

DAYS OF INDIAN SUMMER... DON RICARDO'S LIFE & TIMES NO. 65

October... time of falling leaves. Five years we've been here this month...half a decade. It's Halloween. We should be playing the Red River in Heilbronn tonight. I would be riding the train now, winding up through the Black Forest to meet Thomm Jutz in Baden-Baden. I always wanted to call that place the Red Baron. The Neckar runs through Heilbronn, not the Red River. Mark Twain floated down the Neckar, on a raft to Heidelberg. There was—still is no doubt—a poster on the wall at the Red River, a smoky rock & roll club, of Freddy Krc and the Flaming Apostles. Steady Freddy, from Austin. The Shakin' Apostles, excuse me; I have CRS... an acronym borrowed from Jack Saunders, the maverick Florida writer. It stands for Can't Remember Shit. I call it Old Timers' disease. We played the Red River four Halloweens in a row, maybe five, with Thomm and the band... Richie and Peter on bass and drums, Mätze on keyboards. They served a *Schweineschnitzel*—breaded pork steak—there that hung over the edge of the plate; with a mountain of fries. Thomm, a vegan, ate only fries; and worried then what kind of oil they might have been cooked in. Thomm won the Green Card lotto, and he and his wife, Eva moved to Nashville. He plays now with Mary Gauthier, an Americana songwriter, and with Nanci Griffith, whom I've known for many years. Nanci recorded a song of mine, The Ballad of Robin Winter-Smith. For which I am eternally grateful: it never got me out of poverty, but it helped pay a few bills. Nanci never had a major hit, but she has the kind of fans who stay with her, and go back and buy her old releases. Must be, 'cause the money still trickles in. It's more a drip than a trickle, these days.

October... Five years now Edith and I have lived atop the city walls, beneath the soaring roof timbers of the house called *Zum Ochsen*, place of the oxen. The farmers plough with diesel tractors now, and there are no such beasts around, though there are dairy herds. Carved into the stone above the lintel is the date 1837. That's not old for a house around here, not even deserving a mention in the Diessenhofen book of historical places; but if you could close your eyes and imagine this place 168 years ago it would be a far different world. The walls went all round the city then. There were no dams on the Rhine. It would be over sixty years before the railroad came, linking Schaffhausen to the Untersee and Lake Constance. Much of this country remains unspoiled. Looking in any direction I have a picture of the country in my mind. I've been there, left footprints. And bicycle tracks. Not every square foot or meter, but I know what's there, the lay of the land. I know the river, both banks, upstream to Stein am Rhein, and down to Schaffhausen, especially from here up as far as the bridge at Hemishofen, and down past the old cloister of St. Katherinental. I know how the river feels on the first swim; the bracing cold, and how the current sweeps you down when it's running high with snow melt. The view as seen floating on your back, the wooded hills, clouds gliding by.

The late Roxy Gordon wrote about place, and spirit of place; what it meant to him, and in his view of Indian spirituality. It was his contention that land forms the people who are born and live in a place. I found that this view was shared over here where they called it by a different name. I wondered if you could develop this feeling for a country you came to know late in life, and if you could still be molded in some way this late in the game. I didn't know, but I decided from the beginning to make every effort to come to know this country. It was a good antidote to homesickness, should it ever occur. And I have to say it hasn't, in the main.

I have written of these things in my ongoing book, titled for now *Pleasures of the Hoehrhain*, or High Rhine, as this part of the river is called from here downstream to Basel. It

is a difficult word to pronounce—for a non-German speaker—and to love. Part and parcel of ongoing revision will be a title change. A Gulf Coast boy, landlocked sailor now, cast up on these improbable shores. *Far across the blue water lived an old German's daughter/ By the banks of the old River Rhine...* That would be Edith... an old Swiss German's daughter. That's close enough: my life as a country song. The story takes in the music too, on the road with Thomm and the guys up in Germany, Austria, Netherlands, and Spain.

October... Two zucchinis, a big yellow squash, and five pumpkins remain from our summer garden harvest. We have winter greens and *Nüsslisalat*, a crunchy green; like spinach, nutty in flavor as the name suggests. *Nuss* means nut in high-German. A *Nussbaum* is a walnut tree. *Nüsslisalat* is Swiss German, adding an umlaut, and the ever-present diminutive, “*li*.” We have *Wirz*, or savoy cabbage, and celery root yet to harvest. We put a layer of mulch down we got from Hans-Ruedi Brandenberger, a *Gärtner*, or gardener. Landscape gardener we would call him back in the States. This is only our second year, as we waited four years before an opening came up for a plot. He rents a piece of land on a nearby farm where he hauls brush to be chipped. We made sure to dig up old chips from last year that had time to season. A valuable source of local information is Hans-Ruedi, a man who will take a drink with you, and who plays upright bass. That's a good man to have around... in any town. The path to our plot had a gate, sagging and held together with string. I mentioned to Hans-Ruedi that I wanted to fix the gate. He just happened to have one, brought it over, and we installed it together. A charmer is Hans-Ruedi; women of all ages like him. I've written about him in my book. A book such as I am trying to write should have an intriguing local character, and he fits the bill.

October... *Altweibersommer* they call this time of year; old woman's summer. A mist settles in the night and remains, clearing in the afternoon. Sometimes we can see the Alps off to the south. The light comes in from the south-facing windows now. I harvested the balcony pot plants, got my stash for the year; brought in the jalapeño plants for the winter. Except for an hour or two the balcony is in shade now.

I take an afternoon bike ride, south by Willisdorf, on to the next village, Basadingen, then across the highway, making a loop through the fields east of town. The farmers have finished harvesting corn and sugar beets; some of the fields are coming up with winter crops, some freshly plowed. Later I make a phone call to England where it looks like the critical, second leg of our spring U.K. tour will come together, a duo with old friend and band-mate, Mark Sergio Webb. It's nearly dark when I meet Edith at the five o'clock train from Schaffhausen. Later after dinner I walk over to rehearse with Hans-Ruedi. Tabea is there, a young singer who used to be my pupil. We've invited her up to sing with us a few times. It's good to have an attractive twenty-something chick in a band of old farts; besides, she sings like an angel. We practice some of the new songs I'll be recording in Nashville with Thomm. Walking over I pass a group of kids in costume. Halloween has roots in pre-Christian pagan ceremonies, here in Europe long ago; American style trick-or-treating from house to house is just catching on.

October... five years. I've never lived anywhere for five years. I can't say that anymore. It's not October anymore, either. It's the 1st of November and I better get cracking. I can feel it: countdown time approaching. In nineteen days I fly to Texas, to check in with my parents, and soon after will be driving to Nashville to begin work on the new record with Thomm. Make that eighteen days; it's now November 2nd. Much remains to be done, and the days are too damn short.