 500 A.D., while Lambert points out that *spire*, like *aspire*, comes from that very root word, and that the town's name Teutonic name was *Nementum*, home of the *Nemeter*, and that undoubtedly there was some sort of church, with some sort of spires, by time *Nementum* (also known as *Noviomagus*) became *Speyer*.

The finer points of their colloquy escape me as I search for a parking place. Finally I find one, on the outer edge of the *Domgarten*, with a great view of the *Dom's* backside. It's a very impressive structure, impressive enough to render Bruno and Lambert momentarily speechless as they emerge from the Opel's sliding side door.

I ask Bruno and Lambert to show me around the cathedral. They hesitate for a moment.

"Will he... be waiting for us in there?" says Lambert.

"Henry?" I say. "No, we'll be meeting the family in town. About an hour. C'mon! We don't have much time."

## 6: The Reformers

Hildebrand's reform movement--and it was his movement, *the Gregorian Reform*, though neither he nor the movement yet had that name--wanted to make the Catholic church holy and clean and pure, and they focused, his reformers, on two main areas: money and sex. First, they wanted to stop the sin of simony, the buying and selling of church offices, especially when the profits went to some secular nobleman, not the church, and second, they wanted to stop the clergy from having sex, any sex, all sex, period, whether that meant the local parish priest taking his housekeeper to his bed as a common-law wife, pretty much standard practice at the time, or novices in a monastery humping and sucking each other, it all had to stop, no excuses, no exceptions, sorry my son, that includes jerking off. Now for some of the reformers, like Peter Damian, an abstinence-only sex-negative fanatic, this purity was an end in itself, but a practical guy like Hildebrand could clearly see how these reforms could be used to strengthen the power of the church: priests would be answerable only to bishops, bishops to Rome, Rome to the Pope, with no side obligations to some feudal ruler--and as for sex, of whatever variety, it too created divided loyalties, interrupted the flow of authority, and threatened the proper transmission of church property from generation to generation--the last thing the church needed was for priests to start leaving their land to their bastards or their "nephews."

## 7: Speyer: Tour of the Cathedral

Since the Abbey of Cluny was sacked during the French Revolution, *Dom zu Speyer* has been the largest Romanesque church standing--a fact that somehow does not seem to inspire much verbal energy from Bruno and Lambert. I had been hoping that they might be lively tour guides, seeing as how they personally know many of the people involved in the construction and early history of this magnificent building. But their mood turns positively monastic once we enter the cathedral.

"Now is that a groin vault or a barrel vault?" I ask, pointing to the ceiling.

Lambert bows his head and closes his eyes. He looks as if he's praying--begging God to forgive his dilettantish companion--as if architectural tourism were the worst of all possible sins. I turn to Bruno and repeat my question.

"How the fuck should I know," he says, shrugging. Some degree of astonishment must register on my face, because he steps closer and explains himself. "Look," he says, "this place pisses me off. Do you know much silver from Saxony was sent down here to cover the budget shortfalls? And then we're supposed to come down here on pilgrimages! Where do those emperors get off with the fucking arrogance?"

"Okay," I say. "I guess... I guess I should expect there would be issues..."

"And I can tell you," says Bruno, "the pope isn't too happy about the emperor having a bigger fucking cathedral than he does!"

"Alright," I say. We wander through the vast nave for a while--or to be accurate, I do the wandering, while Bruno and Lambert trail behind me. It's like they're each attached to me by an invisible rope, and repelled from each other by an invisible force. I get the eerie sensation that our movements could be modeled by a simple computer program--Point A (that would be me, or your mouse pointer) leads the way, while Points B and Point C (that would be Bruno and Lampert, or two dots on your screen) maintain a fixed distance from Point A and maximal distance from

each other. It would be moderately amusing, on a computer screen, especially when Point A whipsaws around a cathedral column, which is what I've just done.

Bruno and Lambert bump shoulders as they pursue me around the column.

"Okay," I say. "Let's go down to the crypt."

Lambert and Bruno look at each other for a moment. Then Lambert takes me aside.

"You're going to be meeting Henry in less than an hour, right?" he says.

"Sure," I say. "That's the plan."

"The thing is... I don't think Henry likes that place. The crypt, you know... the tombs. He's kind of superstitious."

"So?" I say.

"Just don't mention it, alright? To Henry. Or his wife. Or his kid."

After I promise to be discreet, Bruno and Lambert negotiate briefly among themselves. It turns out Bruno is the one who takes me down into the semi-subterranean chamber.

It's surprisingly well-lit, and all in all it turns out to be just about the least spooky medieval burial vault you can imagine.

Interesting? Absolutely. Solemn? Without a doubt. But scary? No way.

"Here they are," says Bruno. He's standing next to one of the wrought-iron grates in the ante-crypt that prevent tourists from treading upon the bones of kings. I join him, and look down at the row of serene sandstone blocks. "There's your man," he says, "Henry IV. The one who's going to Canossa. Next to him is father, Henry III, pious bugger that one, he thought the king was kind of priest, *rex sacerdotia*, what a line of shit. Then we've got grandpa Conrad, the one who built this cathedral, Conrad's wife Gisela, and...."

Bruno seems pauses, staring down at one of the tombs.

"Who's that?" I say.

"Bertha," says Bruno. "Bertha of Savoy. Henry's first wife. She's way to good for him."

## **8: In Nomine Domini**

So Hildebrand's reformers had a problem. How could they tell some local nobleman that he couldn't appoint his own parish priests, when the emperor was hand-picking popes whenever he felt like it? They got lucky in 1056 when Henry III died unexpectedly, or maybe not so unexpectedly, he wasn't yet 40 years old, but for the previous few years he had been concerned less with building his empire than passing it on to his his young son, so maybe Henry III had seen, or felt, something coming. Anyway the next Henry, the six-year-old Henry IV, who had actually been co-king since he was three, took over sole possession of the throne in 1056 with his pious mother, Agnes of Poitou, as regent, and it wasn't only the dukes and counts of Germany who began to circle the minority like vultures, nibbling at the edges of the boy-king's power--it was Hildebrand in Rome who made the boldest move of all.

By this time Hildebrand was the archdeacon of the church--popes came and went but Hildebrand did all the work and in his own way took all the credit. At a church council in Rome in 1059, he got the bishops to issue a document called *In Nomine Domini*, which took the job of selecting a pope away from all secular leaders and gave it to the College of Cardinals, starting a tradition that would have continued to the present day, if the world had not ended in 1079.

## 9: Speyer, Maximilianstraße: The Imperial Family

What happens next, when Bruno, Lambert and I emerge from *Dom zu Speyer* and walk down Maximilianstraße?

Where do we meet the Imperial Family?

Are they waiting for us in a sidewalk cafe? Are Bertha and Conrad waiting, but not Henry, not him, not yet?

Or is Henry sitting alone, smoking? Is the weather too cool for anyone but smokers to be sitting outside? Are Conrad and his mother off shopping somewhere? For clothes, or for candy?

What are they doing? What do they look like?

Is Bertha a slim 26-year old, with an elegant ponytail, chic jeans, and double breasted yellow leather jacket over a cashmere sweater? Does a tiny jeweled cross dance lightly on her otherwise bare throat?

Is Conrad a shy three-year old boy, clinging to his mothers hand? Does he wear a Juventus FC jersey that hangs down to his knees?

Is Henry a tallish, bearded, 27-year old man, wearing a black leather motorcycle jacket, an "UNHEILIG" t-shirt, scruffy designer jeans and black army boots?

Do they have their luggage with them in the cafe? Or back at the Hotel?

Does Bruno crouch down in the wayback seat of the minivan, afraid that Henry will see him? Does Henry even recognize the chronicler?

Are Henry and Bertha speaking to each other? Why is she making this journey with him? Why does she stay with him at all? Why is she bringing Conrad?

Does Henry load his wife and kid in the minivan, give me directions to the Hotel to pick up their luggage, and then tell me that he'll meet us in Canossa?

Do I react with surprise? Why won't he get in? Is it the Opel Zafira? Did I rent the wrong vehicle? Is Henry the sort of guy who refuses to ride in a minivan?

Does Henry tell me to give him two hundred euros? Calmly, matter-of-factly, not asking for a loan, but as it were the natural order of things that he should need some cash and I should give it to him?

How would I react to his demand? Would I tell him that I am not his vassal, that I am a twenty-first century American, a Democrat, an empiricist, a blogger?

Would Henry respond that without him, what would I have to blog about? My breakfast? My moods? The latest comment from Rush Limbaugh? How many excommunicated Holy Roman Emperors do I know?

Would I break down and give him the cash? Would I have enough cash in my wallet? Did I stop at an ATM in the Mannheim City Airport, just to be sure, even though I planned to use plastic for nearly everything on this trip, to get the best exchange rates?

Does Henry count the 200 euros, and then give me back twenty, and tell me to take Conrad to the Technik Museum--we'll pass it on the way to the autobahn? Does Henry tell me to make sure the kid knows it's a present from his father?

What's going on inside the minivan while I talk to Henry outside?

Is Bertha sitting quietly by herself in the middle seat, reading a fashion magazine? Or is it a Catholic woman's lifestyle magazine? Has Conrad climbed into the front passenger seat? Is he pretending to drive? Am I worried about letting a three-year old ride in the front seat? What are the laws in Germany? Are Bruno and Lambert sitting in the back seat, whispering gossip about the Council of Worms?

Do I ask Henry how he's going to get to Canossa? Does he shrug his shoulders and glance down a side street? Do his eyes settle on a BMW FG50S motorbike? Do I follow his glance and think that's a nice bike, smaller and sportier than the BMW

bikes we see in the U.S.?

Do I ask him if it's his?

Does he say, It will be, very soon?

## 10: Hildebrand Becomes Gregory

And then in 1073, when Henry IV was a young king, 23 years old, busy fighting the Saxons, Pope Alexander II died. At Alexander's funeral mass the ecstatic faithful, or a drunken mob, or a gang of hired mercenaries, take your pick, started chanting Hildebrand's name (*Ildebrando! Ildebrando! Ildebrando!*) and it pretty clear to everyone in the church and in the neighborhood that Hildebrand had been chosen to be the new Pope. Needless to say, this was not exactly the procedure set forth in *In Nomine Domini*, but Hildebrand did make sure, before he took the chair of St. Peter, that he got himself ordained as a priest, and that the College of Cardinals rubber-stamped his election, and very pointedly left Henry IV, King of the Romans, out of the loop.

And so Hildebrand ascended the throne as Gregory, and not just any Gregory but Gregory VII, the very number of his name a challenge to that annoying German king whose father had tried to tell the world that Gregory VI had never been a pope at all. What a way to redeem the name of your uncle, or your former employer, or your mentor--whatever--and at the same time stick it to your biggest rival.

Henry got the message.

## **11: Leaving Speyer: The Technik Museum**

Well, Henry was right--on the way out of Speyer, heading back to the A6 autobahn, you go right past the big Technik Museum. And if you've got a 3-year-old boy in the front passenger seat of your rented minivan (I still haven't figured out what the rules are over here--for all their scholarship, Bruno and Lambert profess complete ignorance of German child safety laws, and Bertha still hasn't said a word to anyone except her son), you really don't have a choice but to stop, especially when Conrad starts shouting "aereo! aereo!"

So here's the budget for this stop: Henry had given me 20 euros to take little Conrad to the Technik Museum. (I know, I know--it was really my money, and Henry was just giving me a kickback from the payment he had just extorted out of me, but the weird thing was, it felt like something else--like I had these special Imperial funds in my pocket.) But of course it turns out that kids under 5 get free admission to the museum, so even with the 7 euro ticket to the Imax, you might think I'd be ahead 13 euros, right? Hah! That would be because you forgot about the four adults in the Opel! Adult admission is 13 euros, plus the Imax tickets at 9 euros each, and nobody but yours truly made the slightest move to pay. (I'm beginning to understand what it means to go on vacation with two monks and the royal family.)

So basically we're talking 95 euros, of which 20 had been "given" me by Henry, so even if I accept the fiction of Henry's beneficence, and deduct the charges for my own tickets (I did enjoy myself), I'm still down 53 euros, plus the 200 (or should it be 180?--this feudal finance is getting confusing) that I had already given Henry.

Anyway, it's great museum, it even has a Space Shuttle, which they floated up the Rhine, on a barge.

**12: Henry Fires Gregory**

*Scene: A Tavern in Worms. Date: January 24, 1076. Henry orders a round of drinks and dictates to a scribe:*

Dude, this is Henry, remember us? not some usurper but the rightful God-appointed king? We're sending this message to Hildebrand, we're not going to call you Gregory because you're not the pope, no way, just a false monk.

False monk! that's the name you deserve, bro. You've never held a job in the church that you haven't totally messed up and left everybody wondering what the fuck was going on. There are way too many examples, we don't have all day, so we'll just point out the worst--the way you treat your clergy--especially any clergy who happen to be living up here, on this side of the Alps. Not only do you think you can push around any archbishop, bishop or priest who gets in your way, you scorn and abuse them, like they're stupid servants who couldn't even understand what the hell you're doing if you ever even bothered to like, tell them. You probably think that mob of losers in Rome is gonna be impressed by the disrespect, the fucking disrespect you show your own priesthood. You have said, in your own words, that the bishops know nothing and you know everything. If you're so fucking wise, here's some advice: use your wisdom to build, dude, not to destroy.

It is so fucking wrong that you took the name of St. Gregory, it just turns our stomach. We mean, you're the very asshole he had in mind when said: "The heart of the prelate is all puffed, and he thinks himself more better than anyone else."

You know why we've put up with all your shit? Because we respect the papal office. Got that? We respect the office, not you, bro. But now you've made a really big mistake, man. You think because we are all humble and respectful of the papacy that we're afraid of you? Give us a break! You think you can make an attack on the royal and imperial authority which which was given to us by God? You think you can take it away, as if you're the one who gave it to us, as if this kingdom, this fucking

empire, were under your control, not God's? We got news for you: the big boss, J.C., He gave us the job of running this Empire, but He never made you the boss of the Church.

How the fuck did you get where you are? We'll tell you how: first you got rich by pulling all kinds of sneaky underhanded shit over the years. We gotta admit, Hildy, you are some player. If you were like a merchant or a trader, we'd call you a good businessman, but we got news for you bro, *you're a monk!* You're supposed to lay off that conniving and trickery shit. Then once you got rich, you started greasing all the princes and abbots, and pretty soon you've got armies backing you, dudes with swords chanting your name, and what do you know, suddenly, *how could it happen? Moi, you want moi?*, Hildy, you've been elected pope!

And now you're sitting in the fucking throne of peace, from which all you fucking do is destroy the peace.

It totally sucks what you've been doing--a little arms smuggling here, a secret propaganda campaign there--don't pretend you didn't authorize it--to get the people to rise up against their bishops, their fucking rightful bishops, and you send out your henchmen to badmouth the local priests.

And fuck it, you've even had the balls to attack me. That's right, Hildy, I'm talking in the first person singular now, man to man. This is me, bro, Henry the fucking Fourth, King of the Romans, and unworthy as I am, I'm the son of a bitch who has been anointed to rule this earthly kingdom. And like the church fathers said, no one but God himself can judge me, and there's no crime I can commit that will cause me to lose my throne except losing my faith, which is not fucking likely to happen. I may not be a monk but I know my church history, even back in the day of Julian the apostate, those holy fathers, they made the right call, which is no call at all--they left old Julian to be judged and condemned by God. Like St. Peter said, "Fear God, honor the king."

So I gotta figure you don't fear God, because you have totally disrespected me, and I'm God's guy, the fucking anointed and established one.

Do you think that St. Paul made an exception for you, when he was talking about how even an angel from heaven who taught false shit should be sent right down to fucking hell? Did he add, "Except the monk Hildebrand, who will get himself elected pope by hiring an armed mob to chant his name--he can teach whatever false bullshit he wants." No fucking way did St. Paul say that.

The bottom line, dude, is--we're gonna fire your ass. We're gonna fire your ass from the apostolic seat which you took by violence. You have been damned to hell by St. Paul himself for your false teachings, and you're gonna be damned by us and by our bishops for your evil rule.

It's time to elect another pope, have someone else sit on the throne of St. Peter, someone who won't dress up violence in a pretty cloak of religion, maybe even someone who won't embarrass St. Pete, someone holy and good and all that shit.

So let's make it official, man. Here goes:

I, Henry, king by the grace of God, with all my bishops, say to you: "You're fired. You're fucking fired. Go to hell where you belong and stay there forever."

I'm not kidding, dude. You're fired.

### **13: Bad Ideas on Vespas**

Last night, after watching the Criterion DVD of *Enrico IV* by Luigi Pirandello, starring Marcello Mastroianni and freely adapted and directed by Marco Bellocchio (whom I had never heard of previously, although according to IMDB he has a long list of movies to his credit), I read a few pages of a book by Peter Schjeldahl, the art critic for the New Yorker. (How's that for a non-sequitur?)

Wait a minute. It wasn't last night--it was two nights ago, if you count that foreshortened night of fitful half-sleep over the Atlantic. Well, it was the last time I slept in a bed. Anyway, as I put the book down and turned out the light, my mind filled with ideas about what might happen in my journey to Canossa--bad ideas.

To wit: What if Elizabeth Peyton and John Currin showed up on motorcycles--maybe Vespa scooters--as part of Henry's retinue? At the time, I figured Henry would be riding with us in the minivan, so I imagined Elizabeth and John following behind us on their Vespas. But now that I know that Henry is making his own way to Canossa on a commandeered motorcycle, it seems kind of prophetic--the three of them riding together--though it's hard to imagine Henry, on his BMW, throttling down enough for the Vespas to keep up.

But come on, these ideas are still really bad. I wouldn't even be thinking about them now, if it weren't "quiet time" here in the minivan, as we head south from Hockenheim on the A5 autobahn.

I do have to admit that Elizabeth Peyton might fit in with our group--sort of--Henry is her kind of guy, or at least I think he could be. Elizabeth could spot the tortured androgyny that underlies Henry's impetuous self-assertiveness.

Certainly his fractured childhood would appeal to her--imagine your pious but power-hungry father dying when you're only 6; your mother, sighing for a life of purity and simplicity, giving away chunks of your empire to avoid conflict; and you

yourself, sitting there with a little crown on your little head, while *ministeriales* sign documents and proclamations in your name--and then, to top it off, to really screw you up, getting kidnapped by an archbishop at age 12 (how's that for clergy abuse!), giving your mom an excuse to run off to a convent.

Not to mention getting betrothed at age 5 and then *being raised in the same castle as your future wife!*

Then you come of age at 15 and try to make your mark on the world.

To Elizabeth, I think Henry would be an 11th century Kurt Cobain, a fascinating, unstable stew of aggression and passivity, charisma and self-doubt, raw emotional honesty and political cunning. She'd love to paint him. Not only that, she has a thing for royals.

Now John Currin--he's more of a stretch. Frankly, he showed up on the Vespa, next to Elizabeth, just because he's usually paired with Peyton when people talk about hip new figurative painting. And certainly Elizabeth has more in common, stylistically, with the Middle Ages than John does--he's definitely a Renaissance guy--he's all about refulgent light and virtuoso technique, while Elizabeth is all about personality burning through the flat surfaces of the painting. But when I thought about it--and remember, I was thinking bad ideas as I lay there in bed, drifting off to sleep--there was one big area of commonality between John and Henry: Sex. Lots of it.

Now I can't show you you all the images that ran through my mind, because right now my laptop is buried under Lambert's suitcase in the back of the minivan, and all the adults in the car--Bruno and Lambert and Bertha and myself--are being really, really quiet, because Conrad just fell asleep, after crying it seemed like forever after getting strapped, for the first time, in his *kindersitz*. But you can do your own web search for *John Currin images*.

**14: Bertha Receives Two Travelers from Rome**

*Scene: A castle in Saxony. Date: March, 1076.*

After a busy day subjugating the Saxons, Henry is carousing with his soldiers--and with some young ladies, his new crop of concubines, *kebsweiber*, recently plucked from the countryside. Everyone is drunk, eating greasy meat with their fingers. Henry, a fat pretty girl on his arm, chugs a long draft of beer from somebody's boot, then pours the rest of the beer between the girl's ample welcoming breasts. She shimmies with delight. Henry demands silence, and when the crowd settles down, he rebukes them for not partying hard enough! Much laughter. He summarizes the day's exploits--one castle destroyed, two castles rebuilt and presented, in fealty, to his loyal retainers (cheers for the lucky guys!), and most important--seven new *kebswieber* recruited. He slaps the fat pretty girl on the behind, and announces that he'll take this one. He then commands all present to drink, and demands to know where his host is--he needs more beer, more wine, another pig!

In a side room, just off the main hall, the owner of the castle, Count Udalric, is pleading with Bertha of Savoy, Henry's queen. She is thin and pale, with a fragile beauty most men fail to notice, but later her face returns as a whiff of smoke or fog to haunt their dreams. Udalric says he cannot afford to host the royal household any longer--Henry's excesses will bankrupt him! Bertha listens with quiet dignity, and assures him that she will persuade Henry to return to Goslar within the week. Udalric thanks her, and goes off to find more drink for Henry.

Bertha then turns to her trusted old maidservant, who is holding her two-year old son, Conrad, fussy from the noise of his father's revels. She calms her beautiful child with a kiss, and tells her *serva vecchia* to take the boy to the most distant room in the castle so he can get a good night's sleep. *Serva vecchia* and child depart.

Alone, Bertha listens to the noise from the main hall. For a moment she allows the mask of dignity to slip away, and the pain of Henry's infidelities burns through her delicate features. She knows she shouldn't love him but she does--her love is persistent, mute, unreasoning, like a rocky stream in the far north, the water dancing on the sharp stones, the bright swirls carrying the bones and feathers of a hawk-killed kite down to some cold distant sea. She hears Henry's strong masculine voice rising above the tumult, and a tear runs down her cheek.

She recovers hastily as Udalric returns, bringing with him two travelers who have journeyed from Rome with an important message for the king. It is Roland, whom Bertha recognizes as the envoy Henry sent to Rome to depose Gregory VII, and Bruno the Saxon, a mendicant monk, whom Bertha has never met before. Bertha tells them that the king is not disposed to hear any news at the moment.

Then she asks Roland if Pope Gregory has accepted the decision of her husband.

Roland replies that the Pope has not.

Quietly Bertha asks what message they bring.

Roland says he will allow the Pope's envoy to deliver the news.

Bertha looks at Bruno, her eyes full of questions.

Bruno returns her gaze, holding it for a long passionate moment.

## 15: Monastic Sign Language on the Autobahn

On the autobahn: Bruno the mendicant, the monk with no monastery to call home, is teaching me monastic sign language. Conrad and Bertha are asleep, soothed by the rumble of 130 km/hour (ours is one of the slower minivans on the autobahn), and I can see Bruno in the rear-view mirror, from his perch in the middle seat, demonstrating in gleeful parody the silent solemn discipline of the Benedictines. When Bruno sees that I'm not taking my eyes off the road long enough to learn the gestures, he laughs and leans forward and tells me, he says, the truth of the matter: that monastic sign language shouldn't be called a language at all, for unlike the vigorous languages of the deaf, the monastic lexicon has no grammar, no prepositions, no logic words: no *that*, no *whom*, no *because*, no *why*.

Lambert, sitting in the front passenger seat, finally objects to Bruno's sarcasm: Lambert says that monastic sign language dwells in the tenseless existential present, for all times are as one to the mind of God. Bruno says that Lambert is merely elevating the primitive to the philosophical; Lambert replies that a true monk seeks to approach the divine through limitation, not excess, whether of pleasure or of language.

Bruno demands that Lambert list the nouns of the Benedictine sign language. Lambert thinks, and then with both word and gesture, says *abbot*, *God*, *altar*, *church*... and of course, he adds, all the many things that can be indicated by pointing. Bruno smiles quietly, as if sensing his impending triumph, and asks Lambert to tell us the verbs of this language.

Without hesitation, indeed with reverent pride, Lambert replies that in his abbey there are only four verbs: *sit*, *stand up*, *kneel*, and *confess*.

**16: Matilda Leaves Her Mother's Sickbed to Care for Her Dying Husband**

*Scene: The ancient Roman baths outside Pisa. Date: March 15, 1076.*

Though known to the world primarily for her accomplishments in the vigorous arts of war, Matilda, the beautiful daughter of Beatrice, *Marchesa di Toscana*, is equally skilled in the tender art of nursing. Almost every day, her busy schedule permitting, Matilda visits the sick poor of Tuscany, her beloved native land, and bestows upon them her kindly ministrations. And so when Beatrice, frail for many years, falls into a decline, stricken by an illness her doctors fear may be her last, she receives the devoted and skillful attentions of her daughter and dearest companion, who has brought her to this gentle valley, outside the town of Pisa, where the Romans discovered the restorative powers of the climate and the waters. Here it is that Pope Gregory VII, devoted friend of both mother and daughter, has traveled to join them, bringing his papal blessing, which exerts its special power not so much upon the doomed carnality of the human body as upon the eternal conscience of the soul within.

After the blessing, while Beatrice is resting peacefully, no doubt from having glimpsed, through the Pope's intercession, the holy and joyous fate that awaits her, the Pope urges Matilda to walk with him outside, so as to revive her spirit, heavy from many hours in the sick room. They stroll among the olive and chestnut trees, and Matilda unburdens herself of all the tiny, painful details of her mother's condition--the mysterious secretions, the vertigo, the aversions first to water, then to food, then to light, the moments of confusion when Beatrice seems to think she is her own great-grandmother, or a Saracen slave, or or a horse, or an ox, or a frog, or the very bed in which she lies--all of which Matilda, until now, has bravely witnessed alone, with the help, of course, of a few devoted servants, for Beatrice and Matilda are the richest women in Italy, and far be it from Matilda to skimp on household expenses at a time like this. The Pope listens with the calm patience of a

great saint, which of course is what he is, for he would be canonized in 1606 if the world were not fated to come to an end, for all *homidae* living in the Mediterranean basin, in 1079.

Eventually, when Matilda lapses into that relaxed silence into which people lapse when they have finally said all the many things they so desperately need to say, Gregory takes the liberty of asking if he might impose upon her attentions, for he needs the advice and opinions of his most wise and subtle counselor, which is how he regards Matilda. Matilda feels suddenly abashed that she has dominated the conversation without even bothering to ask about the affairs of the papacy, which of course are the most important affairs in the world, but the Pope will hear none of her apologies, and Matilda forthwith leads him to a rose-covered grotto where they can sit and talk over the latest news from Rome.

The news is not good. Gregory, with deep sorrow, tells Matilda how he has been forced to excommunicate the errant King Henry, whom Matilda knows all too well, as he is her second cousin, and she was forced to spend far too many summers of her childhood in the company of that imperious brat. As difficult as it has been for Gregory to excommunicate the King, and bind him with the heavy chains of anathema, the Pope is at peace with that decision, but now he has a greater fear: war.

This indeed is Matilda's area of expertise, for as much as she cultivates her talents as a nurse, battle is her first love, and she takes a twig and breaks it and draws upon the earth, and there in that grotto covered with wild roses she shows the occupant of the throne of peace what he might expect to happen in a war. In great detail she sketches on the ground all the strategic and military considerations of the developing situation, and he is most grateful for her advice.

Just then a messenger arrives, road-weary from a long journey, to deliver some most disturbing information: Matilda's husband, Duke Godfrey the Hunchback, has

received a foul injury at the hand of an assassin, while traveling through his lands of Lower Lotharingia, near a place called Antwerp, and now lies on his own death bed.

What mixed emotions these tidings must stir in the heart of Matilda! For Godfrey the Hunchback, her lawful wedded husband, has for years disdained the company of his beautiful wife. Not only that, the Hunchback is an active partisan of the excommunicated king, and at the time of the assault upon his most private parts he was organizing the very uprising against papal authority which Matilda had just now been sketching upon the earth, for the military edification of the peace-loving Pope. What with her husband's estrangement, his complicity in a rebellious project, and her mother's illness, it would be easy for Matilda to abandon Godfrey at his time of need. But Matilda knows her duty. Immediately she resolves to journey to her dying husband's side.

The Pope tries to discourage her, for the journey will be long and dangerous. Matilda holds firm in her resolution, and she offers an additional argument to the skeptical pontiff: her duties are not merely matrimonial but official, for she has, by this journey, the opportunity to keep Godfrey's vast allodial lands under her own control (if worse comes to worst and a widow she returns), and therefore, loyal to the Pope.

Eventually Godfrey is persuaded, by both the fervor of Matilda's devotion to wifely duty, and by the wisdom of her military and political calculations. She is indeed his most astute and valued counselor. He consents to bless her journey.

But ever bold, she asks for more: she begs him to hear her confession before she sets out.

And there, in that grotto covered by wild roses, witnessed only by the olive and chestnut trees, the Pope hears Matilda's confession. He then grants her absolution for her sins, and sends the warrior princess northward with his blessing.

## 17: Leaving the Autobahn

I bite my lips, contort my cheeks into a grimace, first the left side, then the right side, pinch my leg, squeeze the steering wheel, anything to stay awake. The autobahn is even more soporific than I-55 in southern Illinois, especially when everyone else in the minivan is sleeping, or praying the office. I try to imagine life in the towns and villages whose names flit past on the blue signs: Wiesloch, Wäghausel, Bruchsal, Stutensee, but really all I can think of is a warm bed and closing my eyes. Maybe it's jet lag, maybe I'm resentful for having assumed the role of the only adult in the vehicle, maybe this whole project is a mistake--how was I so foolish as to expect that these people from another century, another era, whose view of life, after all, is *fucking feudal*--how could I have expected them to pitch in, offer me a banana, maybe, or a granola bar, or even just stay awake and make conversation which is all I need to keep this goddamn minivan on the road!

Then there's a noise from the wayback seat--a tinny techno beat. It's Bertha's cell phone. She answers it and talks for a while in a tone of studied nonchalance. In the rear-view mirror I see her shrug her shoulders. Then Conrad, in his *kindersitz*, wakes up and starts screaming "Papa! Papa!" Bertha's voice grows more argumentative for a moment, then stops. Can I actually hear the tiny click of the cell phone closing, or do I just imagine it? I glance back in the mirror, just in time to see Bertha inhale sharply through flared nostrils.

There's a lot of whispering and rustling behind me now. "Keep those seat belts on!" I shout. Even Lambert, in the seat beside me, wakes up, the prayer book sliding from his lap.

Eventually Bruno leans forward and tells me what's going on. "Look," he says, "I don't know whether you've noticed, but Bertha and Henry, well, their marriage is kind of rocky...."

"I noticed," I say.

"Well, that was Henry," Bruno says. "He's not taking the autobahn. He's got some vehicles in his retinue, they can't do the minimum speed limit."

"What? Like Vespas?" I say.

"Who knows. Anyway, Bertha, she has mixed feelings, you know, about Henry's retinue, but at the same time she doesn't want to get too far ahead of him. On the road."

"You and Bertha," I say to Bruno, "You seem to be close."

"She needs someone to confide to," says Bruno. "You gotta admit she has a point. It would be really weird for her--I mean us, all of us--to show up at Canossa without Henry..."

"I suppose so," I say.

"So Henry wants us to get off the autobahn, cross the border into France, and meet his retinue in Strasbourg."

"No problem," I say. "Where do we get off?"

**18: Henry Learns of the Murder of Godfrey the Hunchback**

*Source: Heinrichlied (Song of Henry), author unknown.*

In the Rhineland there grew to manhood the child of a noble Emperor, Henry son of Henry son of Conrad, of the Salian family, dukes of Franconia, a proud and warlike line, who ascended to the throne duly elected by the princes of Germany after the last Saxon emperor had gone to his death childless from a lack of marital exertions, caused by an excess of purity more fitting to a monk than to a king. Despite his proud ancestry, Henry son of Henry son of Conrad was not raised to be a bold warrior, for his valiant and holy father died when he was but a small child, and he was tutored not by fierce warriors, but by women and bishops, who flattered him and manipulated him (the crown was upon his head) and taught him only the skills of compromise and deception. But such courtly games found no purchase in the sturdy soil of Henry's nature, for he was the descendent of proud warriors, and as soon as he attained the age of majority he went to war, and his manly exploits soon subdued the rebellious princes. Then did the maidens of the realm offer themselves to him, without thought of recompense or child support, for they wanted no more than the pleasure of his lordly member, and the secret honor of raising his bastard sons.

But even as Henry won fame and honor on the battlefield, a great enemy was conspiring against him, an evil Pope, who sought to replace the just rule of the virile with the machinations of the effete, and who would even force the parish priests of Germany and Italy and Burgundy, strong men all, despite their learning, to disown their wives, and live instead the lives of monks, spending their seed only in involuntary dreams.

And so, after subjugating the Saxons, who proved to be far more zealous in battle than the last king of their race had been in the Imperial bed, Henry called together the bishops and abbots of Germany, and they did soon, with most careful attention

to process and procedure, and with the authority of Henry as King, depose the false pope, a man named Hildebrand, who called himself Pope Gregory VII. The document of their most just and urgent decision was then sent to the decadent city of Rome, where, not surprisingly, it was met with scorn.

But then did the evil monk Hildebrand concoct a subtle plan. First he excommunicated Henry and the loyal bishops and abbots of Germany, branding them with the searing mark of anathema. Next he made alliance with the rebellious princes of Saxony and Bavaria, who saw in the underhanded papal maneuverings a chance to escape the just and legal obligations they owed their King. And then he set a deadline. In one year's time, the false pope proclaimed, all the princes of the Holy Roman Empire would meet in Augsburg, and there they would decide the fate of Henry son of Henry son of Conrad, who had done nothing wrong except to exert his rightful powers and duties as king.

Even though he despised the courtly arts of compromise and deception, Henry had spent his childhood in the company of conniving clerics, and he could see this gathering at Augsburg for what it would be: his own death sentence, and the end of the Salian dynasty. Therefore he called his most trusted advisers to his Palace in Goslar, close to the much-envied silver mines of Saxony, for a meeting on Good Friday of that year [1076, *but of course the meeting was actually held in Utrecht, on Good Saturday, see below--Editor's note*], to discuss the war against the pope, which would soon begin. He summoned his most trusted fighting men, the Rabbit Warriors of the Alemanni, and he sought in especial the presence of his bravest lieutenant, Godfrey the Hunchback, Duke of Lotharingia, who despite his physical deformity and small stature and general air of effeminacy, which Henry, to tell the truth, found moderately disgusting, had proven himself to be a most fearsome warrior in the field of battle.

But Henry had to move quickly and change his plans when a messenger arrived to

report that the Hunchback had been murdered in a most cowardly manner, stabbed in the asshole while shitting. When Henry heard this, his hatred for the false pope redoubled, for he knew that Gregory VII consorted in the bed of Matilda of Canossa, the Hunchback's estranged wife, and only a man as evil and hypocritical as Hildebrand could order a murder so vile. Without hesitation did Henry respond, for he gathered his Rabbit Warriors together, and they did depart, with haste, to the rich lowlands of Lower Lotharingia, also known as the Netherlands.

## **19: The Rabbit Warriors**

We are the Schlabbles! We the founding members of Reilinger Kraichbach Schlabbe, for years we Schlumbel-carnival all around! Not just Reilingen, we also schlumbel in Hockenheim, Altlussheim, Rheinhausen, Wiesental, and Kirrlach Kronau! All the places it pisses, our beautiful river, the Kraichbach! Smelling of asparagus we piss in the river Kraichbach!

Some of us in years gone by we have in ourselves the experience of great Fastnacht parades and the Greasy Tuesday parties! So is why we decide to combine our carnival wagons to organize itself into a grosse BierWagen and attack with fun all parades of the region! We are the Schlabbes!

And then the Schlabbes found themselves in the first campaign! 30 Fastnacht fanatics in 2007, the first time the carnival people get loose on the world!

After the first campaign, we had finally tasted blood. And that's why we decided to continue driving on Carnival to participate.

Unfortunately, the year 2008, once we are out of the campaign, the year it brought us not a good news, our very popular BierWagen was no longer good to drive. Why we do, with a heavy heart, the old BierWagen had to be scrapped.

Fortunately, it is our sponsor / buddy / SuperPassenger Ralf managed to Wettengel us a truly gigantic chassis!

So do not panic, the Reilingen Kraichbach Schlabbes did not give up so fast, we continued to participate in the carnival and bustle us in 2009 with our new double grosse BierWagen. On a great 08/09 season, a 3-fold strong AHOY!

Always we are looking for more sponsors / buddies / SuperPassengers! Always we are looking to take the clownish bustle of the BierWagen on tour!

So now when Henry on the motorbike with his two scooter friends comes to us and

says, "You are the Hasekrieger Alemanni! The Rabbit Warriors of the Alemanni! Join with me on my Way to Canossa! All your beers will be paid!"--we paint our faces and fill the BierWagen with our snowboards and on the tour we go!

We leave behind the asparagus-scented Kraichbach, the sandy fields of Reilingen!  
Gang nach Canossa! We are the Schlabbes!

**20: Bertha Begg Empress Agnes to See Her Excommunicated Son**

*Scene: Speyer Cathedral. Date: May, 1076*

Bertha of Savoy has arranged a meeting with her mother-in-law, the dowager Empress Agnes of Poitou. Agnes is a most pious Catholic, a follower of Hildebrand and St. Peter Damian.

They meet in *Dom zu Speyer*, each accompanied by a small retinue. The Empress brings three nuns from her convent in Rome, and five armed monks from Tuscany, assigned to her service by the Pope. The young queen brings only her *serva vecchia*, who cares for the toddler prince Conrad, and the monk Bruno the Saxon, who has remained in the royal household since delivering the Pope's message of excommunication. As they enter the cathedral, it is Bruno who is holding Conrad-- as the child, now more than two years old, has grown too heavy for the aged maidservant to carry for long distances, though she still tries, the poor thing.

Inside the cathedral, Bertha sees Agnes near the altar, kneeling in prayer. With joyous impulsiveness, Bertha rushes to greet her son's grandmother, but the nuns converge to protect Agnes in her devotions. The armed Tuscan monks take the measure of Bruno, and relax a bit, content that they have *force majeure*.

Bertha feels hurt and rejected, but tries to hide the embarrassment she feels, and waits patiently for Agnes to finish her prayers. When Agnes finally acknowledges her presence, Bertha proudly calls to her *serva vecchia*--Eustacia is the kind old woman's name--who hurries at her bidding to take Conrad from Bruno, and then to his grandmother.

Agnes notes Bruno's role with a curious eye. When her grandson is presented to her, she protests, in a thin weak voice, that she has not the strength to hold him, and then proceeds to praise Conrad's pale skin and sensitive eyes, his passivity and obedience, his evident aptitude for a life of holiness and scholarship. Would Bertha

like to send him to Rome with her? Agnes is certain that the Pope would take a personal interest in Conrad's education.

Bertha's cheeks flush with maternal protectiveness. She quickly takes Conrad from Eustacia's arms, and, clutching her son to her breast, dismisses the suggestion.

The time for small talk has ended. Bertha gets right to the point: she begs Agnes to see Henry. Henry is Agnes's son, and he needs his mother's love just as Conrad needs Bertha's love.

But Agnes replies that she has no son, not while Henry remains locked in the impregnable tower of anathema, not while he chooses, through his willful ways and sinful habits, to remain outside the communion of the Church.

For a moment Bertha finds herself speechless: the coldness of her mother-in-law astounds her. Instinctively, she turns away, to protect the sweet child in her arms from such unnatural sentiments. With infinite discretion, Bruno approaches and takes Conrad from her, the better to allow Bertha to vigorously defend the primal bonds of motherhood vs. the holy communion of the Church, in what promises to be a lively debate indeed.

But before the debate can begin, Agnes, in her mild and humble voice, asks who Bruno is.

Bruno replies that he is a mendicant monk, formerly of the Abbey of Merseburg in Saxony, and that it had been his solemn duty to have pierced the king with the sharp blade of anathema, that is, he was the one who delivered the notice of excommunication.

And why, wonders Agnes, to no one in particular, is the papal envoy holding her grandson?

Bruno stammers for a moment. He does not know himself why he is there. He doesn't know why joined the monastery, or why he left the monastery, without

permission, to make a pilgrimage to Rome. He doesn't know how he found himself at the papal synod, or how the Pope chose him as envoy. The roads from Merseburg to Rome, from Rome to Goslar, from Goslar to Speyer, seem to him like marks on a manuscript, a scribe's failed attempt to set down the poetry and prophecies of an ancient language, a language with no alphabet, while the last living speaker mumbles, dying, on a mat of straw. He lowers Conrad gently to the floor. The boy runs to Eustacia, and clings to her skirt.

After a moment's reflection, Bruno says that, as he understands his solemn charge, he is to return to Rome only with news of the king's repentance, and as such news has not been forthcoming, he has made himself useful around the royal household, which seems only fair, considering as the queen has so generously provided him with room and board.

Agnes smiles as she listens to this rationale, then softly says, her eyes fixed on Bertha, that one could imagine other reasons for a man to join the inner circle of the queen.

## **21: Exit 51**

"Watch for Exit 51, Baden-Baden," I say to Lambert. "We're going to take B500 toward Iffezheim slash Paris."

"Paris?" says Lambert. "But Paris and Baden-Baden are in opposite directions...."

This is ridiculous. Here we are, barreling down the A5 autobahn at 130 k, and I'm trying to teach a medieval monk how to use a GPS unit--while I'm driving. While I'm the one who's fucking driving.

"No," I say. "Exit 51 is near Baden-Baden, all the signs will say Baden-Baden, but the sign we're looking for says Paris slash Iffezheim. I mean Iffezheim slash Paris."

"Hmm," says Lambert skeptically, leaning toward the dashboard to study the unit.

I know what he's gonna say next. He's gonna say that we aren't going to either Iffezheim or Paris, so before he gets a chance I tell him:

"We'll go right past Iffezheim, and we won't get anywhere near Paris, but that's the sign we're looking for."

"No need to condescend," says Lambert. "Exit 51. It's the quickest way to Strasbourg. I get it."

"Right," I say. "Sorry."

I drive for a while in silence. The noise of the autobahn no longer puts me to sleep--its a different sound now. It almost seems that I can hear the land beneath us moaning.

I glance in the mirror--Bruno is staring out the window, Bertha seems to be looking at her phone, and what's Conrad doing? Is that a PSP?

No one but me seems to hear the earth complaining, clay and sand, roots and rocks writhing under the concrete bonds. Even Lambert, in the seat beside me, seems in

a perfectly good mood--he's now taking his duties as navigator seriously--he opens a paper map, flapping and snapping, to compare it to the GPS. Maybe this is a good time to get to know him better. As a writer, a thinker.

"Look," I say, "I've been meaning to ask you..."

"Go ahead..." he says, without lifting his nose from the map.

"Well," I say, "It's about your work... I'm not sure where to start..."

One thing about having a conversation while you're driving--you don't have to look at the other person. And without that eye contact, there seems to be no limit on the length of pauses. You pause when a Mercedes zips past your rented minivan, you pause when you pass a truck, you pause for entire minutes, for kilometers, for farms, for rivers, for ancient villages, for whatever tension builds up in your mind.

Eventually I manage to state my question to Lambert, and it goes something like this:

"Well, I guess I wanna ask what your thoughts are on, well..."

(pause)

"...you know, the role of narrative in history, story-telling, I mean, given the paucity..."

(pause)

"...the paucity of documentary evidence, of course you yourself are one of our greatest sources, for your period, and from what I've read, the parts that have been translated, I mean..."

(pause)

"...your annals, from the references I've seen, extended quotations, they seem to have a great narrative energy..."

(pause)

"...But..."

(pause)

"..there's always a tendency for any narrative, any story, to structure our understanding in terms, well, of stories we've heard before, pre-existing models..."

(pause)

"...you know, story templates as it were, casting this person as hero, this other one as villain, one side the good guys, one side the bad guys..."

(pause)

"... I mean, how would you say we should deal with the essential unknowability of the past... that is, of what we really want to know about the past, all the questions of subjectivity, personality, motivation..."

(pause)

"...I guess it comes down to what it was like to live back then...for example, we talk a lot today about identity, you've got your Palestinian identity, your gay identity, your Asian identity, which really only matters *outside* of Asia, your evangelical Christian identity, though its odd that people only really talk about identities on the left, but the same principle ought to apply to groups on the right, don't you think?..."

(pause)

"...so what sort of identity did an unfree man have, a serf, some guy working out on the fields at the Abbey of Cluny? Or your abbey? Hersfeld, right? and what about that guy's wife? Did that serf's wife have anything that we would recognize as an inner life? I mean, I've gotta assume she did, because I'm a liberal 21st century

guy and its part of my world view to recognize her as fully human as you or me, but if social structures constrain consciousness and the social structures were really, really constricting..."

(pause)

"...I guess what I really want to know is, how would you respond to one of those contemporary historians, I had professors like this in college, who renounce all attempts at narrative as a sentimental exercise, as if telling a good story is just satisfying the appetite of the crowd...."

(pause)

"...you know, somebody who thinks that the appetite for narrative, the human need for a good story... it's like an appetite for sugar. And the historian's job, it isn't to feed people sugar..."

(pause)

"So. What do you think?"

Lambert takes a while to respond. The silence feels comfortable, relaxed, easy. Finally he says "You missed it."

"What?" I say.

"Exit 51," he says. "Iffezheim slash Paris. About three kilometers ago. You missed it."

**22: Matilda Hears A Nasty Rumor**

*Scene: An inn outside the Abbey of Cluny. Date: April 1, 1076.*

With feverish urgency, desperate to kneel beside Beatrice, her mother, who lies upon her final sickbed with only weeks to live, maybe days--who can foretell the hour except that it is coming soon!--Matilda of Canossa, countess of Tuscany, hurries home. She begs her men to let her ride all night, but they say no, it is too dangerous, the moon is hidden by the clouds and the army of King Henry might be waiting, like bandits, around the next bend. Reluctantly she agrees to stop at the Abbey of Cluny, that pleasant vale of holiness amid the violent hills of Burgundy.

Hugh, the abbot, receives her with open arms. Matilda knows that Hugh, sometimes known as Hugo, or even Ugo, is the King's godfather, but such is piety of the Abbot, and the Abbey, that Matilda places herself in his protection with utter confidence. Hugh then does Matilda a great honor--he takes her inside the cloister, to the altar of the great church, so that she can pray to the Lord her God that He keep her mother alive until she returns home. Throughout the cloister the monks begin to buzz, not in actual words of course, for they have all taken vows of silence, but a buzz of involuntary murmurs and surprised breaths and rustling linen, not unlike the noise and chatter that will spread among the woodland creatures when the end of world approaches, for never in the memory of these holy monks has a woman entered the cloister. Matilda does not sense the buzzing, so intent is she upon her prayers, begging God that she might be permitted, one more time, to share the Holy Eucharist with her dear dying mother.

After her vespers, with a heart reconciled to God's plan, whatever that might be, Matilda retires to the little inn outside the Abbey, for a woman of Matilda's holiness and nobility would never dream of making her bed inside the cloister. The inn turns out to be a most pleasant place, with simple but charming amenities, which should not be surprising, for many queens and duchesses and marquesses have stayed

there, while dropping off their younger sons at Cluny to begin their monkish careers. Two young girls, daughters of the inn-keeper, help Matilda to unpack and air out her things, and as night falls they bring her a lit candle and the quill from a freshly killed goose.

Her window faces a small courtyard. Matilda opens the shutters, and the heavy tallow smoke finds its way to the gentle night air. Matilda sits down to write a letter to Pope Gregory VII. Her quill moves rapidly: she tells her great friend of the delays and vexations that have beset her urgent journey, her concern for her dying mother, the hospitality at Cluny, and the last days of her husband, Godfrey the Hunchback, Duke of Lower Lotharingia. Though her tone is sombre, here she conveys a note of joy: for the Hunchback, inspired by her tender nursing, had repented of his opposition to the Pope just moments before his death.

Outside her window the girls are sweeping the courtyard, giggling as they work, making a game of their chores. Matilda listens, and smiles for a moment at their carefree yet dutiful lives.

Turning back to her letter she tells the Pope of the Hunchback's funeral in Verdun, and the intervention of the King in the inheritance of her husband's duchy. How selfless it is of Matilda to forget for a moment her own personal sorrows and concentrate instead on the great struggle of the day, the contest between the Pope and the reprobate King, her cousin! Her report on these matters is mixed: she has managed to keep the bishopric of Verdun in pro-papal hands, but the King has decided that the Duchy of Lower Lotharingia will go neither to her, the Hunchback's widow, nor to Godfrey of Buillion, his nephew and chosen heir, but to the King's own two-year-old son, Conrad.

The giggling of the girls outside catches her ear: now it seems secretive, whispered, almost naughty. Setting down her quill, Matilda goes to the window and listens. The

older girl is telling her sister a story of some kind. With a start, Matilda realizes that the story is about herself.

She is the Pope's whore, says the older girl.

Her sister gasps.

She hired a man to kill her husband. Do you want to know how they did it? How they killed him? Do you really want to know?

From the window Matilda can see in the shadows the younger girl nodding, frightened but eager. The older girl leans forward and whispers something softly in her ear. The younger girl shrieks and jumps up.

No! They didn't!

Yes, they did! The cook told me!

Matilda quietly closes the shutters, sadly, and returns to the writing table. As the heavy tallow smoke fills the room, she asks the Pope to join her in prayer that the innocent child Conrad will not be corrupted by his father's evil lies.

### **23: Europa Brücke**

We're heading down the A5, south of Baden-Baden, planning to swing over to Strasbourg to meet Henry and his entourage, which apparently includes some vehicles that can't handle the 60 km/h minimum here on the autobahn. We missed Exit 51, I won't go into why exactly, so now what we're gonna do is take Exit 54-Appenweier to merge onto B28 toward Kehl. A few kilometers longer, no big deal.

Lambert, checking the GPS unit, reports that we will cross the Rhine on the the Europa Brücke. The Pont de l'Europe.

"What?" I say. "You mean we'll cross two bridges?"

Lambert looks at me like I'm an idiot. Bruno leans forward and fills me in. It's the same bridge, The Bridge of Europe, with two different names, in French and German. Bruno and Lambert don't actually laugh at me, but I can tell they're feeling mighty smug.

Okay guys, I think, clenching my teeth, if I had been able to look at the GPS myself, I would have figured it out right away. But hey, I'm driving this minivan! We're going 120k here, as I swing off the autobahn and onto B28. It just sounded like two different bridges, the way he said it, that's all.

"So its like a symbol," I say. "After all the wars between France and Germany...."

No response. I guess my comment is so obvious they can't think of anything to add....

## 24: Henry Refuses to Become a Symbol

*Source: Heinrichlied (Song of Henry), author unknown.*

Now let us tell how Henry son of Henry son of Conrad feasted at Utrecht, at the palace of William, the loyal Prince-Bishop of those lands, where Henry had come in haste to settle the succession of the fallen duke, Godfrey the Hunchback, who had been stabbed in the asshole while shitting. Boldly and fairly did Henry dispose of this matter, for he did name his own son, Conrad, to be the Duke of Lower Lotharingia, and he did also appoint a loyal vice-duke to manage the Hunchback's lands, for Conrad was but two years of age, and not ready to battle against the West Frisians, which was part of the job description. The duchy secured, Henry sent the young Duke Conrad to his bed, and called for a feast.

There in the palace they did assemble, his loyal vassal lords and his brave fighting men, the Rabbit Warriors of the Alemanni, joined by a goodly assortment of German abbots and bishops, strong men all, who could eat and drink and service the *kebsweiber*, unlike the eunuchs who pass for clergy in Rome, except that at this particular feast there were no *kebsweiber* to be serviced, for it was Holy Saturday, and Henry had declared that the holy weekend must be respected.

When the first pig had been consumed by the hungry virile assembly, Henry rose and bade them to postpone their drunkenness, for they had much to discuss. And straightaway, without wasting anyone's time, they did plow through the agenda, for Henry was a decisive leader, who knew how to run a meeting.

First they did discuss the whereabouts of the evil countess Matilda, the pope's whore, who had ventured into Lower Lotharingia to claim both her husband's body and his lands. Feller the Blessed of the Rabbit Warriors did then report that Matilda had retreated to Cluny, after burying her murdered husband in Verdun. Henry thereupon demanded to know whether Matilda had taken credit for her husband's murder. To this just and angry query from the King did Rupert, archbishop of

Bamberg, reply. Rupert told how Matilda was spreading a most implausible rumor-- that the honorable Robert of Flanders had ordered the foul deed--but that she was doing so in such manner, her sentences unfinished, her words saying one thing and her eyes another, her voice smooth as goose butter and her smile chilled as the night air, that all who heard her speak did know that she and the Pope had been the ones behind the cowardly blade.

Then did Henry demand a show of hands from all the clergy present, asking which of them would, at Easter mass tomorrow, denounce Hildebrand from the pulpit as a false Pope and smite him with the mighty sword of anathema, for having dared to excommunicate your beloved King who stands before you. As soon as Henry spoke did William, bishop of Utrecht raise his hand, for he was, after all, the evening's host and Henry's most trusted advisor and in fact he was the one who had devised the plan to denounce the Pope on Easter from every pulpit in Germany, what a statement that would be! For a long moment the bold and upright arm of William reached alone toward heaven above the feasting multitude, but soon enough it was joined by the hands of Siegfried, archbishop of Mainz, Burchard, bishop of Lausanne, and the two Ottos, the one who was bishop of Regensburg and the other one, who was bishop of Constance. Finally did Pibo of Toul, who had been whispering something to Count Eberhardt, most timidly raise his hand.

Then did Henry call upon timorous Pibo, and ask him to share with the entire group whatever he had been whispering. And so did Pibo rise and tell all present how dire he thought the situation was and what he thought the King ought to do about it. For had not the Pope's power been growing throughout the land since he had first bludgeoned the King with the harsh rod of anathema? Then of the gathering at Augsburg did timid Pibo speak, reminding all present that it was scheduled for less than one year hence, and that all the princes of Germany, including the rebellious princes of Saxony and Bavaria and Thuringia, were planning to journey to Augsburg, there to meet with the Pope and convene under the papal blessing.

The craven Pibo, insisting that he meant no disrespect, then asked if anyone present doubted that Augsburg promised to be the end of King Henry's reign, not to mention his very life? And thus, Pibo inquired, should not King Henry immediately attempt to go to Italy and meet with the Pope, there to make mortify himself and beg the Pope's absolution, in a place where the Pope would not be backed up by the armies of the Saxons?

Truth be told, this cowering Pibo, bishop of Toul, had a point. Even among the ferocious Rabbit Warriors there was nodding of heads. But then did King Henry silence the murmurs and doubts, with the following speech, generally regarded as a high point in the rhetorical history of his reign:

How would I be remembered, asked the King, were I to follow the advice of Pibo, bishop of Toul? In the memory of my children? Of my grandchildren? In the memory the world a thousand years hence? What would the people of that age think of the fourth Henry, king of the Romans? Let us pretend, for a moment, that in the memory of that age I did do what Pibo suggests. Let us pretend that I did go to Italy, that I did meet the Pope in one of his retreats, Lucca, perhaps, or one of the other castles kept by his whore Matilda. And there I did make penance, and did crawl on my knees, and did beg his absolution?

Now let us further pretend that by so abasing myself I saved my Kingdom, and outwitted the rebellious princes of Saxony and Bavaria and Thuringia, and that on that very day did the Pope anoint me Holy Roman Emperor, *Imperator et Patricius*, heir to the great Kaisers Augustus and Charlemagne? Let us even suppose, looking back from a thousand years hence, that my reign thereafter was glorious, that I did defeat the Normans in the Sicily and the Saracens in Jerusalem.

So how would I be remembered? How would the schoolboys of that distant age tell me apart from all the other Henrys who will by then have worn this crown?

I will tell you, Pibo. I will tell you how those schoolboys would remember me: they

would remember only that the fourth Henry was the one who went to Lucca and crawled before the Pope. They will remember only that the power of empire knelt before the ambitions of a false monk. The name of Lucca, or whatever castle of the Lombard bitch it might be, will have become the symbol of my shame. They will mock me and spit upon my statues and say, if only Henry had been strong.

And so I say to you Pibo, cowardly bishop of Toul: No, that cannot be.

And the hall was silent then, for all were thinking of the glorious warlike deaths which awaited them and the honor they would have in heaven, despite what the Gregorians said about war and violence. And then did they drink, for they had much drunkenness to attain, and weak-shouldered Pibo did slip out without having another tankard, making some excuse about having to get to his cathedral in time for Easter morning mass.

When all were good and drunk, so drunk that one of the Rabbit Warriors of the Alemanni, Grahlert the Garland-Headed, was rebuking Henry for the lack of *kebsweiber*, with a familiarity born not of presumption or lack of discipline but from the bloody brotherhood of the battlefield, there did appear a beggar in their midst. Who is this beggar? asked Henry, but all around the Rabbit Warriors were too drunk to answer. Henry did then say to all, in his voice of command, which pierced through their drunkenness and would have sent them into battle if Henry had so desired, to be quiet for a moment and tell him who the beggar was. What beggar? said the Rabbit Warriors, with one impulse if not with one voice. That beggar, said Henry, that beggar right there.

Then they did all become quiet and look at the beggar, whose rags were most foul and whose frame was twisted and puny, which is the sort of thing a bold fighting man notices when he is drunk and told to look at a beggar.

But before anyone could approach him, the beggar stepped toward Henry and said, cousin, do you not know me? For I am Godfrey the Hunchback, your loyal vassal,

and I say to you I am here, alive before you, and it is the assassin's body, not mine, that lies rotting in my grave.

**25: Pont de l'Europe**

We're off the autobahn now, heading on the B28 highway toward toward the Rhine river--and Strasbourg, France. You know something, I'm actually kind of excited about driving across a national boundary in contemporary Europe, now that it's all unified. I've never done it before, and I'm curious as to what actually happens. And I'm even more curious as to what Bruno and Lambert think of the unification of Europe. I tell the two monks what I know about the border situation, and how I expect we won't even have to stop when we go across Rhine into France.

"So how does that compare," I say, "to your experience? You know, the borders of 1076?"

"We don't worry about borders," comes a voice from the wayback seat. "My husband is King of the Romans."

It's Bertha. This is the first time she has spoken directly to me since we left Speyer. "Right," I say, jumping on the chance to get a conversation going. "Of course. But still, aren't there some--"

"My Enrico is also King of Germany, King of Burgundy, and King of Italy."

Enrico? Who's Enrico? Does she mean Henry...?

"And when we get to Canossa, the pope will anoint him Emperor."

"Absolutely," I say, trying to catch her eye in the rear view mirror. "But aren't there, you know, a lot of princes, dukes, counts, whatever, with their own territories, their own armies...?"

"My son is Duke of Lower Lotharingia," says Bertha. There's something final in her tone, as if Conrad's dukedom is all I need to know on the subject of rival principalities.

"That's great," I say, nodding my head. "You... uh... you must be proud of him...."

What the hell is Conrad is doing? I look around, as best I can, in the mirror. The Duke of whatever-it-is had better still be in his *kindersitz*!

"Lower Lotharingia," says Bruno, "is basically what you would call the Low Countries. That's--"

"I know what they are," I say. "Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg. Benelux."

"Very good!" says Lambert, his voice dripping with unctuous superiority, "Except that Luxembourg would be part of *Upper* Lotharingia."

Okay, I give up. We're going to stop in Strasbourg and get a hotel room. I'm going to get a good night's sleep before I try talking to these people again. How long has it been since I slept? really slept? not counting those semi-hallucinatory hours aboard the jumbo jet, half-dreaming yet excruciatingly aware of the passage of time? I'm too busy driving to figure it out.

As we get closer to the village of Kehl, the B28 highway follows a little river--I figure it must be a tributary of the Rhine, except that it looks more like a canal, sometimes even a drainage ditch. It's the the kind of waterway that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers would love: dredged, routed, measured and rationalized. But as I drive beside it the little river keeps pulling at my mind, and now I think no, it's not rational at all, here it looks as if an orderly giant has pulled his finger through the soft earth, and I imagine an immense soil-encrusted finger, soon to be licked clean by the tongue of a loyal slobbering dog. The little river's name? I have no idea. I see a sign or two, but I think better about asking Bruno or Lambert--the signs might mean "No Littering" or "Fishing Only for Senior Citizens" and I don't want to accumulate any more American Idiot points this afternoon.

Then we veer left, heading toward France. Around us sprawls the industrial fringe of Kehl--railyards and warehouses. Next thing I know we're crossing the Rhine--on a dreary old causeway that must be the Europa Brücke/Pont de l'Europe. For a

symbol of peace, reconciliation and unity, the bridge is very utilitarian, even boring--it looks like it was rebuilt in a hurry at the end of World War II, which it probably was. There's a nice pedestrian bridge, though, one of those soaring Calatrava rip-offs--a few hundred meters to the south.

Just as I expected, the border crossing itself is clear sailing. It's like driving through those tollboths outside Chicago, where you don't need to stop--except it was even easier, because you don't need that thingey...

And then I see that something is wrong.

Burned out buildings.

Police tape.

Armed troops, with sub-machine guns, guarding workers boarding up smashed windows.

"What the hell happened here?" I say.

"The anti-OTAN riots," says Lambert. "I think you call it NATO."

"Don't you watch TV?" says Bruno. "It happened last week. The Black Bloc anarchists set fire to the custom house during the summit."

I pull over to the first parking spot I can find.

"C'mon," I say. "You mean there were riots--buildings burning--right here--at this symbol of European unity?" I don't care how stupid I sound--I want to know.

"Like I said," says Bruno, "Don't you watch TV? Did you even know your president was here?"

"Of course I knew," I say. "It was all over the news. But I kept turning off the TV--it was all about Michelle Obama and Carla Bruni--their clothes, their make-up, their hair, whether they really got along or not..."

"American TV is fucking stupid." Once again, a female voice comes from the wayback seat. I look back. Now that we're parked, I can actually turn my head. Bertha has taken the Duke of Lower Lotharingia out of his *kindersitz* and holds him defiantly in her lap.

"I read about it in a magazine," says Bertha. "You have the second-stupidest TV shows in the world."

**26: Bertha Disbands the Rabbit Warriors with a Kiss**

*Speyer, Bischofhaus, All Souls Day, 1076*

Are we in the *Bischofhaus* in Speyer? Is the bishop's house the place where the Salian emperors, Conrad and his son Henry and his son Henry, accompanied by their entourage, always stay when they visit their favorite church, *Dom zu Speyer*, the largest cathedral in Christendom, if you don't count Byzantium? Do the emperors always tell the bishop that one of these days they will build themselves a palace, a proper *Kaiserpfalz*, here in Speyer? Do the bishops always reply that it is no burden, none whatsoever, indeed it is an honor, to host the imperial cortege?

Where has Henry been for the past two weeks? Has he been camping in Oppenheim, across the river from Tribur, where the the princes of Germany have assembled to discuss what to do about King Henry and the Pope, who has imprisoned the king in the damp dungeon of anathema, or the political equivalent thereof, a campsite in Oppenheim, on the other side of the Rhine?

Has Henry's host and good friend, Rüdiger, the bishop of Speyer, been the go-between in the awkward negotiations, ferrying back and forth across the melodious Rhine, Tribur to Oppenheim, Oppenheim to Tribur, between the excommunicated king and the devout princes of Germany, so anxious to avoid contamination of their souls?

And now, at last, has the *Fürstentag*, the Parliament of Princes, come to an end?

Does our scene begin with Bertha of Savoy, Henry's delicate queen, organizing her household for the move back to Goslar? Are we in the bishop's kitchen? Who is there? Is that Bruno, the Saxon monk? Is he still hanging around the royal family? Shouldn't he go back to Rome, or at least back to his monastery? Who is toddling around the floor, trying to chase a cat? Is that Conrad, the little Duke of Lower Lotharingia? Who catches Conrad as he scoots by, and chastens him with an

affectionate tickle? Is that Eustacia, Bertha's *serva vecchia*, the beloved maidservant who was Bertha's own nanny it seems so many years ago? And who is that other woman, so heavy but so sure of herself in this kitchen? Who else could she be but the bishop's cook?

Does a hunchbacked beggar come to the door, asking for alms or a meal? Does Bruno take charge for a moment, as the only adult male present, and shoo the beggar away? Does he then complain to Bertha that their host, the bishop, is far too permissive, that he has allowed the beggars of Speyer too much freedom and familiarity, too much access, in short, to his kitchen door and the scraps of his table? Does Eustacia begin to tease Bruno? Does she ask him why he doesn't like the bishop? Because the bishop is too good? Too rich? Too successful? Too handsome? Does the bishop's cook join in the teasing? Or does she just smile and watch, her hands upon her hips?

What does Bertha do as Bruno blushes? Does she smile serenely at his discomfort, giving him hope one moment and despair the next?

Is it now that Rüdiger returns? Does he appear at the doorway of the kitchen, in the company of the hunchbacked beggar, for whom he orders his cook to prepare a meal? Does the bishop's cook, with a mocking look at Bruno, take the beggar into one of the side kitchens? Is the *Bischofhaus* so grand that it has kitchens within its kitchens? Does Eustacia discreetly take Conrad away, saying It's time for his nap? Does she give a sharp look at Bruno, as if to say, You too, you should make up some excuse to leave Bertha alone with the bishop? Is her wrinkled old face expressive enough to convey such a complex message without words? Does Bruno reluctantly do what she has suggested? Does he stammer and say I must go to my room and pray? Does he look over his shoulder, longingly, as he departs?

When they are alone, does Bertha thank Rüdiger for his hospitality? Is he a handsome, athletic, yet scholarly man? Does he have the grace and self-confidence

of someone with large private fortune who has devoted himself to good works? Is he exactly the sort of man she would be attracted to, if she were not hopelessly in love with husband, the king?

Does Bruno find a nook in the next room, and seclude himself there, listening?

Does Bertha tell Rüdiger that her family will be leaving now, and returning to Goslar? Does Rüdiger tell Bertha that he is afraid she must remain here at Speyer, but of course his hospitality will continue with unabated pleasure? How does Bertha react to this news?

How about the eavesdropping Bruno? What does he think of remaining here in Speyer, in the house of the handsome bishop? Can we see his reaction through the shadows that fall dramatically upon his hidden face? Or do we deduce his emotion from our intimate knowledge of his character and motivations? Or from the graphic properties of the moody shadows?

Does Bertha ask Rüdiger what he means when he says, must remain?

Does Rüdiger explain that Henry has signed an agreement with the Princes of Germany? Does he say it's called the Promise of Oppenheim, and that among its provisions--

Is Rüdiger interrupted, at that very moment, by the sound of King Henry arriving? Does Henry come in through the front door of the *Bischofhaus* with his advisors? Are the Rabbit Warriors following him, tentatively, and in some confusion? Does Bertha rush from the kitchen to see what is going on? As she hurries to the Great Hall, does she pass Bruno, in his hidey nook? Does she look at him with puzzlement, but only for a moment? Does the brevity of her glance break his heart? Can we see it in his face? How long do we linger on this delicate moment, a man realizing just how unrequited is his love, now that a noisy angry king has stomped into the next room?

Or does Bertha hurry past Bruno, never even seeing his face in the shadows?

When Bertha, followed by Rüdiger, enters the Great Hall, is Henry denouncing his advisors for betraying him? Is he saying that he will go to war, tomorrow--that he will attack the Pope! the Saxons! the Bavarians! the Thuringians! the godless Saracens! and even those insufferable Byzantines! all at once? Is Henry saying he will soon be the only Roman Emperor? Does Henry boast that he will be the new Alexander, king of the known world?

Does Henry even know who Alexander the Great was?

Are Henry's advisors protesting feebly against the king's ragings? Do they whimper this war would be suicidal, mad, doomed? Who are these advisors? Does Bertha know them? Does she recognize her old friend Count Udalric, and Bishop Rupert of Bamberg, and that Otto, the one who is Bishop of Constance, not the one who is Bishop of Regensburg? Has Bertha ever been able to tell the two Ottos apart?

Has the entire household now gathered around the edges of the Great Hall to watch the spectacle of the king's tantrum? Are little Conrad and Eustacia looking down from the balcony? Are the cook, the hunchbacked beggar, and Bruno the Mendicant peaking from the hallway that leads to the kitchen? What combination of pity, terror, awe and disdain does each of them feel?

Does Bertha whisper a question to Bishop Rüdiger? Is she asking him what has happened to make her husband so upset? Does he reply, his lips close to her ear, that Henry has agreed to give up his army and wait patiently in Speyer until the Assembly at Augsburg, the one where the princes will be joined by the Pope, and now, after the long ride home and a few drinks at a nearby inn, Henry has worked himself into a fury, at himself and his advisors, because he cannot bring himself to disband the Rabbit Warriors, his brethren of the battlefield?

Does Bertha nod her head in quiet understanding? Does she know what she must do?

Does she step forward, crossing the fray, walking heedlessly between invective-spewing king and wheedling defensive cleric? Does she continue on, without acknowledging either husband or bishop, and approach one of the Rabbit Warriors, who is standing uncomfortably against a wall?

Is it Immanuel, the smallest of the Rabbit Warriors, known in his language as Schwager, the God-Who-Is-With-Us? Does she quietly, but not whispering, no, her voice is soft but clear, thank Immanuel for his brave service? Does she kiss him on his rough cheek and wish him well?

Does she do the same for the other Rabbit Warriors? For Florianus, known as Schulze the Flower-of-Manhood? For Andrius, known as Ruck the Strong? For Phillipus, known as Geng the Horse-Lover? For Stephanus, known as Grahlert the Garland-Headed? And for Benecius, the largest of Rabbit Warriors, known far and wide as Feller the Blessed? Does she thank each one, and kiss each one on his rough cheek?

Do they each, in response to her soft kiss, kneel humbly before her?

Does Henry fall silent at her display of quiet dignity? Do the assembled bishops bow their heads in reverence at her courtly ritual? Does Eustacia pat Conrad's hair, as if to say, That's your mother, you should be proud? Does the cook weep openly? Does the hunchbacked beggar suppress a tear? Does Bruno fall in love all over again, forgiving Bertha yet once more for barely noticing that he is alive?

And then, in solemn procession, one by one, do all the Rabbit Warriors stand and walk out the door, the *Hasekrieger Alemanni*, heroes of a bygone age who have each heard whispered in his ear the secret command of a beautiful queen? Does not their exit deserve a recessional composed for full orchestra by a great German

composer, if only the world would survive long enough for German music to become the very paradigm of musical greatness?

And now, when the Rabbit Warriors are finally gone, does Bruno, wiping away his tears, catch Henry exchanging a conspiratorial glance with the hunchbacked beggar?

Or is Bruno just imagining things?

## 27: Richardson Buries Henry and Bertha's Wedding

Needless to say, I need to learn as much as I can about Bertha and Henry, not to mention Gregory and Matilda, since I've undertaken to drive at least part of Henry's entourage, by minivan, to Canossa. I have to admit that most of my initial research, before flying over to Germany, was in, well, what you might call tertiary sources. Okay, it was Wikipedia. But I did shell out for a couple of serious scholarly books. The most important of these the is only full-scale biography of Henry in English:

Robinson, I. S. *Henry IV of Germany, 1056-1106*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

That's Robinson, I. S. as in Ian Stuart Robinson of Trinity College Dublin. The book cost a ridiculously high \$75, in paperback, on Amazon.com, which I take to be a reflection of the economics of limited-run scholarly books. If this book could attract a general audience, the price might drop to one-half, or one-third, or even one-quarter of that forbidding price. But the marketing gurus at Cambridge University Press (if they have marketing gurus at Cambridge University Press--some guys and gals in sharp suits, despised by their co-workers) were absolutely right in consigning this monograph to the scholarly ghetto. There's no way this book is going to find a general readership, let alone a popular one.

So what's wrong with Richardson's opus? Well there are two problems. The first has to do with his writing style. Now, on a sentence-by-sentence level, Richardson's prose isn't that bad. Given the strictures of measured scholarship, some of his sentences might even be described as "vigorous." But on the level of the paragraph--the level of organizing one's thoughts, building one's argument, anticipating the reader's questions--Richardson falls apart. He doesn't use the paragraph as a unit of composition, but rather as an occasional typographical break. He burrows into the research, following this suggestion, that implication, this remarkable similarity with a diploma issued by another king, until eventually he lifts

up his head, takes a quick breath, and starts a new paragraph. As a guide through this thicket of material, he is most valuable to those who already know their way through the forest, and are ready to engage in detailed discussions of individual trees.

The second problem has to do with what we might call the book's focus. Despite having the name of an individual human being in the title, this isn't really a biography. Richardson is simply not interested in Henry the man, let alone Bertha the woman. Questions of psychology, motivation, personality, relationships--all the dimensions of a human being that make a dramatic character come to life--are so thoroughly ignored by Richardson that you wonder if it ever occurred to him that a reader might be interested in such things. An accurate subtitle for the book might be: *An examination of the documentary evidence relating the reign of Henry IV, with particular emphasis on the constitutional struggle between empire and papacy.*

Take, for example, my attempt to read Richardson's paragraph on the wedding of Henry and Bertha:

**Me:** Okay, where's the wedding? I mean, I really need to know just what's going on between this couple--their relationship is so odd--so one obvious place to start is their wedding. Here we are, page 60. Hmmmm, well I guess this is the right paragraph...

**Richardson:**

Four months after Adalbert's fall the princes in real earnest 'began to confer about the succession to the throne', not because of any conspiracy to depose Henry IV, but because of the king's serious illness.

**Me:** This doesn't seem to be about the wedding. This seems to be about *princes conferring about succession*. Okay, let's see. This is after Henry has come of age, he's what? 15, 16 years old? and the princes have forced him to kick Adalbert out of his court, which the Wends and the Abrogites took as a free pass to sack

Hamburg, and now the king is sick, seriously sick... Well, this doesn't seem like the paragraph I was looking for, but it's pretty interesting stuff...

**Richardson:**

In the middle of May, while he was staying Fritzlar, Henry fell sick, 'so that the physicians gave up all hope of his survival and certain princes had hopes of seizing the royal throne'.

**Me:** Still nothing about the wedding, but, what the heck, it's moving along in a reader-friendly fashion: *The princes are concerned about succession; the young king is ill. In fact, at a particular time and place, Henry fell so ill that his doctors gave up hope and the plotting began.* This is pretty good writing: the first sentence introduces a situation, and the second gives some specific details and raises the stakes. So far so good.

**Richardson:**

Soon after his recovery Henry was married to the princess to whom he had been betrothed in 1055, Bertha, daughter of Count Otto of Savoy and Margravine Adelaide of Turin.

**Me:** Wait a minute! Here's the wedding--introduced in the third sentence of a paragraph? Isn't the arranged wedding of the king and the his bride (his fiancée--since-childhood) worthy of it's own paragraph? If not its own chapter? Ian, please, set the scene for us! How did the young king feel about the wedding? How did his bride react? In a few years, after all, Henry is going to make an unprecedented petition for divorce--a petition that is a crucial event in his battle with the papacy, so isn't the necessary precondition of that petition--his marriage--worthy of a little exploration? Who arranged this sudden wedding? How? Did his mother, who by now has apparently retired to a convent, bother to attend? Was she even invited? C'mon, this is what I want to know! And to get really picky (as a good editor should have) why does the sentence end with such a precise statement of the parentage of Bertha? Does either the writer or the editor know that in good prose the last part of a sentence is a powerful place, best used to set up the next sentence, usually by

mentioning something that is going to be discussed in the next sentence? On the other hand, I suppose I'm willing to forgive a minor sin against the optimal flow of the prose--I know the author probably had Henry's in-laws (good old Otto and Adelaide) in his notes, and dropped them in here, simply because it was convenient, not because it helped the reader follow the argument. If I insisted on beautiful transitions between every sentence, I would only read *The New Yorker*, which would itself produce a kind of intellectual atrophy--I guess. And I also know that the documentary evidence is probably short on the details I want--we don't have any photos or videos of the event--so I'm willing to assume that this sentence will pay off as the paragraph develops--after all Richardson started this paragraph talking about the *conniving of princes around sickbed of a young king*, or so my short-term memory reminds me, and that's a pretty interesting topic for a paragraph, and the fact of the young king suddenly getting married--well, it just might fit into the theme...

**Richardson:**

The royal wedding the summer of 1066 was presumably intended to allay the widespread anxiety caused by the threat of the king's death and the uncertainty of his succession.

**Me:** Well, this seems pretty good--i.e., Richardson seems to be tying the his ideas together. *The wedding was response to the conniving princes*. Okay.

**Richardson:**

A royal diploma issued in Tribur on 13 July 1066 introduces the queen as 'intervener with the words: 'we have lawfully associated Queen Bertha with us in the kingship'.

**Me:** Huh? What does this diploma have to do with the apparent argument of the paragraph at this point--which I had taken to be, *the sudden marriage of Henry and Bertha, after Henry's serious illness, as an apparent counter-move against the conniving princes*? I pause, lift my eyes, think for a second, and then start making allowances for Richardson: okay, well, maybe this is the first non-narrative documentary evidence of Bertha's queenship. Richardson has it on a note, so he

put it in. It's a little bit of scholarly showing off. For the moment, I decide to forgive the Richardson for this little detour. After all, I'm glad to know that he's immersed in the primary sources. He'll probably return to the main argument soon.

**Richardson:**

The language of the diplomas, like the double ceremony of coronation and marriage, underlines the importance of the queen's constitutional position.

**Me:** Wait a minute! What happened to the Machiavellian chess game between the conniving princes and the unnamed decision-makers of the king's court? Forget about that, we seem to have moved on to a new topic--"the queen's constitutional position." And what's this about the "double ceremony of coronation and marriage"? A quick glance around the nearby pages reveals that "Bertha was crowned queen in Würzburg before being married in Tribur."--a fact disclosed in a footnote at the bottom of the previous page! Isn't the whole idea of footnotes that they contain additional and ancillary information, and that the main text can be read independently? What sort of editor lets an author get away with a callback to a footnote?

**Richardson:**

She was married to both king and kingdom.

**Me:** Just when I'm about to throw the book down in disgust, Richardson comes up with a good sentence--short and direct, with a nice little zeugma for a conclusion. But disturbingly, it confirms that the topic of the paragraph has changed--clearly, we are now talking about the constitutional status of the queen, not about the machinations of courtly advisors vs. conniving princes.

**Richardson:**

In the diplomas of 1066-7 Bertha is described as 'consort of our kingdom and our marriage-bed' and similar formulas appear in the diplomas of later years.

**Me:** Uh... okay. We're still in 1066--sort of--but the events of that year are no longer the focus of our concerns. The author seems to be answering the question:

*What does the official paper trail of Henry's reign tell us about Bertha's role?* The part about the marriage-bed seems interesting, though, considering the upcoming divorce/annulment petition--maybe the author will explore this question in the next sentence...

**Richardson:**

Henry IV's mother had been identified by a similar formula in her husband's diplomas, as had his grandmother, Gisela, and likewise he last two empresses of the Ottonian dynasty, Theophanu and Conigunde.

**Me:** No such luck. Instead we get Henry's mom (that would be Agnes, wouldn't it?) and his grandma, Gisela, and then to top it off, Theophanu and Conigunde! These are great names, and they would probably be great characters--*at at wedding!* But, no, the wedding has lost Richardson's interest. He doesn't care about the wedding as an event or even the marriage of Henry and Bertha as a human relationship. What is he interested in?

**Richardson:**

The '*concors* formula' in Ottonian and Salian diplomas, by associating the monarch's consort with her husband's office and dignity, served to concentrate political authority exclusively in the imperial family.

**Me:** You got it: He's only interested in the legal language used to refer to queens in the Ottonian and Salian dynasties!

**Richardson:**

The wife of the present monarch, and the mother of his successor, as 'consort of the kingdom', was the guarantor of dynastic continuity, participating in the government on her husband's behalf or ruling as regent in the event of his premature death, as Empress Agnes had ruled between 1056 and 1062.

**Me:** So by the end of the paragraph, the topic is...what? How the kings used their wives' names in official documents to emphasize heritability of power? Yeah, yeah, I know, that's what a royal wedding was really all about--the concentration and continuity of power.

But I got news for you, Mr. Ian Stuart Robinson. Individuals do matter. Whatever

Bertha is saying to Henry right now, on her cell phone, in the back of this minivan, *it matters.*