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PERSONAL HISTORY

TIME OUT

Confessions of a watch geek.

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In October, my feelings of dread spiked, so I decided to buy a Rolex.

AT THE START of 2016, I had a bad feeling. Time was not working right. Some weeks were as snappy as days, others were as elastic as months, and the months felt as if they were either bleeding into one another three

at a time—Jabruarch—or segmenting into Gregorian-calendar city-states. Feb. Rue. Airy. Something was wrong with the world.

One day in February, I took a ride on the subway. This was a rare occur-

rence. Since turning forty, I'd started to suffer from a heightened sense of claustrophobia. A few years ago, I was stuck for an hour in an elevator with a man who weighed about three hundred and fifty pounds and his two grocery carts crammed with bags of Tostitos and bottles of Canada Dry, an experience both frightening and lonely. The elevator had simply given up. What if a subway train also refused to move? I began walking seventy blocks at a time or splurging on taxis. But on this day I had taken the N train. Somewhere between Forty-ninth Street and Forty-second Street, a signal failed and we ground to a halt. For forty minutes, we stood still. An old man yelled at the conductor at full volume in English and Spanish. Time and space began to collapse around me. The orange seats began to march toward each other. I was no longer breathing with any regularity. *This is not going to end well. None of this will end well. We will never leave here. We will always be underground. This, right here, is the rest of my life.* I walked over to the conductor's silver cabin. He was calmly explaining to the incensed passenger the scope of his duties as an M.T.A. employee. "Sir," I said to him, "I feel like I'm dying."

"City Hall, City Hall, we got a sick passenger," he said into the radio. "I repeat, a sick passenger. Can you send a rescue train?"

A rescue train. My whole life I have been waiting for one. Sensing the excitement of someone suffering more than they were, the other passengers moved to my end of the car to offer advice, crowding in on me and making me panic all the more. One man was particularly insistent. "I'm a retired firefighter," he said. "I've been doing this twenty years, folks. Seen it all. This man here is hyperventilating. That's what he's doing. Twenty years a fire-

fighter, now retired.”

“I’m going to take an Ativan now,” I said, fishing a pill out of my breast pocket.

“Do not do that,” the retired firefighter said. “It will only make you hyperventilate more. Trust me, I know what I’m doing.”

A middle-aged woman approached me. “You have to imagine,” she said to me, in a Polish accent, “that *eventually* the train will move. That *eventually* we will come out of the tunnel.”

Shamed into not taking the Ativan by the retired firefighter, I looked down at my wrist. I was wearing a new watch, the first mechanical watch I had ever owned. A brief primer: Since the late nineteen-seventies, most watches have used a quartz movement, which is battery-powered and extremely accurate. Mechanical watches, by contrast, are powered either by hand-winding or, in the case of an automatic watch, by the motion of the wearer’s wrist, which is converted into energy by means of a rotor. Mechanical watches are far less accurate than quartz watches, but often far more expensive, because their bearings are more intricate. All contemporary Rolex watches, for example, are mechanical. The difference between quartz and old-fashioned mechanical is that your child’s Winnie the Pooh watch will likely keep better time than a seventy-six-thousand-dollar Vacheron Constantin perpetual calendar in rose gold. A quick way to tell the two kinds apart is to look at the second hand. On a quartz watch, the second hand goose-steps along one tick at a time; on a mechanical watch, it glides imperfectly, but beautifully, around the dial and into the future.

Looking at the smooth, antiquated mechanical glide of my watch’s second hand, I felt, if not calm, then ready for whatever happened next. As the conductor’s radio flared on and off with promises from City Hall (my rescue train never came), as the passengers around me discussed my fate, I wondered: Can you hold your own world together while the greater world falls apart? The visible passing of time, second by second, seemed to provide a kind of escape route, even as my body remained within the metal shell of the stricken N train. *Three seconds, inhale. Three seconds, exhale.* The

watch was a Junghans, from Germany, derived from a design by the Bauhaus-influenced Swiss architect, artist, and industrial designer Max Bill. I had bought it at the MOMA shop for what in my early, innocent watch days seemed like the astronomical price of a thousand dollars. Its no-frills, form-follows-function shape evoked civility in a time of chaos, a ticking intelligence in the face of a new inhumanity. The train slowly moved again. The Polish woman smiled at me. We shuddered into Times Square and I was, for a few moments in time, safe.

EVERY WATCH GEEK has an origin story. During childhood, my first best friend was a watch, a Casio H-108 12-Melody-Alarm. True to its name, the digital watch played twelve melodies, including “Santa Lucia,” “Happy Birthday,” “The Wedding March,” “Jingle Bells” (played only in the bathroom of my Hebrew school, when no other Jewish boys were present), and even a song from my native Russia, “Kalinka” (roughly, “Red Little Berry”), which I listened to every hour on the hour to make myself feel less homesick and scared. I spoke English miserably, but the watch had its own language, a computerese series of squeaks issuing from a tiny Japanese speaker to form passable melodies. My parents had bought me the watch at a Stern’s department store in Queens for \$39.99, a significant part of their net worth at the time, and it was easily my favorite possession, until it caught the eye of a Hebrew-school bully. My grandmother marched into the principal’s office and used the hundred or so English words at her disposal—“Bad boychik take watch!”—to lobby for its safe return.

Eventually, I made human friends, and my musical Casio disappeared for good. My relationship with watches from that point on coincided with the women in my life. In high school, my mother bought me a quartz Seiko, which pinched my budding wrist hair with its loose gold-plated bracelet, and was a bit out of place at my next stop, Oberlin, where comrades were not encouraged to have gold-plated things. After college, a girlfriend bought me a Diesel watch with the image of at least six continents on its dial, to indi-

cate just how “worldly” I was, and a subsequent girlfriend had it repaired after we had broken up, a gesture of unusual kindness.

But by this time I thought of myself as a writer, and, for a writer, the money you make can be traded in for your creative independence, hence one is permanently building a rainy-day fund. I have always tried to keep on hand enough cash to cover at least two years of expenses in case the public stops being interested in my work, while plowing the rest into low-cost index funds. Thrift was comforting; material goods uninteresting, bordering on gauche.

And yet on April 12, 2016, I walked out of the Tourneau TimeMachine store, on Madison Avenue and Fifty-seventh Street, with a receipt for \$4,137.25 and a new Nomos Minimatik Champagner on my wrist, the sales clerks bidding me farewell with a cheerful cry of “Congratulations!” By the standards of luxury watches, the amount I spent was small indeed (an entry-level Rolex is about six thousand dollars), but by my own standards I had just thrown away a small chunk, roughly 4.3 writing days, of my independence. And yet I was happy. The watch was the most beautiful object I had ever seen. After my panic attack on the subway, the urge for another Bauhaus-inspired watch had become overwhelming, and I compared many brands. The winner was a relatively new watchmaker called Nomos, based in the tiny Saxon town of Glashütte.

An early-spring sun glistened off my watch as I walked down Lexington Avenue. I took a photograph of the Minimatik on my wrist, as if at any moment I would be forced to give it back. There is an entire genre of watch aficionados who take photos of themselves wearing their timepieces in front of landmarks and post them on watch forums. Would I become one of them? I ducked into a Pakistani place to eat a quail, but was worried about splashing grease on the vegetable-tanned natural-leather strap. The dial was champagne-colored, with an unexpected circle of neon orange around the seconds’ subdial. (“These are wild colors but in homeopathic doses,” one of Nomos’s marketing texts reads.) The Min-

imatik's lugs—the four parts that extend from the case and connect the watch to either a strap or a bracelet—were contoured and feminine, as was the gently domed sapphire crystal, a sharp rebuke to the dinner-plate aesthetic you see on so many watches meant for men. Nomos does not market its watches to either gender—their relatively small size is meant both for women and for men with nothing to prove. The hour markers were pearled, and milled into the champagne dial to pick up its brass hue. The watch seemed to absorb and reflect light in its own way, storing it under its arched sapphire, making it golden.

I took the watch off and turned it over. Some of the more interesting watches have an exhibition-case back, allowing you to see the inner workings. The Nomos calibre, assembled almost entirely from hundreds of minuscule parts made in Germany, is a riot of sunburst decoration, tempered blue screws, and a small constellation of rubies. A tiny golden balance wheel spins back and forth, regulating the time (think of a pendulum swinging on a grandfather clock, but at a tremendously fast clip), and this action, to many viewers, gives the watch the appearance of being alive. It is not uncommon for some watch enthusiasts to call this part of the watch its “heart,” or even its “soul.” The Nomos was not a quartz watch built by robots in a giant Asian factory. A German man or woman with real German problems had constructed this piece, blue screw by blue screw.

I was obsessed. And I had time to indulge my obsession. I believe that a novelist should write for no more than four hours a day, after which returns truly diminish; this, of course, leaves many hours for idle play and contemplation. Usually, such a schedule results in alcoholism, but sometimes a hobby comes along, especially in middle age. For us so-called W.I.S., or Watch Idiot Savants, all roads led to one Internet site: Hodinkee, the name being a slightly misspelled take on *hodinky*, the Czech word for “watch.” Hours of my days were now spent refreshing the site, looking at elaborate timepieces surrounded by wrist hair and Brooks Brothers shirt cuffs, and learning an entirely new language and

nomenclature. By this point, it was becoming clear that Donald Trump would be the Republican nominee. Hodinkee became a natural refuge, a place where I could watch videos of celebrity Watch Idiot Savants talking about their obsession in terms that made me feel less obsessive myself. The rapper Pras, of Fugees fame: “I think about my watches. Like when I get up in the morning.”

HODINKEE IS THE brainchild of Ben Clymer, a thirty-four-year-old watch impresario. In the outside world, no one really understood me, or the value of tempered blue screws. My sister-in-law pointed out, not incorrectly, that I might be suffering a mid-life crisis. But, in Watch World, you enter a room and everybody wants to discuss micro-rotors with you. As Cara Barrett, one of the few women writers on Hodinkee's staff, told me, “Micro-rotors are pretty damn adorable.”

At Hodinkee's headquarters, which occupy a loft space in Nolita, every object is tasteful, much like the twenty-some mostly young people working there. In addition to publishing the most passionate watch journalism on the Web (and the most incensed readers' comments), the site sells its own watchbands and vintage watches. Hodinkee's statistics reflect the often rarefied world of watch collecting. The average visitor has an income of three hundred thousand dollars, owns five to seven watches, and buys two or three more a year at an average cost of seven thousand dollars each.

I spoke with Clymer at Hodinkee's offices. After I launched into a long soliloquy on a certain Zenith gold-filled chronograph, he said to me, “Wow, you're in deep.” I took this as a huge compliment, but it was also a sign of how my life was unravelling. Hillary Clinton had just collapsed at the 9/11 ceremony, FiveThirtyEight was showing the election tightening, and my shrink—also a watch nut—had just been telling me about the toll the election was taking on his patients. Yes, I was *in deep*, but weren't we all? A dear friend of mine who lives in Putin's Russia collects high-end shaving supplies. He once spent part of a visit to New York on the trail of some kind of badger-hair brush. I re-

membered all those old Soviet-era Russians humming math problems in their heads or playing twelve hours of competitive chess with themselves. In a society hopeless and cruel, the particular and the microscopic were the only things that could still prove reliable.

Clymer is preternaturally calm and sumptuously bearded, a self-described “old soul,” who ticks as reliably as a chronometer granted the all-important Geneva Seal. The origin story of his watch obsession begins with a grandfather he called Papa, whose urbane New York tastes he admired as a kid growing up in snowy suburban Rochester, and whose gift to his grandson of an Omega Speedmaster “inspired me to do the whole thing.” Clymer also started out with what has been called “the collecting gene.” He wore a Volkswagen Beetle costume for his fifth birthday and collected old Bakelite rotary phones, which he bought at fifty cents apiece. His personal collection of watches is impressive—for example, a gold Patek Philippe with the Golden Rule inscribed on its dial, which Lyndon Johnson gave to his allies and underlings—and he has likely made a small fortune from buying and selling timepieces over the years, but he's also harnessed nostalgia in a way that feels real.

Hodinkee's influence is felt throughout the watch industry. Clymer has helped Jerry Seinfeld and Jay Z pick out their wrist wear (Jay Z wanted “the least rapper watch possible”). The shrinking size of some of the more intriguing watches for men can, arguably, be traced back to Hodinkee and its assault on what some in the watch world call “penis-extenders”—those overwrought testosterone timepieces pumped out by newer brands like Hublot, but also by old stalwarts like Patek and Rolex. If you want a watch that looks like a Russian oligarch just curled up around your wrist and died, you might be interested in the latest model of Rolex's Sky-Dweller.

AS THE ELECTION approached, I started going to meetings of the Horological Society of New York. On the streets of Manhattan, I never have any idea which celebrity is which—they all seem to be Matt Damon—but at the

Horological Society I could identify all my new heroes, many with full, Portlandian beards, across the vast hall of the library of the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen, in midtown, while they waited in line for their free coffee and Royal Dansk butter cookies. There was the nattily dressed Kiran Shekar—yes, *the* Kiran Shekar, noted collector, author, and proprietor of the independent watch purveyor Contrapante. I ran over to introduce myself and a few moments later he gave me his watch to hold, and a few weeks later he arranged for me to attend the secret RedBar, a meeting of the watch elect, at a bar in Koreatown. You need a regular to invite you to a meeting, and the idea that I could be welcomed into this exclusive world kept me from sleeping. I lay in bed practicing what I might say about “perlage,” “three-quarter plates,” and the rare lapis-lazuli dials on some seventies Rolex Datejusts.

At the gathering of the RedBar Crew, there was a Brooklyn watchmaker’s apprentice from Australia, a woman from Latin America carefully taking pictures of a prized Rolex Daytona, a guy from Helsinki with his own brand of massive watches, and a young man with a hundred-and-fifty-dollar Citizen. No watch is rejected here, and there is no hierarchy. Just as at the Horological Society, the attendees skew young, a surprise considering youth’s supposed slavishness to all things digital, and there are a growing number of women—RedBar’s chief operating officer is the collector Kathleen McGivney. There was a boozy meat-market scene in the rest of the bar, which was filled with loud music and twentysomething Koreans on the make. But, in the section reserved for the W.I.S. crowd, we sipped whiskey as we stripped off our watches in our small brightly lit safe space. I threw my Nomos on a long covered table and an exuberantly bearded dude pawed at it while I got my hands on a cheap but sturdy Seiko diver and an “honest” Omega Speedmaster. Swiss luxury watches may be made with the one percent in mind, but true aficionados know that the hegemony of the Swiss is over; some of the most interesting watches now come from German brands like Nomos and A. Lange and Japan’s Grand

Seiko. I missed out on the culmination of the evening, when all the watches were piled up for an Instagram photo with the hashtag #sexpile, but as I wandered into the autumn night my Nomos beat warmly against my wrist.

IN OCTOBER, MY feelings of dread spiked, and so I decided to buy a Rolex. Not a new one, of course, but something vintage—in this case, an Air-King from the seventies. I spotted one on the site of a dealer from Boston. It had a perfect “bluejean” dial and well-preserved hands, and a brown leather strap that I knew would contrast perfectly with the blue dial, as if my whole world were just cool and casual and everything was going to be O.K. After it arrived, I got in touch with Eric Wind, one of the top watch experts at Christie’s, who told me that the dial was indeed rare and the hands “extraordinary.” But, as I suspected, the case had been overpolished, because the lugs were too sharp and thin. (“Thick, beefy lugs” is a mantra for watch collectors; and most would prefer a scuffed “honest” case over something buffed and shiny.) Still, Wind valued the watch at about six hundred and fifty dollars more than I’d paid for it—my first potential profit as a Watch Idiot Savant.

I started looking at the Air-King’s frantic second hand for hours, and listening to its serious ticking, which sounded like a surly boxer before the first round. When I was a kid, in the eighties, Rolex was shorthand for “yuppie.” To console myself that I had not become one, I thought of all the rap lyrics featuring the brand. “Girl you look fine/like a wide-face Rolex, you just shine,” Biggie Smalls rapped on “Fuck You Tonight.” “They took my rings, they took my Rolex,” Warren G commiserates with Nate Dogg on “Regulate.” “I looked at the brotha, said ‘Damn, what’s next?’”

At a lecture that Jack Forster, *Hodinkee’s* editor-in-chief, gave at the Horological Society, a photograph of a lonely Antarctic research station flashed on the projection screen. Speaking of its inhabitants, Forster said, “In Antarctica, there is no time except from the civilization that sent them there.” He went on to discuss the very subjectivity of time. “A month is not the same

month from one month to the next. A year isn’t.” I looked into the reassuring deep blue of my old Rolex. I’m familiar with the concept of leap years, of course, but Forster was saying that no one month, year, minute, hour is exactly, perfectly equivalent to any other. What hope do we have of regulating our lives, if time itself is an unsturdy, possibly political construct?

“There’s something very mournful about watches,” Forster told me, after the lecture. When I got home, I checked my Air-King and Nomos and Junghans against the atomic clock of time.gov. The Nomos had lost five seconds in the previous twenty-four hours, the Junghans close to ten, and the Rolex had gained fifteen. It took an average of three timepieces to tell the actual time. We were using watches to calculate our own demise, and we weren’t even doing it accurately.

A few days later, over oysters and gluten-free Martinis, I pressed Forster on what I could do to end my expensive new hobby. He shrugged and swallowed a bivalve. Of collectors, he said, “There’s some pocket of rot in the oak of their soul that can only be patched up by watches.”

AFTER TRUMP WON, I went to Germany—specifically, to Glashütte, in the remote Müglitz Valley, in Saxony, between Dresden and Prague, where my Nomos Minimatik was born. The journey from Dresden by suburban train took me past churches and boxy G.D.R.-era dachas, a perfect Russian motif for a city that once hosted the budding K.G.B. spy Vladimir Putin. Glashütte, where German watchmakers began working in the nineteenth century, is now home to at least eight companies. The town, surrounded by the Ore Mountains, appears suddenly, its train platform hugged by buildings of cement, steel, and glass. Glashütte does not have so much as a proper restaurant, although every Tuesday a chicken man comes with a truck full of roasting birds, and pensioners dutifully line up as if the Berlin Wall had never fallen.

“Caring for machines is as essential as caring for yourself,” an old East German poster proclaims in one of Nomos’s workspaces. The company oper-

NOMOS

GLASHÜTTE

neomatik



neomatik from NOMOS Glashütte: Watches with the automatic movement of the next generation. Incredibly slender, highly precise—and now available at selected retailers. Find Minimatik champagner and other NOMOS models at nomos-glashuette.com, nomos-store.com.



ates out of Glashütte's old train station, and also a well-kept building stuffed with the latest Vitra furniture, situated on a hill overlooking the town. (There is also a design bureau in Berlin, on the Landwehr Canal.) The watches are marketed not to the one per cent but to the creative classes. "If an editor's career is on the rise," a German publishing friend said, "they'll get a Nomos."

"Too many Swiss watch companies have become M.B.A.'d and are run like Procter & Gamble," the watch collector Kiran Shekar had told me in New York. Nomos is the opposite of that. And there is a political element, too. Saxony has not been immune to the racist stirrings of the Alternative für Deutschland party, challenging Angela Merkel's ruling coalition. When an AfD march was planned for Glashütte, the company put up a sign reading, in German, "We tick internationally. No to right-wing propaganda. Yes to tolerance and cosmopolitanism, and to people who need our help now."

Visiting a watch manufactory is a soothing experience during chaotic times, and the painfully slow assembly of these beautiful objects may well fall under the heading of "God's work." At the Nomos workshop, a monastic silence prevailed as men and women (there are more of the latter than the former) sat at desks, wearing what looked like pink finger condoms and sifting through parts, some of them thinner than a human hair. The work is difficult and takes a toll. Because their hands need to be steady, watchmakers cannot drink profusely. According to Nadja Weisweiler, who works for the German retailer and watch manufacturer Wempe, they are encouraged to take up musical instruments or horseback riding. I observed with special delight as a watchmaker inserted a balance wheel into a new watch, and it came to life for the first time.

At Nomos, the dignity of work is still celebrated, and the company provides an example of what a creative manufacturing workplace can look like at a time when making things is rarely the province of humans. Nomos's design bureau, in Berlin, is light-filled and cheery. The minimally bearded design-

ers turn to everyday objects for inspiration. "We're recoding heritage with contemporary influences from Berlin," one of them told me. The neon orange that adds such cosmopolitan charm to my Minimatik, for example, came from the orange of warning signs seen in technical instruments and on the streets of the city. The avant-garde fonts for the numbers on the dial are stretched and opened up for better legibility. The intelligence of the design never proclaims the watch to be anything more than an instrument. "We know there are more important things than watches," Judith Borowski, the company's chief brand officer, said. "Like people suffering around the world."

Nomos is doing well. The company's sales increased by more than twenty per cent over the previous year, while the Swiss watch industry is suffering, in part because of the decline of several important markets, such as China and Russia, and, at a certain level, the preponderance of smart watches like Apple's. Because Nomos aims for a younger demographic, its C.E.O., Uwe Ahrendt, is optimistic. "The good thing about smart watches is that young people started caring about their wrists again," he told me in Glashütte. "They'll start off with a smart watch and then they'll switch to mechanical."

After visiting Nomos, I crossed the road to A. Lange & Söhne. Ferdinand Adolph Lange, the godfather of German watchmaking, founded the company in 1845, as part of a Saxon king's anti-poverty measures. The region was chiefly known for mining, but it was also famous for basket-weaving, and the dexterity required for that was used to make precise ticking things. After the Second World War, the Soviets nationalized the company and carted the best equipment off to Russia. Walter Lange, the great-grandson of Ferdinand, was about to be conscripted to work in an East German uranium mine, when he fled to the West. In 1990, after the Wall fell and when Lange was sixty-six years old, he returned to Glashütte and brought the company back to life. The new watches were soon beloved, especially by collectors who didn't care about Lange's pricing (entry-level Langes start at nearly fifteen thousand

dollars, which some people consider a bargain).

In contrast to the freewheeling Nomos, Lange has an air of secrecy and tradition. To enter the inner sanctum, I had to surrender my phone and put on a lab coat. Lange's timepieces are beautiful in an eerie way that collapses the differences between centuries, speaking to a world interrupted and then, against all odds, resumed. The watchmakers use gold chatons with steel screws to hold down the rubies that act as a lubrication system for the watch. There is absolutely no need for gold chatons at this point—the technology has moved on—but Lange insists on using them.

Walter Lange died this year, at the age of ninety-two, and the success of his company can be seen as a form of revenge against the totalitarian Soviet interregnum. The results are almost perversely opulent. Parts of the mechanism are finished by hand but are never meant to be seen by the owner; only the watchmaker and subsequent watch repairers will see the work in full. When I look at the back of a Datograph, one of Lange's more complicated watches (it features a date as well as a chronograph, a kind of stopwatch), I see a small city of silver and gold gears and wheels, a miniature three-dimensional universe in which everyone is running to catch the next bus. If only our own daily exertions could be so purposeful and ornate. If only watches could do what they so slyly promise. To record. To keep track. To bring order.

AS THE INAUGURATION approached, I bought another watch. I knew I had to stop, but I had an excuse. I desperately needed a waterproof watch for swimming, my only form of exercise. By my hopeless logic, the watch would make me healthier. I went to Wempe's emporium on Fifth Avenue, which is just a few doors down from Trump Tower, and feels like a meditation on the calmness of wood and the serenity of the color beige. It was early in the day, but already some gentlemen had stumbled in for their watch-fondling. "Tell me which watch you like and I'll tell you how long I have to work for it," one man was telling his five-year-old

son. I was served an espresso and a Lindt chocolate by a young man who also presented me with a Tudor Heritage Black Bay 36, a glowing black-dial water-resistant watch bearing the famous “snowflake” hour hand of Tudor (a sister company of Rolex). I bought it, whereupon a small bottle of Veuve Clicquot was opened, and although the iconic snowflake hand was still two hours short of noon, I drank it down to the last. In total, I had now given up 10.1 days of artistic freedom to four watches in the course of less than a year.

Hodinkee invited me to a secret event at an undisclosed location. A black Lincoln MKT picked me up and half an hour later we arrived at a swish bar in midtown. Meanwhile, twenty-one of the world’s most significant watch collectors were making similar, if longer, journeys, from as far away as London and Los Angeles. They had no idea what awaited them. At the bar, Ben Clymer unveiled the project that Hodinkee had been working on for more than a year. The company had taken a famous Vacheron Constantin watch known as the Cornes de Vache (its lugs are shaped like cow horns), swapped out the platinum or the rose gold for humble steel, switched the white or silvered dial for a slate-gray one, and changed the tachymeter scale on the rim of the dial, which

measures distance or speed, for a pulsation scale, which helps measure the beating of the human heart.

Vacheron Constantin is a storied Swiss *maison* (Napoleon wore one of its watches). Amid the *aab*-ing of the audience, I ran over to be the first to feel metal against flesh. Collectors gathered around, taking snaps of the watch on my wrist. The atmosphere simmered with the strange happiness of our little world, the feeling of being finally at the right place, if maybe not in the right time. The price of the watch was forty-five thousand dollars, and only thirty-six of them would be available for sale. Momentarily, I reviewed my finances. *What if*. . .

Shortly afterward, I met with a well-known collector and the editor of the watch site TimeZone who goes by the nom de plume William Massena, an ursine man with a strong Continental accent and even stronger horological opinions (“I used to get death threats!”). The timepieces in his collection were subtle yet striking. As Massena showed me the gorgeous faded-brown dial of a Rolex Submariner, akin to a model issued to members of the British Navy, I told him how I had got into watches at the start of 2016, when our nation was vulnerable but still whole. “Ah,” he said, in a burst of European pragma-

tism, “but you are a little Russian émigré. You know if you need to you can put these watches in your pocket and sneak across the border to Canada past Buffalo. And you can survive.”

A memory arrived unbidden. The year was 1978, and my family and I were at Pulkovo Airport, in Leningrad, about to become Soviet refugees in America. A stern customs officer took off my furry *shapka* and poked at the still warm lining, looking for diamonds my parents might have hidden there. A six-year-old is humiliated, but perhaps a lesson is learned. What if we had stashed away some diamonds and somehow got them through to freedom? In talking to collectors, I have heard the tale of a grandfather who was able to escape Occupied France because he gave a gold Omega to a stationmaster. Is this it, then? Is that what my obsession is about?

I will stop buying watches. But allow me one last purchase. It comes, via eBay, from San Luis Potosí, a city in north-central Mexico. It is a Casio H-108 12-Melody-Alarm, the kind I had lost to the Hebrew-school bully and my grandmother had reclaimed. The watch feels small, digital, innocent. It dutifully plays all the songs I remember. The word “HAPPY” appears in eighties letters as the birthday song plays. And, for a moment, I am. ♦

NOMOS
GLASHÜTTE
neomatik



NOMOS watches for premieres, podiums, and parties: such as Metro neomatik nachtblau, depicted here. Find this and other timepieces with the NOMOS swing system and the automatic movement of the next generation now at selected retailers. More at nomos-store.com, nomos-glashuette.com.

