

## Arrival

Wheeler Burden did not think of visiting Berggasse 19 until the third day in Vienna, or at least there is no mention of it in the journal he kept with meticulous care from almost the moment of his arrival. The first days he spent adjusting, you might say, to the elation of newness and the spectacle of this city he knew so well in theory but had never actually visited. Then the practicalities settled on him, followed by a deep feeling of displacement. Wheeler was a long way from home with no means of either identification or support. But before the gravity of the situation set in, he was almost able to enjoy himself. Much of the first day, of course, he was busy marveling at his mere presence in such a magnificent and imperial city. It was 1897 Vienna, after all. The first hour, we learn from the journal, he spent clearing the fog from his mind and pulling himself painfully back to full awareness, emerging from the miasma of what seemed like a long uneasy sleep, and from the catastrophic precipitating event he was nowhere near ready to remember.

In the first moments Wheeler could only stare vacantly at the handsome men in dark coats and top hats, finely adorned women in long dresses with tightly corseted waists and well-defined poitrines, military officers in ornate and colorful regalia, workers carrying lunch boxes. Everywhere there were horse-drawn carriages of all sorts, and tall, elegant marble façades of the grand buildings for which Vienna at the end of the century had become renowned.

You do need to know that Wheeler Burden had never been to Vienna per se but had traveled there many times before in his mind. He could speak German as a result of a natural fluency with languages,

and he had a general grasp of the manner in which a young man in fin de siècle Vienna was expected to carry himself, both a result of what now seemed like careful training in the hands of his wise old mentor, the Venerable Haze, whom we will encounter momentarily. In fact, after some reflection, you might conclude that, as with so many heroes who are invited on extraordinary journeys, Wheeler's way had been prepared.

Some time after his mysterious arrival, in pulling together his initial impressions, Wheeler would detail in his journal his first moments on the Ringstrasse, the broad and magnificent boulevard that encircled the city, as awaking from a great sleep, floating between oblivion and consciousness. Anesthesia was an experience he had been through twice—once having his tonsils removed as a child and once in adulthood in 1969, during surgery to repair a spleen ruptured by an angry Hell's Angel at a well-publicized rock-concert riot. This time he was not lying inertly in a hospital room blinking at sterile walls and unfamiliar nurses, but rather coming to his senses walking along a magnificent, wide boulevard, gaping at finely dressed passersby and massive, grandly detailed buildings.

His first recollections were ones of ambling aimlessly, smiling, gazing absently at these spectacular edifices with awe and elation, as if the mechanism that had delivered him to this fabulous place had carried with it, like anesthesia, the complete dismantling of any worldly concern.

He must have entered, he figured later, somewhere near the Danube Canal and circled half the old city before enough consciousness descended to demand a verification of place and time. Wheeler found himself drawn to a newsstand, where he picked up his first newspaper. It was then that he realized there was no other city it could have been, really. All of the impressions that led to this inevitable conclusion were rooted in the Haze's vivid descriptions of the time and place, preserved in his famous "Random Notes," but of course Wheeler was at the moment much more concerned with practical matters than he was with the peculiar coincidence of winding up in exactly the time and place that he had heard described so often.

First, he had to do something about his clothes. He was staring at the Viennese, predictable given his circumstance, but they were staring back, which, again given his circumstance as a stranger in a strange land, was not good. People staring, you might know, was certainly nothing new to my son. With his long hair and Wild Bill Hickok mustache, Wheeler Burden was on *People* magazine's ten most recognizable list five years running in the mid 1970s, and, in the words of one of his grammar school teachers, had been "something of a spectacle" all his life. The Viennese focused their suspicious attention on him as he passed, not recognizing him specifically, as strollers in the 1970s would have, but simply wondering what a man in his late forties of his appearance, dressed as he was, was doing on the Ringstrasse. The style of the times and the crisp morning air made being out in shirtsleeves inappropriate, not to mention uncomfortable. This attention was giving him a deep sense of foreboding.

Since strangeness, not notoriety, was drawing the unwanted attention in this situation, one in which anonymity above all was to be wished, at least until he had his bearings, he decided that doing something about appearance was his first priority.

No matter how much a more cautious person—his mother, say—might have advised looking before leaping, he felt he had to act. So, just as he had made his way around the Ring to the area of the opera house, he was drawn into his first action, a fateful one, one that set in motion everything that was to follow and established him indelibly as the central character in this story.

Across from the opera house, near the grand entrance of the Hotel Imperial, Wheeler was stopped by the sight of a small serving man struggling to remove a heavy steamer trunk from a curbside carriage under the unsympathetic supervision of the trunk's owner, a stern and athletic-looking young man in his early twenties. The young man drew Wheeler's attention immediately, first because of his offensive manner and only secondarily because he was a fitter, more compact, and younger version of himself, almost exactly Wheeler's size and build.

Oblivious to Wheeler's attention, focused singularly on the unloading of his possessions, the young man burst out, "Hurry up, for

god's sake. I haven't all day, you know." His accent was clearly American. He thrust some bills at the struggling man and a note onto which he had written some large numbers. "Here. Have it delivered to four thirty-three," he said with a contempt that made him immediately unlikable. "I've an hour's worth of business at the American consulate," he said under his breath, intending not to be understood. "That ought to give even you enough time."

Wheeler was not sure if it was more the man's abrasiveness or his own desperation that brought on the suddenness and audacity of his next move, one that would solve his immediate problem and—it must be added—create far worse ones. But however it was, he quickly left the scene in front of the Hotel Imperial, found a back entrance to the hotel, and strode confidently up the broad service stairs. An expert at secretive entries and escapes, Wheeler had learned long ago that assertive confidence always masked inappropriate entry.

On the stairwell, he passed a maid in a white and black uniform. Wheeler saluted her and flashed a confident greeting; then as soon as she disappeared around a corner he picked up a bundle of soiled bed linen and carried it up the stairway. He explored until he found his way to the fourth floor stairwell within eyeshot of room 433 and watched through a crack in the heavy door until the little man with the dolly and trunk arrived.

He slipped into the room unnoticed and into the large hall closet while the man fussed with the luggage. Suddenly, as he heard the door click behind the exiting servant, Wheeler was alone in the spacious hotel room with the large upright steamer trunk, and—because the young man seemed to have packed for a good long stay—with a large wardrobe to choose from. Remembering the "hour's worth of business at the American consulate," he took his time, laying out clothes on the bed. He chose the shoes, trousers, shirt, vest, and coat that seemed the most conventional from his brief walking tour of the Ringstrasse. As he finished dressing and was choosing a tie, he noticed on a trunk shelf a neat pile of five envelopes, each with the name of a country written on the outside. He chose "Austria" and found inside a stack of paper currency, which he began to pocket, then returned respectfully

to its place. Wheeler Burden had been known to bend the rules, but he was not a thief.

Suddenly, a key sounded in the lock, and the door swung open. The young man, seemingly in a hurry, walked in with his head down and was fully into the room before he looked up and saw Wheeler, now well dressed, standing at attention beside the trunk. The young man let out an involuntary grunt of surprise as his steely eyes did a quick appraisal of the situation. The two men stared for what seemed an interminable moment, the younger one's face reflecting a quick evolution from stunned surprise to unmistakable indignation.

Had Wheeler known then what he wrote in the journal later, he would have seen in the young man's eyes a familiar, smoldering intensity too deep for either man to recognize. "And what do we have here?" the young man said, collecting himself, his nostrils flaring, absorbing the very essence of the intruder and sensing something primal that defied words and civility. As his words hung in the air unanswered, the two men remained transfixed, both taking in details of the other.

Had the younger man been less taken aback, he might have sprung forward and attacked, but in that instant of surprised paralysis Wheeler seized his advantage. Before the eyes of his startled new adversary, he reached for the Austrian envelope and, deftly snatching it, brushed past him and stepped through the door and out into the hall. The young man paused for an instant, giving the intruder the slight advantage he needed, then, recovering from his momentary paralysis, darted out into the hallway.

As Wheeler reached the service exit, he swung the door shut with a mighty force, then wedged it closed with a wooden stopper. He descended four flights to the back alley, the sound of the haughty young American banging on the door fading as he went.

Quickly, he reached the Ringstrasse and adjusted his stride to match that of the average passerby. He crossed the broad boulevard near the opera house into the dark narrow streets in the heart of the old city, past St. Stephen's Cathedral, well removed from the scene of his crime. He was now comfortably and appropriately dressed, with Aus-

trian currency in his pocket, all but a shave and a haircut away from looking like a Viennese or at least a turn-of-the-century American tourist. He felt quite pleased with himself. After he was settled, with some at least temporary means of support, he would try to find the man and make amends, but for now he had Vienna to think about.

Wheeler Burden was a new man. He gave little thought to his old twentieth-century clothing, which he had left like so much shed snake's skin in a pile beside the steamer trunk in the American's hotel room. He felt such immeasurable relief at being comfortably clothed and in cash, with no one staring, that, for the moment at least, he was able to disregard the fact that he was friendless, still without passport or any means of identifying himself, and that on this, his first day in 1897 Vienna, he had acquired a mortal enemy.

## 2

### No Ordinary Journey

When he instructed the Viennese barber to cut his hair short and shave the Wild Bill Hickok mustache, Wheeler finished the transformation to anonymity that his borrowed clothing had begun. He now looked "shockingly normal," his long-time friend Joan Quigley would have quipped, had she been able to see him now in Vienna. "Now, you look just like everyone else," he could hear her saying, disgusted and amused. Joan Quigley, wife of a prominent federal court judge and social power in Pittsburgh, where her husband had grown up before becoming a Harvard football star, had given Wheeler his first sexual experience back in 1959. She had remained his secret and passionate

love for fifteen years. “Wheeler Burden is fifty-yard famous,” she had told him one day in San Francisco shortly after his injuries in the Altamont catastrophe, exasperated, referring to him in the third person. They were in Golden Gate Park, outside the de Young Museum, and she was trying for the umpteenth time to have a serious conversation about their future together. “I mean, he’s not first-sighting recognizable like Ringo Starr, say, or Robert Redford, or Mick Jagger, oh no, but definitely in the second tier. After walking fifty yards, in New York or San Francisco or Atlanta, you can bet that someone is going to come up and shake his hand and ask for an autograph or ask about Woodstock or whether Shadow Self will stay together.” This time she was especially peeved. “It gets damned annoying, you know, especially when one is trying to have a serious conversation about the future. And he doesn’t do anything to prevent it. It’s that damned Wild Bill Hickok look,” she continued, knowing Wheeler would never settle for anonymity. “No one would recognize you with a shave and a crew cut.”

But people noticing Wheeler on the street had started a long time before the Wild Bill hair and before Joan Quigley had rolled him in the hay at Harvard in 1959. It had been somehow a natural consequence, Wheeler’s mother, Flora Burden, always figured, of having a famous father and an eccentric, no-nonsense mother. That and the fact, incomprehensible to Flora’s English sensibilities, that at age twelve or so their small Sacramento Valley town discovered that this young man could throw a baseball faster than anyone they had ever seen. So it was that his mother became pretty accustomed to having people point and stare as they walked down the street and then come up and want to talk about his future plans.

Whenever Wheeler thought back on his life and its extraordinary trajectory and looked for causes, he inevitably credited being the son of a famously heroic father or perhaps just being generally blessed by benevolent gods. Whatever it was, he could pretty much pinpoint the moment it all started—his epiphany day, he called it—that day at age ten when he pasted the sparrow hawk with the rock. At least that was when it became clear about the throwing-arm part.

In the fall of 1951, Wheeler Burden—then known as Stan—was ten, a fifth grader, walking with his mother in the bottom forty acres near the Feather River, the part of their farm inside the levees that flooded nearly every winter and was suitable only for row crops. Flora loved the bottomland, with its large open bean fields and thick stands of cottonwoods and isolated pothole lakes where you could scare up wild ducks and pretend you were lost and alone. There was a calm wildness to it that was like nothing she had known growing up in London. In the long tormented days when she first arrived after the war, the walks with her son were her salvation.

This one afternoon, he was giving her, as was the custom on those walks, a detail-rich and seamless version of the latest chapters of *Ninety-Three*, the Victor Hugo novel he was reading, or rereading. For young Stan Burden, his mother always conjectured, talking was discovery, so she would just let him ramble as she lost herself in figures from the recent prune harvest. She knew he was eccentric, flamboyant even, and she liked that. His free flow of ideas kept her good company, and she figured the outpouring was good for releasing all the pent-up male energy of growing up without a father.

She walked and listened as he recounted all the vivid details of Hugo's heroine, a mother hauling her children through the ravages of the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror. Wheeler had no idea of the events that she had worked to keep secret: that when he was very young his own mother had made a very similar odyssey hauling her own infant son through newly-liberated northern France after the invasion, searching for her Resistance-hero husband, the boy's father, the legendary Dilly Burden.

As Wheeler told the Victor Hugo plot, he noticed with ten-year-old fascination a sparrow hawk hovering at about a one-hundred-foot distance. Without thinking, and definitely without breaking stride in his narrative, he picked up a smooth stone and winged it straight at the bird, striking it squarely in the chest. The bird fell like an overripe peach and hit the ground with a thud.

Wheeler's story stopped midsentence, his jaw dropped, and boy and mother stood watching the fallen bird as first it lay inert on the



bottomland's rich alluvial dust, then struggled to raise itself, shaking the cobwebs out of its tiny brain.

"Look what you have done," his mother said without a trace of either awe or humor, after it was clear that the bird was not dead and might in fact revive. "And for no reason."

Wheeler's mother had a well-earned reputation as a no-nonsense pacifist. Five years earlier, in 1946, her husband already dead in the war, she had made the unlikely move with her five-year-old son from their bombed-out London neighborhood to the small family farm in far-off California. Wheeler's father's family, the Boston Burdens, had given it to Wheeler's mother outright. It was a way to buy her off, to get her out of the way, a recompense for what she had been through, and a place to raise the family's only grandson, the last of the Burden line. Wheeler's mother, ravaged by war herself, had been glad to leave the gloom of her own and her country's loss, and the Boston Burdens had been glad to have her out of sight. The family, at least Wheeler's grandfather, had never accepted Flora. Regardless of how desperately she had loved his son and how she had left England to search for him almost as soon as the Allies landed in Normandy, it was clear to Flora that to the old patriarch Frank Burden she was little more than that English Jewess his son had gotten pregnant.

What may have appeared to the world and even perhaps to Flora Burden as exile was for a London-born American boy a dream come true, the ideal surroundings for an upbringing. From his earliest years, Wheeler roamed the bottomlands with his friends, carefree and uncomplicated.

Now, watching the wounded bird fluttering on the ground beside his mother, who understood little of what it was to be a ten-year-old rural California boy, Wheeler could only stammer. He thought of explaining to Flora the entire history of boys and rocks and incredible long shots, but for once in his short life he was speechless and even at the age of ten realized the futility of some tasks. "It was far away—" he began, still feeling the magic of the stone leaving his hand. "I never thought I'd even come close." The sparrow hawk stretched out its wings.

“You were trying to hit it.”

“Well, yes,” Wheeler stammered. How do you ever explain to your English mother how an American boy throws rocks at just about everything, not really expecting to hit anything? And this English mother, Flora Burden, was about the most uncompromising woman Wheeler would meet in his life. She drove a hard bargain in buying goods for the ranch. She knew exactly whom she wanted as friends and whom she did not. She was single, celibate, self-assured, and intended to stay that way. She was considered beautiful, granted, but her commitments ran too deep. “I’m an eagle,” she would say to Wheeler. “When I chose your father I mated for life.” And her commitment to pacifism also ran deep. She had been a life-long disciple of Bertrand Russell, Albert Einstein, and, most important, Sigmund Freud, whose seminal works she had embraced early and whom, at the end of his life, she spent time with when he emigrated from his Vienna home to London in 1938. She certainly did not want to be raising a young warrior, and, perhaps most important in this case, she knew nothing about ten-year-old arms and throwing range except that what began with throwing rocks ended with mighty armies going at each other.

“I didn’t think I’d actually hit anything,” he stammered again, still amazed at what he had accomplished.

“Well, now you know,” she said, her way of pointing out what she hoped would be a life lesson for Wheeler, that such tiny and thoughtless acts of violence were exactly what eventually caused the huge consequences of global war. She never forced him to promise anything. She had complete faith in her son’s rational powers, and saw no reason to explain or ask for an explanation. “Well, now you know” was for her all that was necessary. She had the utmost confidence that he would hear it, absorb it, and make the necessary attitude changes.

The sparrow hawk collected itself one last time, flapped its wings, then rose haltingly and flew to a nearby stand of cottonwood trees. Wheeler watched silently and recalled again the sensation in his right arm as the stone had left his hand. His fingers seemed to follow the trajectory of the stone to the fluttering target in one beautifully unified motion. Wheeler looked down at his hand, opening and closing it. He

looked up at the position in the sky where the hawk had been hovering; then he looked back at his hand, then up to the cottonwood where the bird was regrouping. It was hard to explain, but something began to dawn on the boy in that moment. He had felt for just an instant the connectedness of all things.

It was, you would have to say, a life-altering moment. Wheeler's was going to be no ordinary journey.