

## THE SEAT OF EUROPE

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“Only a few drops are necessary,” said the doctor, waving a translucent plastic cup at the bathroom door. She needed to make sure I didn’t suffer from bubonic plague, syphilis, gonorrhea, psychological aberrations, hallucinatory psychosis, or rabies. After I’d been pronounced disease-free, I went down to the New York Police Department headquarters, where an officer dipped my fingers in sooty ink and smeared my prints on a white form, checking a box to confirm that none of my digits had been amputated. A quick search revealed that I had no criminal record, and I was issued a certificate of good conduct. Presented with this evidence, the Belgian consulate was kind enough to grant me a short-term work permit, on the condition that I report to the Ministry of the Interior within eight days of my arrival.

The international arrivals terminal at Brussels airport is a jungle of posters that say “Welcome to the Capital of Europe.” Belgium seems to have only a tentative sense of itself as a nation, but in spite of

this irresolution—or perhaps because of it—Brussels has designated itself the official capital of the European Union. I was installed in an apartment on the edge of the Schuman area, near EU headquarters, a mitotic sprawl of glass-curtained office blocks. The building’s clear walls are meant to suggest governmental transparency, but when I tried to stroll into the office of the immigration commissioner, a guard stopped me: I didn’t have proper EU press accreditation. Transparency, it seems, is not the same as accessibility.

I am a citizen of India, a country born of partition, a country that has guarded its borders assiduously ever since its birth. I wanted to understand what had impelled the nations of Europe to abolish their border checkpoints and adopt a common currency, even as they worked harder and harder to keep out people like me. So I took a trip to Mini-Europe, a theme park that claims to be the “number one attraction in Brussels.” With 360 models of tourist destinations from 70





EU cities, the park allows visitors to “discover Europe’s nicest places.” In the gray drizzle of a Belgian February afternoon, a small Big Ben nuzzled up against a diminutive Eiffel Tower, and a pint-sized Acropolis winked at a molehill-ish Mount Vesuvius that periodically spewed out steaming fake lava. There were plenty of polyester town halls and epoxy-resin churches—buildings that aimed to “epitomize the European Spirit.” The guidebook handed to each visitor explained that Democracy and Christianity are among its foremost elements.

But the closer you looked, the more obvious it became that the “European

Spirit” had more to do with markets than politics or religion. There were two stock exchanges, a smattering of guild-halls, and a handful of ports. An oil rig pumped imaginary crude off the coast of never-never England, while a red Coke delivery truck stood poised to zip off on the endless loop around the mini-continent—5,000 kilometers each year, the guidebook said. Younger visitors are encouraged to play “Europoly,” which divides twenty-five participants into groups representing each EU member state. “The intention of the game is to learn about exchange rates [and] bank commissions,” according to the directions.

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The syntax of Mini-Europe’s press package may be confused, but its mission isn’t. “In the second last phase of the game, the Euro is introduced. Suddenly, the advantages of the Europe become very clear.”

Rudi Rasschaert, the facility’s general manager, enthusiastically pointed out his favorite attractions—he was especially proud of the Berlin Wall, which collapsed at the touch of a button. But he admitted that the Lilliputian continent was causing some Brobdingnagian problems. Countries campaigning to join the EU had begun to lobby for inclusion in Mini-Europe: the Czechs had dispatched a delegation to plead their case, and the Poles were adamant that their famous parliament be enshrined. A few governments offered to pay for the privilege of miniaturization, even though the models cost an average of \$90,000. But Mini-Europe is running out of space. The park occupies about six acres; there might be room for six new buildings at most. “Venice has already been shifted to make room for Stockholm, and we’ve removed some buildings from Germany, too,” Rasschaert said. “If this continues, we’re going to be overcrowded. We simply can’t let everyone in.”

...

I was working the night shift at the copy desk of the *Wall Street Journal Europe*. Just past my desk was a large sixteenth-century-style map of the Dow Jones global empire, with Neptune standing in one corner flipping through a copy of the *Journal*. Every business day, nearly 2 million copies of the *Journal* tumble out of thirty-one plants on three continents.

Working at the overseas copy desk allowed me plenty of time to observe the vocabulary of globalization. The editors used their blue pencils to ensure geography-neutral vocabulary: mindful of the climatic differences between Northern and Southern hemispheres, we eliminated most mentions of seasons. (One of

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my colleagues devised a Gershwin parody that began, “Third quarter, and the livin’ is easy.”) Then we de-Americanized articles from America to make them comprehensible to the rest of the world. Among other things, we were on the alert for analogies drawn from American sports, such as “ballpark figures” and “the whole nine yards.”

Wall Street journalism may have been scrupulously climate-neutral and sports-resistant, but it was hardly unbiased. Free-market fundamentalism was everywhere, and the reporters adopted the corresponding phraseology. In *Journalspeak*, the nations of Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe are “emerging markets,” and praise is accorded to political leaders who run their countries with corporate efficiency. Governments that grant farmers subsidies are scolded for their “populism,” but administrations that give companies concessions are credited with “responsiveness to business needs.” “Shareholder activists” who campaign



for “corporate democracy” are celebrated, but protestors at global economic summits in Seattle or Genoa are merely “militants.” Meanwhile, heads of corporations are often termed “business leaders,” as if they were chosen by broad mandate and had popular constituencies.

The *Journal* has been a vocal supporter of European unity, of course. The day the Euro was launched, an op-ed piece rhapsodized that in the future, “Corporations will merge across borders. Financial markets will link up. . . . Regulatory systems that go with the grain of the market will win out.”

. . .

As my visa required, I reported to the Belgian interior ministry within a week of touching down in Brussels. After making a few photocopies of my passport, a kindly press attaché handed me an identity card and a publication called *Newcomer: An Introduction to Life in Belgium*.

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“So this card will allow me to travel through Europe, right?” I asked. Most EU countries eliminated their internal borders in July 1995, with the adoption of the Schengen Treaty. I planned to see Amsterdam and Paris; I also wanted to visit the southern Portuguese town of Sagres, where Henry the Navigator had

established his famous nautical school. This had been the point of departure for the Iberian crews that set off to conquer new worlds, including the Indian state of Goa, where my family comes from.

But there was a snag. “To travel through the European Union, you need to register with your local community hall and they’ll issue a permit,” the man informed me.

“How long will that take?” I asked.

“Six weeks.”

I was going back to New York in five.

On the metro home, I glumly flipped through *Newcomer*. A section titled “The Paper Chase” caught my attention. It began, “Getting to grips with Belgian red tape requires patience, determination, and a lot of paperwork.”

. . .

The Belgian state secretary for foreign affairs told the Thai authorities that the incident was “most unfortunate.” Not only “unfortunate,” Annemie Neyts-Uyttebroeck said, but also “absolutely deplorable,” not to mention “particularly insulting to our country.” Her outrage had been sparked by the seizure of 650 copies of a book entitled *Tintin in Thailand*, which placed Belgium’s most beloved cartoon character in a variety of predicaments unsuitable for contemplation by children. Suspected to be the work of a Thai gang, the bootleg comic book is said to have depicted Tintin being propositioned by two male Thai hosts in a bar called Sexy Boy; in another scene, Tintin’s Chinese friend Chang discovers why Snowy, the dog, is man’s best friend.

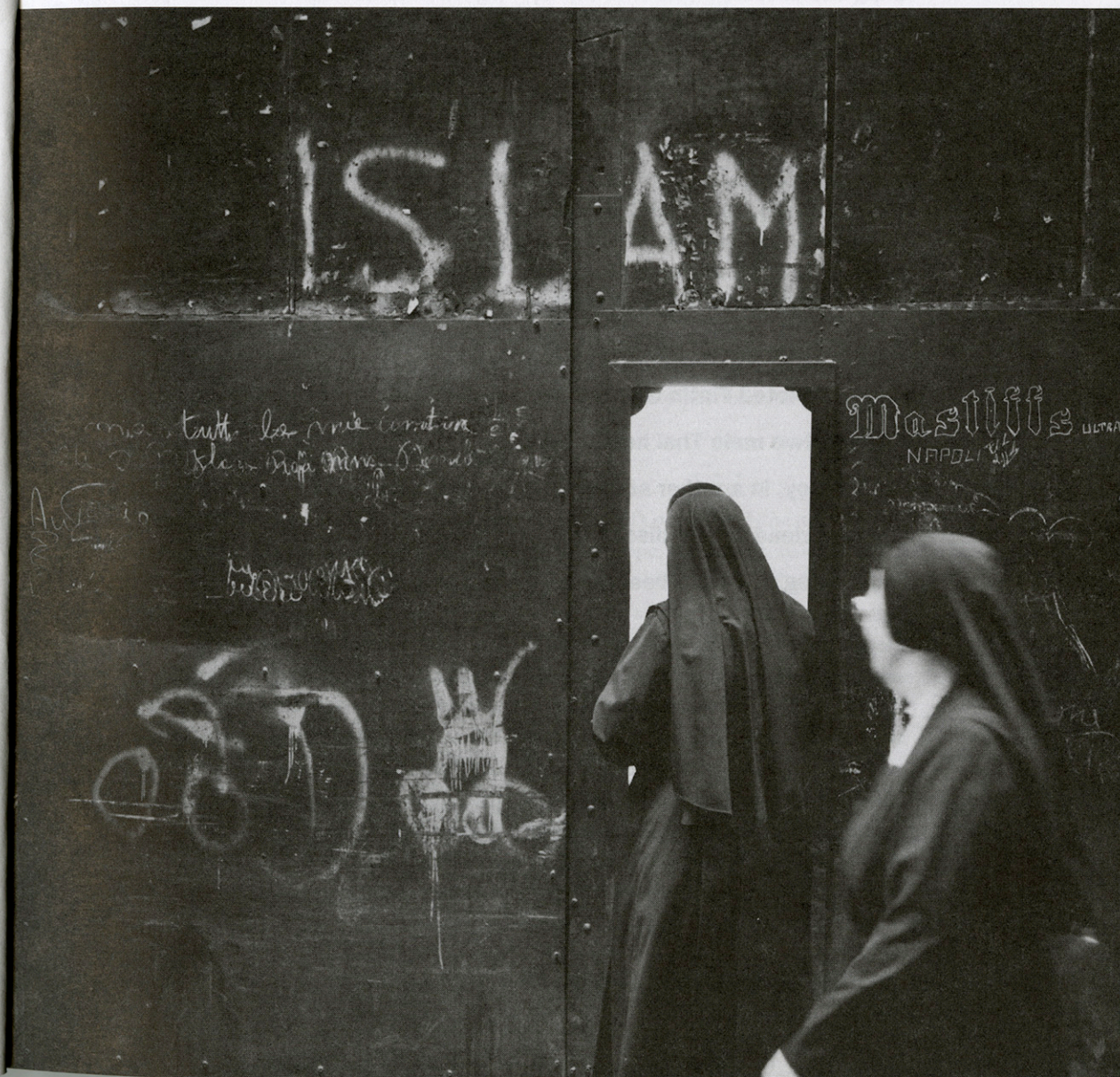
The state secretary’s ire was understandable. Few countries take their comics

as seriously as Belgium, which probably boasts the world’s highest number of full-time comic artists per capita: 700 in a population of 10 million. An estimated 60 percent of all books published in Belgium are comics. Perhaps it’s just another manifestation of the country’s well-known love for whimsy. After all, modern Belgian history begins with a song: in 1830, an impassioned rendition of “Sacred Love of the Fatherland” stirred the audience in the Brussels Opera House to rise against the Netherlands

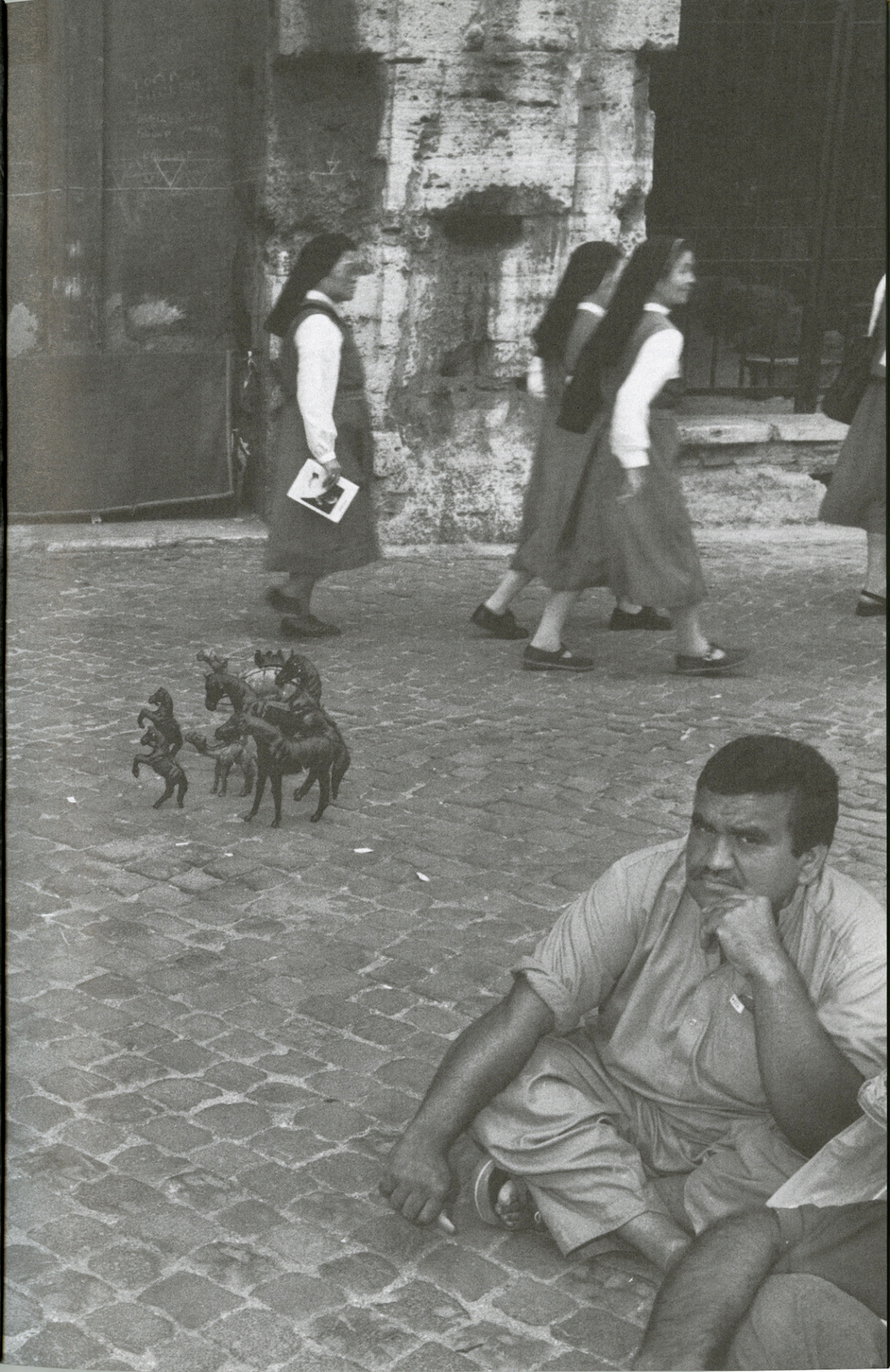
and demand independence. And four hundred years ago, Flanders commissioned the micturitious monument that is now Belgium’s most visited attraction: the Manneken Pis, a statue of a little boy urinating.

Tintin was the second Belgian I ever knew. The first was Baudouin I, the king whose visage gazed out shyly from the first foreign stamps to go into the collection I started at age five. My mother had once worked as a secretary at the Belgian consulate in Bombay, and her former

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political mainstream by downplaying secession and denouncing immigration. In municipal elections in October 2000, Vlaams Blok captured 33 percent of the votes in Antwerp, its traditional stronghold, and more than 20 percent in other Flemish cities. The party suddenly found itself the focus of international attention as commentators compared it to other

**Looking suave in brown corduroys, a green shirt, and hipster glasses, the leader of the Flemish nationalists presented his party as a bulwark against European—and Belgian—imperialism.**

far-right groups in Europe: Austria's Freedom Party (formerly led by Jörg Haider), France's National Front, and the Danish People's Party. Vlaams Blok's campaign had included a poster of a road sign pointing to Brussels, with the name of the capital in both Roman and Arabic script. Above, in Dutch and French, was an exclamation: "NEVER."

Van Cleemput had become the party spokesman after sixteen years in the wilderness, studying and teaching Classics in America—he earned a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago with a dissertation entitled "Aristotle on Happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*." Looking suave in brown corduroys, a green shirt, and hipster glasses, he led me into his office, past posters that announce "We Say What You're Thinking." He began with an explanation of his party's principles. "We have been second-class citizens for too long," he said. "We should be masters of our own destiny." Soon he warmed to the dangers of the EU: "We

don't like the idea of giving up sovereignty to a supranational power that doesn't understand our particular situation," he told me. The European Union may be headquartered in Brussels, but that hardly placates the Vlaams Blok—they believe that the city is too small to accommodate all the EU institutions. Worse still, they claim, the EU is disturbing Belgium's delicate demographic balance by attracting a disproportionate number of French speakers.

The Flemish have good reason to be wary of large trading blocks. In the fourteenth century, Flanders—the Flemish homeland—joined the Hanseatic League, a proto-EU that included some 150 cities. Formed by German merchants to protect their convoys from pirates and to extract commercial privileges overseas, the Hanseatic League persuaded foreign monarchs to join by offering gifts and easy credit. (If these blandishments were ignored, the league might stage a blockade.) Bruges, in western Flanders, was one of the league's most important ports. It profited from the trade in grain, furs, timber, honey, and tar, commodities that made their way from Russia and Poland to Flanders, then on to England. In exchange, Bruges sent the clothes it manufactured with English wool to the east. The profit from this trade turned Bruges into a sort of mid-millennial Manhattan and spurred a bull market for fine art. The Onze Lieve Vrouwekerk—the tallest church in the country—has a remarkable collection that includes a *Madonna and Child* by Michelangelo, one of the very few Michelangelo sculptures to make its way outside Italy during his lifetime. But in the second half of the fifteenth century, the silting of the Zwin



River isolated Bruges from the North Sea, effectively shutting down its economy. The Hanseatic League turned its back on the port, and the traders of Bruges watched as their city faded into obscurity. Soon, people were calling it Bruges la Mort—Bruges the Dead.

The Vlaams Blok remembers Bruges as it was at the height of its glory: the party's Web site features a photograph of the majestic belfry in the old Bruges marketplace. Still, the Flemish know how fickle a federation can be, so Vlaams Blok supports "the idea that the nation is a community of people who live in the

same cultural zone," as Van Cleemput put it. For his party, this "cultural zone" denotes a shared language—Flemish, which is similar to Dutch—and a shared set of social values. The family is the cornerstone of this idealized world, and the party encourages women to stay at home to raise children: it backs a scheme that would provide government compensation to full-time mothers.

Vlaams Blok's official literature warns that Flanders will splinter into "a collection of ethnic ghettos" unless immediate steps are taken to reverse the present degeneration. Van Cleemput dug up a

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