

Nabokov's Advantage

a novel by Marshall Jon Fisher

Synopsis

One of the greatest partnerships in literary history was born at a masked ball in Berlin on May 8, 1923. A twenty-four-year-old poet named Vladimir Nabokov encountered a woman in a wolf mask, and his life found its course. Véra Slonim, like most in attendance and a half million others in Berlin, was a refugee of the Russian Revolution. She also happened to be an enthusiastic Nabokov fan, attending all his readings and even keeping a scrapbook of his poems published in émigré newspapers. They left the party and strolled out onto a bridge over a dark canal. She recited his own poetry for him but never removed her mask. By the end of the year she was typing all his manuscripts, as she would for the next five decades. In April 1925 they married. In the years to come, as they fled Nazi Germany (Véra was Jewish), then left Paris ahead of the invasion and settled in the United States, Véra Nabokov presided over her husband's burgeoning literary career as typist, manager, first reader, and Muse.

The story of this famous couple's genesis seems especially ripe for a fictional treatment. Even the two major biographies, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, by Brian Boyd, and Stacy Schiff's *Véra: Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov*, had no choice but to skim quickly over the courtship of Vladimir and Véra; not enough biographical lumber has been left behind to construct a detailed account of this historic literary love story.

In *Nabokov's Advantage*, we see this story play out through the eyes of a fictional character, Walter Spicehandler, an American who comes to Berlin to research a book. Spicehandler, a former pilot in the Great War and subsequently a tennis star at Penn, falls in love with Véra and becomes a friend and rival of his coeval Nabokov. In doing so, he records priceless details. As the academic narrator of the novel writes, “That Nabokov was a fine tennis player was already a matter of public record, but not what an elegant backhand he wielded. It had been noted that Véra Slonim longed to learn to fly, but never before has she been seen in the cockpit of an Albatros gliding over the Baltic Sea. Spicehandler indeed illuminates, however dimly, a lost alleyway of history, like the opalescent light of high lamps reflecting off the dark, wet, homesick streets of Russian Berlin....”

The setting is irresistible. The Russian émigré community in 1920s Berlin was an efflorescent world within a world: there were Russian hairdressers, grocers, pawnshops, and money exchanges. There were Russian orchestras and soccer teams. In 1923, Berlin, not Moscow, was the capital of Russian literature, with 150 Russian-language newspapers and journals and 86 Russian publishing houses (one of them, *Orbis*, owned by Véra's father, Evsei Slonim). The thousands of Russian artists, writers, and other intellectuals who had been driven out of Soviet Russia convened around Berlin in Russian cafés, at literary soirées, and at charity events such as the masked ball where the Nabokovs met. Vladimir and Véra, suspicious of their families' opinions, would meet surreptitiously at night in the Fall of 1923, but they were not alone. The poet Nina Berberova recalled "all of us sleepless Russians wandering the streets until dawn," dreaming of a return one day to a Russia who had finally come to her senses.

Spicehandler's romantic battle (as he imagines it) for Véra's affections takes place not only within the amber suspension of Russian émigré life but also deep in the social and political cauldron of Weimar Berlin. An impotent government, which seemed doomed from its inception in the ashes of a miserable war, is constantly in threat from the fascists on the right and communists on the left. The streets are pervaded by a feeling of lawlessness, which becomes compounded by the hyperinflation of 1923-4. The German mark, which had gone from four per dollar to seventy-five between 1914 and 1921, shot to 48,000 in February 1923, just before Spicehandler showed up. In October a dollar will buy 440 million marks, and the next month 4,200 billion. Paper money becomes worthless as soon as it's printed. A life savings of a hundred thousand marks suddenly won't buy breakfast. Retired generals and ambassadors on a fixed pension can be seen scouring garbage cans for bits of food. There are reports of people withdrawing their entire savings to buy one last postage stamp for their suicide note.

And not only money but other standards as well seem to lose their value in this anarchic atmosphere. Money comes and goes, and its value lasts only a few hours; as a result, it is spent as never before, as though the world were about to end. No sexual thirst is left unquenched. "The higher prices rose," wrote one historian, "the greater the abandon, the madder the nightclubs, the faster the dance steps, the louder the jazz bands, the more plentiful the cocaine. But [in 1923] it was not yet the joyful dancing of the so-called 'Golden Twenties'; it was an insane dance of forgetting, a dance of despair."

On this dramatic historical stage, Spicehandler finds himself not only witness to the first violent eruptions of his century's fateful conflicts, but also a hapless middleman in one of literature's greatest true love stories.