

“A woman in Atzbach was murdered by her husband because, in his opinion, she had carried the wrong child with her to safety from their burning house. She had not saved their eight-year old son, for whom the man had special plans, but had saved their daughter, who was not loved by the husband. When the husband was asked, in the District Court in Wels, what plans he had had for his son, who had been completely consumed by the fire, the husband replied that he had intended him to be an anarchist and a mass murderer of dictatorships and thus a destroyer of the state.”

Thomas Bernhard



2. *Big Brother*, © 2008, 72 x 60", Oil on Canvas

IN SITU CARNALIS

AN AUSTRIAN ADOLESCENCE

WOLFGANG BAUER

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(D) Disclaimer. All characters, events and reflections are fictive imaginings bearing no malice or offence, and are crafted with convenience to evoke love and elicit goodwill through empathy and introspection.

To my Otis faculty and classmates, family and friends,

who have touched my life,

and who continue to teach me.

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INTRODUCTION

I don't remember when it all started—the secrets, the lying, the not talking about certain things or not talking at all, the physical and mental abuse, the obedient and silent enduring, the sacrifices that border on self-destruction. I don't remember because I was not born yet. Three generations later though, barely comprehending language, I would fall prey to these patterns of dysfunctions and by default perpetuate and even indulge in them myself.

1. *The Zwiebelmuster Incident*

My sister Ingrid and I watch the white-and-blue *Zwiebelmuster* coffee pot smash with a grenade-like shatter-blast against the dining room wall. It barely missed the credenza with the Hi-Fi Stereo, positioned between the dining room table and *Boccaccio Square*—a gold-leaf framed painting by my beloved grandfather. In it, Opa depicted a veiled woman in white, crossing a bustling marketplace followed by a wedding procession. A farmhand brute, holding an axe, forcing a chicken's head onto a cutting block, is shielded from the procession by tables and wooden crates laden with fruit and vegetables. The cavity of a dismembered chicken carcass ghoulishly saturated with dabs of blue, black, and Alizarin crimson occupied the bottom-right corner of the painting. If I stared long enough, the white dress, the glistening metal of the axe, and the red of the carnal neck-cavity formed an abstract triangle and made these objects levitate off the canvas. I never liked pretty paintings.

As a child, I was drawn to art that objectified nakedness, aestheticized torture, masochism, or death. The life-sized statue of Saint Sebastian gracing the Market square, semi-nude, tied to a

tree and penetrated with arrows; the Pieta with Mary holding her dead and naked son in her arms, his privates barely hidden by a scrap of linen; and the larger-than-life Jesus on the cross above the altar in our church, blood stained and awkwardly covered with a loincloth, were my initial favorite objects of study.

I had my first nocturnal emission touching Jesus' smooth, sculpted abdominals while washing away the blood from his wounds. Then, just when I was about to remove the loincloth, I woke up in the sleeping hall at boarding school, disoriented, with my heart racing and an embarrassing wet spot in my pajama pants.

2. *Pappa Loves You*

The avocado green and harvest gold wallpaper took on a dark, new life with the coffee splatters from the shattered porcelain extending far over the frame of Opa's *Boccaccio Square* painting. With a quick swipe, Pappa sends the rest of the coffee set, as well as the strawberry cake, napkins, and forks, sailing from the dining room table.

"I'm tired of this! Do whatever you want!"

He pushes Mom to the side, bolts into the hallway, rips his coat, hook and all, from the wall, and then vanishes, slamming the front door behind him. The whipped cream slowly drips down the strawberry-violated tablecloth, mimicking the color scheme of the chicken neck and wedding dress in *Bocaccio Square*. Ingrid, my sister, picks up the shards of grandmother's pride and joy, while Mom attempts to calm me down.

"This has nothing to do with your birthday. Pappa loves you. He is just under a lot of stress."

Lovely, self-denying, sad-eyed Mom could never completely erase

the *Zwiebelmuster* incident from the wallpaper. The sugar bowl survived unscathed, as did the stereo that Uncle Jupp had brought to barter, and that Pappa had traded in for his services as a dentist.

“It probably fell off a truck somewhere,” Pappa said when he proudly installed it.

Uncle Jupp was not our real uncle, but a tall, cursing, misogynistic, one-legged WWII victim who insisted on being called just that. He was a Neo-Fascist who made his money from a pig farm slash boarding house slash work camp of illegal immigrants from Yugoslavia. I saw him several times using his long metal crutches as powerful extensions of his humongous hands to poke and beat down anybody and anything getting in his way. He had lost his leg as a baby when a grenade killed his mother as she was breastfeeding him.

“And that is the reason he is such an angry man,” Mom explained. “Deep down, he is really a good guy. You kids should be grateful to have the use of both of your legs.”

3. *Spying Eyes*

My first “carnal” drawing was a depiction of Jesus’ genitalia without the ubiquitous, camouflaging, and sometimes weirdly gravity-defying loincloth.

I rendered it in pencil on loose-leaf paper. Unfortunately, my subject-sensitive explorations were often thwarted by the lack of privacy in our *Kinder-zimmer*, the children’s room.

We lived on the first floor in an old Art Deco apartment building with high ceilings. The bedrooms, living room, kitchen, and entrance hallway were arranged in a circle, connected with two doorways on two sides of each room. Although the *Kinder-zimmer* was inconveniently located between the parents’ bedroom and the kitchen, the worn and squeaky parquet floors would announce anyone approaching on either side.

Warned by such a squeak, I crumpled up my secret drawing and quickly stuffed it down my pants. I made three of these and hid them inconspicuously, all crumpled up on the bottom of my toy box. Once in a while, I would dig them up and revise them unnoticed by Ingrid or Mom.

4. *Monica Posed Nude*

Opa had always been my ally. I was six when his second wife ran away and he moved upstairs from us into the attic studio of the building. The large and bright single room was sparsely equipped with a toilet and a utility sink used for personal hygiene, dishes, soiled brushes and Opa's occasional drunken piss. Whenever I would visit the attic studio, I immersed myself in the adventurous smells of oil paint, stretcher bars, pipe tobacco, Pitralon aftershave, and, depending on the hour, coffee, red wine, or...

Monica.

She was Opa's Rubenesque, three-decades-younger girlfriend.

I memorized all these smells, took them downstairs with me to my room. I secretly borrowed things for a little while, then brought them back and exchanged them for "fresher" ones: Opa's shirt, a paintbrush, a piece of Monica's underwear, or a t-shirt. I would rub my bare arm against the couch so it absorbed the smell of the leather, then I could add it to my borrowed symphony of scents and fall asleep with them, dreaming of my

exhilarating future life as an Artist. I kept my treasures hidden from Mom and Ingrid.

Oscar Kokoschka, had been one of Opa's teachers at the Academy. When I was six, Opa taught me how to use oils, stretch canvas, and play Chess. He would let me win once in a while to keep me interested in the game, pretending to be upset when I proudly declared "Checkmate." He also introduced me to classical music. Gustav Mahler, his favorite composer, blasted from the turntable while Monica posed nude on the dilapidated leather couch. I remember Opa's gargantuan, black, leather shoes Monica and I pried off his feet after he had fallen asleep in his clothes, drunk from the daily visits to Mitteregger, a restaurant two blocks uphill from our building.

5. *Musty Awesome Egon*

On Saturdays, in the late afternoon, Mom would send me to fetch Opa from Mitteregger so he would be back in time for our weekly family dinner. Opa was strong, a World War II and Russian work-camp survivor. I believe he wanted to toughen me up when he bribed me with a 100 *Schilling* bill, more than double my monthly allowance, to hang out at the restaurant and wrestle Mitteregger's son Egon, a tall beefy boy with a fascinating birth defect. Musty, awesome Egon, who was also in my class, intimidated me with his size and confidence. He was equipped with strong, stubby arms that extended into three-digit sphinx-like claws, which he managed to move with ninja speed, making them impossible to grab. I hated, feared, yet secretly admired Egon, who never took shit from anybody and who always won our fights.

Egon's monster legs weighed heavy on my body while his claw-like hands, which he mercilessly employed to choke me even after I would surrender, forced my brick-red, sweaty face onto the greasy, wooden floorboards of the Mitteregger restaurant right in front of Opa's black shoes. I felt awful letting Opa down. Weakling, wimp, and coward, his disappointed eyes seemed to

say; you are hopeless like the painted headless chicken in *Boccaccio Square*; an embarrassing disappointment that looks like a girl, fights like a girl, and quite frankly, should have been a girl!

All that and much more seemed to be coming through Opa's denigrating eyes when he handed me the 100 *Schilling* bill.

6. *Thick Dark Pubes*

I thought of Austria as the most important country in the world. I also was convinced that my mother was the best driver, cook, and one of the most beautiful women in Vienna. She won a beauty contest at the Dentists' Ball in the Hofburg, the former residence of the Emperor. In the photo, Mom sat on a red velvet and gold chair, wearing a turquoise gown, a beehive hairdo, and a red sash declaring "Rose-Queen 1970." She was thin and looked happy in that picture.

Pappa was a lover of glamorous women, a predicament that I began to understand and share much later. Mom spent many evenings alone in the living room waiting for him to come home. It was anxiety provoking to hear her cry at night. It was those times that I wished him dead, or at least fantasized that Mom, Ingrid, Opa, and I would be adopted.

One night before bedtime my tipsy mother reminisced about an "allegedly" platonic love with a musician who left for California after she got married to Pappa. His name was Guenther. Mom showed me a picture of them together in bathing suits on the beach in Bibione, Italy. Guenther had a smooth chest

and blonde hair like me. I didn't look anything like Pappa or my sister. Pappa's dark, Italian hair mirrored Ingrid's, who was already sporting thick, dark pubes, while my blonde hair and the sparse, blonde curls that crowned my penis were solely reminiscent of my mother's. Pappa loved my sister, but he barely paid any attention to me. I thought that maybe my sister should just stay with Pappa, while Opa, Mom, and I would do much better without them.



3. *Everything is Ridiculous*, © 2010, 72 x 60", Oil on Canvas

7. *Hand Signed by Hans Enn*

I devised a plan to find my obvious father in Hollywood, so I signed up for the Orlando-Vienna student exchange program, that Mom reluctantly agreed to send me on if I managed to save up half the money. I was 1,250 *Schillings* short, a fortune, but I was determined.

Desperate to avoid another humiliating defeat at the Mitteregger restaurant, I thought up a scheme. If I could just forge a friendship with Egon and earn his trust, then we could form a partnership in which we could stage our wrestling matches. In my perfect scenario, Egon would let me win a fight now and then, and we'd split Opa's money fifty-fifty. This way, I wouldn't get hurt, wouldn't let Opa down, and would still make 50 *Schillings*.

To avoid potential embarrassment, I needed to catch Egon alone. Egon was always sitting behind his desk by the time I got to school in the morning. He was also the last person to leave the classroom in the afternoon, long after everyone else was gone.

I wondered how it was humanly possible that Egon never stepped out to use the bathroom or get a drink of water during

any of the breaks. No doubt he was weary of people staring at him whenever he used his three-digit hands to do what everyone else would do with five: wave, carry a book bag, eat, drink, pick his nose, or pee.

Finally, I knew this was the day I had to take action. I would corner Egon during lunch, while the rest of the students hung out in the hallways. Sitting alone at his desk, waiting for me to split so he could eat, Egon eyed me as I anxiously fidgeted around in my bag until everyone else was out of the room. Presumably hungry and annoyed, he growled at me.

“What do you want?”

Going out on a limb, I pulled out the official 1981 Ski World Cup Encyclopedia, hand-signed by the Bronze metal winner Hans Enn, my idol. I stretched out my arm.

“I just thought you might like this,” I said.

Egon glanced at me suspiciously. Realizing he wouldn’t want to grab this treasure with his short hands, I put it down in front of him.

“I got it in Kitzbühl. It’s hand signed,” I said. “Open it.”

Egon didn’t move. Suddenly even more nervous, I flipped to the second page, pointing to the signature and read out loud.

“Best! Yours, Hans Enn.”

That got his attention. With the three fingers of his right hand, he flipped a few pages and then paused at a photo of the Bergisl ski jump, the most coveted venue of the World Cup.

I was too preoccupied with my mission to notice Ursula Führer, the “it” girl of the entire grade—the coolest, hottest, most amazing creature, who only hung out with older students—come up behind us, just as I choked out:

“You’d be great at ski jumping, Egon. You have really muscly legs. I always notice them when you wear shorts...”

Egon locked eyes with Ursula and turned red. Before I could salvage what was left of my meticulously crafted game plan, Egon leaped from behind his desk, lurched toward me, and kneed me in the groin, sending me to the floor with a thump. If I had only refrained from mentioning ski jumping. The nauseating pain from the kick was only superseded by the humiliation I felt when I couldn’t hold back my tears.

8. *Alzheimer's*

Two years later, at the age of sixty-nine, Opa was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. At 3:00 in the afternoon, on my first day home from boarding school after lunch with Mom, I went upstairs to see him. I knocked on the studio door. No answer.

“Opa?” I opened the door. “Opa?”

I walked through a narrow hallway and entered the studio. There was no smell of oil paint in the air. It just reeked of spoiled food, dirty dishes, and sharp body odor. The black leather shoes stood shiny and unused in the shelf next to his closet.

Opa's bed was across from the entrance. I was startled when I saw him sitting naked on the edge of his bed, wearing nothing but bedroom slippers. He had gigantic balls.

“It's about time you're here. I have been waiting all day.” Opa said enthusiastically.

I held my breath as he kissed me right and left on the cheek. He hadn't showered or brushed his teeth for days.

“Let me to get you a pair of pants, Opa.” I said.

“I’m good,” he replied, getting up from the bed. “Sit down and let me get you a Coca-Cola.”

Mom had told me that Monica had broken up with him and that Opa’s longtime chess partner, Herr Koenig, was MIA. They used to spend hours re-enacting famous chess moves of the American Grandmaster Bobby Fisher.

Opa put a greasy glass on the table, where the chessboard was waiting for me. No fizzing sound or bubbles escaped the half-empty Coke bottle as he unscrewed the lid. The soda was as flat as yesterday’s coffee. Hiding my nausea, I pretended to take a sip.

“You should drink some,” I said, handing him the glass.

“No, Wolfi. I saved it for you. It’s all yours. Make your first move.”

Halfway through the game, Opa had difficulties remembering his many premeditated strategies. He exposed his King in odd maneuvers that would have resulted in a five-move Checkmate. He became agitated. He wasn’t pretending this time. To let him save face, I sacrificed my Queen and committed several more fatal moves. Finally, triumphantly, Opa declared Checkmate.

“Tough game, but you’re getting better,” he said excitedly.

“Do you want some wine? Let’s open a bottle. Just you and me, old times.” He set up the board again.

“I’m thirteen. Opa. I think I better go downstairs. Mom is waiting.”

Disappointed, Opa looked down at the board.

“Just one more game.”

I gave in. We played again. This time, the game turned into a bizarre dance of pathetic maneuvers. I finally conceded and commenced the pointless slaughter of pawns with a “Checkmate Opa.”

He was upset—no, he just feigned being upset. He was a terrible actor. I finally caught on. Opa wanted me to win so I would stay with him. I stayed the rest of the evening.

9. *The Sticky Sweet*

It was two months later, in boarding school during math class when I was called into the principal's office. Frau Otilie Obermeier, the school secretary, a tight-lipped, unhelpful, unaccommodating "student hater," rushed me with impatient strides down the long hallway. We nicknamed her OO, which in Austria stands for *restroom*. It was rumored that she was having an affair with the headmaster, Father Bieregger. Affair or not, OO seemed to be an expert in concealing any positive facial expressions.

Racking my brain for the terrible sin I had obviously committed, I carefully asked OO the reason for my summoning. Barren of anything remotely resembling empathy, she barked at me.

"I don't know. You will find out soon enough."

When we passed the massive wooden cross at the chapel entrance, I quickly crossed my chest, pleading to God that I would immediately halt my nightly masturbation sessions with Thomas Ruttinger, if he would have mercy on me and intervene from above.

We passed the hallway along the library. It was tiled in yellow and black, forming a geometric pattern of yellow stars on black ground. While believing in a higher power, I also believed in the power of the stars. For good luck, I made sure to tread only on the yellow tiles. Because of the way they were spaced, I had to do three medium zigzag steps, one small jump, and three more zigzags.

“Are you out of your mind?” OO shouted at me. “Stop that nonsense immediately.”

Determined to change my fate for the better, I stuck to my routine, but before I could reach the last yellow star, OO grabbed me by my shoulder and jerked me into line. I stepped square on a black tile. My fate was sealed.

Upon entering the office, my heart pounded so fiercely that I could hear the blood pumping in my ears. Father Bieregger got up from behind his desk when he saw me. I expected to be reprimanded, beaten or chastised for “the crime,” but instead he motioned for me to sit down on the couch next to the window. He sat down next to me and awkwardly laid his hand on my shoulder. I was paralyzed and could only think of the missed yellow star.

“Bauer, did you hear what I said? Your grandfather has passed away! I am sorry for your loss.”

I noticed the hair growing out of Father Bieregger's nose as he offered me a piece of candy from the glass bowl on top of his desk.

I unwrapped the sticky sweet and thought of Gusti Melzer, my best friend at home. We would go to the arcade after the funeral. We knew each other since second grade. At seven years old, Gusti and I explored each other for the first time.



4. *Bubbles*, © 2012, 72 x 50", Oil on Canvas,

10. *Gusti Melzer*

Starting in a new school is a nerve-racking experience. I wasn't very tough or cool looking so I had to be careful not to be labeled from the start. It happened to Josef Preslmeier, the fat kid in kindergarten whose mother bribed other kids with 10 *Schilling* coins to be friends with him and watch his back. It also happened with Geri Schoenbach, the pale kid with the big black mole on his left cheek.

One Saturday, I watched soccer practice from the bleachers. I was secretly relieved that the doctors had deemed me physically unfit to play. Afterward, Gusti Melzer, the ridiculously confident athletic "forward" and star-player of my grade, asked me if I had a bicycle pump at home as his bike had a flat tire. I wondered how Gusti knew that I lived close to the soccer field, but then I remembered that in our *Heimat-kunde* class we had to map out the school's proximity from our individual homes.

Unsure if there was a pump in Pappa's toolshed, I eagerly assured Gusti that I definitely had one. Gusti pushed his bike while I rambled on about my favorite soccer team. I was delighted to find out that Gusti favored the same one.

I knew we would be alone when we arrived at my house. Nothing even resembling a bicycle pump was in Pappa's toolshed.

"I swear it was in the corner by the lawnmower. I just saw it

last week,” I said.

Gusti wasn't upset. I kept looking for the nonexistent pump. Was he awkwardly smiling at me?

“Forget the pump. Do you want to play Giants and Midgets?” he asked.

“Sure,” I replied, trying to act supercool. I had no idea what he was talking about.

“We are the Giants. We have to pull our pants down, and then we punish the Midgets,” he said.

I felt my heart pounding in my ears. But, I also felt another sensation. Gusti opened his jeans. I spotted white low-risers with blue stars on them and hesitated. Mine were Spiderman.

What would be more humiliating—if Gusti saw my underwear, or if I just went for it and dropped both my pants and underwear together and he kept his on?

Gusti pulled on my belt.

“Are you going to take yours off?” he asked.

“If you do,” I replied.

Gusti dropped his low-risers and I followed suit. It felt amazing when he touched my Midget. We played many times.

11. *Secrets*

I watched the white stuff shoot out diagonally across his upper body and land on the speckled brown and beige Berber carpet on the side of his bed. Subsequent abdominal contractions, though not as powerful or surprising as the first, forced out even more of the milky fluid. It splattered on his stomach filling his navel. I was fascinated.

I don't exactly remember how I got my brother to show this to me, but I do remember that nothing came out of mine when I tried it myself. Gerald grabbed one of his socks, cleaned his stomach and my hands, pulled up his pajama pants, and said:

“You just have to try over and over, then it will come out as well.”

This was the last time Gerald would let me sleep in his bed. Just by instinct I knew that this thing we did together would be a secret.

I diligently practiced in the bottom bunk of my bed. I had to wait until Ingrid was asleep. She always copied what I was doing, so I didn't want to be caught and interrogated. She

obviously wouldn't be able to do "it." If she knew, she would have been mad at me for doing something she couldn't, and she probably would have gotten Mom involved. Just like the pee discussion that ensued with Mom and Ingrid when I peed my initials in the snow behind the house. This would have turned into an embarrassing penis discussion, which I wanted to avoid. I just had to make sure Ingrid was asleep before I exercised.

12. *A Little Gossip Never Killed Anyone*

During summer break, every Sunday morning at 10:00, Aunt Rosi, my godmother and Mom's childless older sister, a well-to-do grocer's widow and staunch Catholic with strong convictions of questionable *Hausfrau* science, dropped by our house to summon my sister and me for a "church-cake outing." During the week, she autonomously presided over her inherited grocery stores in slimming black-and-white pantsuits. But on Sundays, she costumed herself in dramatic faux designer cocktail dresses in flowery shades of yellow, pink, and turquoise. Wherever she arrived, she demanded undivided attention. Rosi spoke with an affect like a seasoned opera diva.

"Your mother and father sometimes need adult time to sort things out," she said. "I am doing this for you and for your parents."

The Sunday outings gave Rosi a chance to interrogate Ingrid and me on all the sensational family matters she might have missed.

“How are your parents doing? Did your father come home late last night?” She usually concluded her cross examination with “...a little gossip never killed anyone.”

Little did she know that her gossip would someday do just that when Bogna, one of Aunt Rosi’s migrant workers, who she had spotted making out with another employee, hung herself on a sausage hook in the walk-in freezer of Rosi’s warehouse after the story made its rounds and wrecked Bogna’s marriage. Although Aunt Rosi treated everyone with an Eastern accent as slightly inferior, she derived great pleasure lending her inescapable helping hand to anyone she deemed worthy.

Sundays with Aunt Rosi were exciting—not because of the boring, long walks in the park with her annoying dachshund Pushkin, or her compulsory visits to the pastry shops after mass, but because of the marvelous paintings in Saint Michael’s, our baroque church. I always made sure Ingrid and I were dressed and ready when Aunt Rosi picked us up at 10:30 a.m. so we would be certain to arrive early at mass before the first row of pews were taken by a gaggle of regular churchgoing ladies who wanted to be as close to God as physically possible.

Aunt Rosi was smitten with my passion for church. Before we went inside, she gave Ingrid and me each a 10 *Schilling* coin to put on the offering plate when it was passed around at the end of mass.

Since I was diligently saving money to go to America, I decided to split the donation fifty-fifty with God, and I put a similar-looking 5 *Schilling* coin from my other pocket on the collection tray instead. The music playing during that segment of mass was surely designed to conjure up feelings of guilt and remorse. I knew I couldn't confess this particular sin to the priest, since it was him I was withholding half the money from. Without confessing, however, I couldn't walk up the center aisle to receive the Holy Communion from him, along with everyone else free of sin. That would raise suspicion with Aunt Rosi. So as not to blow my cover, I devised an additional deal with God that would absolve me. I would pray five Our Fathers before bedtime for every *Schilling* I kept.

Undisturbed and camouflaged, I would study *Judgment Day* directly on the center panel of the side altar opposite my bench. I was mesmerized by the beautifully orchestrated bodies of the *saved* next to God, and of the *damned* tumbling down from the edges of the white clouds into the fiery abyss of Hell. All bodies of the *lost* sported gruesome expressions of pain and suffering, some completely naked with carefully rendered genitalia, which were much more interesting than those of the shiny happy ones engulfed in God's glory.

13. *A Gift From Heaven*

Things changed for the better at home when Hannelore, our next-door neighbor, became friends with my parents. The entire family seemed to hit it off with her. Pappa was in a good mood and spent more time at home, and Mom was more fun to be around when Hannelore was with them. She was a gift from Heaven.

When Mom hurt her back, Hannelore encouraged her to take a few days off and go visit the healing mud baths in Budapest. Ingrid and I jumped up and down for joy in anticipation of spending time alone with Hannelore, our new best friend.

“Don’t worry. I will take care of everything. You deserve a break,” Hannelore said to Mom.

When Mom went on her trip, Hannelore took over the household—we even went hiking with Pappa. Pappa drove us to the *Schneeberg*, a destination spot in the Alps, just a couple hours west of Vienna.

Lucky for me, the road up the mountain was curvy, which

tended to make my sister carsick so she had to sit in the front of the car with Pappa, while Hannelore and I shared the back.

We played the *Wolkenspiel*, a *Rorschach*-watching-of-clouds game. To get a better view of the cloud formations, I lied with my head in Hannelore's lap.

"Can you see his claws reaching out for the little ones?" Hannelore whispered as her nail-polished fingers dangerously circled above me like a buzzard baring its talons.

"He comes from behind and swallows anything in his path," she continued.

"I see it." I giggled in pleasurable terror.

Quietly so only I could hear, she continued, "especially when he sees an unsuspecting boy..."

I screamed in pleasure when Hannelore attacked my tummy and moved in to bite me.

"Hey you two, you're killing my ears," Pappa said, while Ingrid enviously rolled her eyes.

We were done playing. My head was still in Hannelore's lap. The underside of her left breast was touching my left temple as she conversed with Pappa. I remember inhaling the sweet smell of her warm body while the button of her blouse pressed against

my left ear.

Days later, I secretly attempted to draw her in the nude, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't figure out the correct proportions of her vivacious breasts in relation to her face and neck. I later would ask Opa for help.



5. *Red Riding Hood*, © 2010, 48 x 36", Oil on Canvas

14. *Two Older Gentlemen*

I always loved family functions such as Christmas, baptisms, weddings, birthdays, or funerals, because during these times, Mom and Pappa would perform in unison. When the curtain went up and the spotlight illuminated the utopian Bauer family, starring Pappa as the charming and worldly dentist, supported by Mom as the perfect *Hausfrau* and wife, and aided by Ingrid and I impeccably groomed and dressed, we embodied aspirations of success and happiness. The entire extended family envied us.

Great Aunt Mella, the ninety-year-old matriarch of the Bauer family, an iron-fisted, childless woman and early advocate of women's rights, abhorred lying and unfaithfulness. She never got married. As the story goes, in her earlier years, Great Aunt Mella worked as a housekeeper for two older gentlemen, Herr Bischof and Herr Bachmann, who had been living together since the early 1900s. She took care of them until they passed away, one shortly after the other. Great Aunt Mella was the sole heir to the Bischof and Bachmann wine fortune.

Whenever Mella raised her hoarse and slightly baritone voice, everyone listened, agreed, and obeyed. Pappa, the charmer, was her favorite nephew.

15. *Great-aunt Mella's Birthday*

Fifty guests, parents, and kids were invited to celebrate Great-aunt Mella's ninetieth birthday at the Rathauskeller, one of the most exclusive wineries in the outskirts of Vienna. I couldn't wait to get to the restaurant and walk through the entrance hand in hand with my sister to show off the new outfits Pappa had bought a day before the party. Mom wore a simple black dress, my sister sported a traditional pink, silk *Dirndl* with a green apron, and I, a pair of deerskin *Lederhosen* with a white shirt and a green bowtie. Pappa wanted us to look especially cute for the occasion. All eyes were on us when we entered the room.

Traditional Austrian-Italian family dinners would last several hours. Ingrid and I loved them because we got to stay up late, hanging out in the yard with our cousins, with limited supervision, depending on the amount of alcohol consumed by the parents.

At midnight, after the birthday cake, the sweet congratulatory speeches, and final toasts, the extended family and their children said their goodbyes.

Great-aunt Mella didn't want the evening to end, so her

prospective heirs, Pappa and Uncle Pauli, continued to “celebrate” her long life. Mella got sentimental, and Ingrid and I got bored when Pappa and Uncle Pauli started singing old Italian folk songs, accompanied by Great-aunt Mella’s unharmonious voice.

If it had not been for that unfortunate mishap at the end of the party, Pappa surely would have inherited half of Mella’s money. Unfortunately, the glossy bond of marriage that was supposed to tie Mom and Pappa together forever, or at least until Great-aunt Mella had passed on, would unexpectedly disintegrate and blow away like a vampire turned to ashes under the rising sun, when Pappa lost his cool at the end of the party.



6. *As Far As Conversation Is Concerned*, © 2011, 17 x 14 inch

Pencil and Watercolor on Paper

16. *Nobody Ever Yells at Great-aunt Mella!*

Most likely, the family knew of Pappa's indiscretions, but just like my mother, everyone turned a blind eye when it came to male infidelity—except, of course, Aunt Rosi, who sat right across the table from Mom.

I needed some change for the pinball machine, and just as I was about to ask Mom for it, I saw Aunt Rosi grab Mom by the arm and lean into her. Her face scowled like that of Pushkin, her dog, when I tried to force a piece of broccoli in his mouth.

“Keep an eye on that Hannelore. She's trouble,” Rosi said.

“It's not her fault,” Mom replied. “Herbert flirts with every woman. He's a man, but he knows where he belongs. Besides, Hannelore is my friend.”

“You are blind. She's got eyes on him,” Rosi replied.

Great-aunt Mella overheard the remarks and of course took Pappa's side, but not without examining the situation further.

“Who's that Hannelore you are talking about?” she asked.

Unfortunately for Pappa, the alcohol had already gotten the better of Rosi and Mom, and in a revelatory conversation for all the remaining family members to hear, fragments of indiscretions began to escape Mom's inebriated lips.

I felt the tension rise at the table. Pappa tried to avoid a humiliating display and attempted to persuade Mom to go home.

"The children need to go to bed. We should leave," he said calmly.

Mom ignored him and reached for her wineglass.

"Who's that Hannelore woman?" Aunt Mella asked again.

I knew something unpleasant was about to happen, and it made me feel that familiar queasiness in my stomach.

"For God's sake, don't make a fool of yourself," Dad said in a more commanding tone. "You're drunk, let's go."

Mom stayed put, which infuriated Pappa.

"Leave her alone, Herbert. I want to know what's going on," Mella barked.

From that point on, everything happened very quickly. Pappa grabbed Mom by the wrist and pulled her up from the chair. Mom's glass tipped and spilled red wine over Great-aunt

Mella's jacket. Mella jumped up, and Mom screamed out, yanking herself free from Dad's grip and falling to the floor.

"Enough, Herbert! Stop it this instant," Great-aunt Mella yelled out while Mom sat shocked and bewildered on the dirty restaurant floor. Her left knee was scraped and her stocking had a big running tear.

"Please stay out of this, Mella," Pappa said in a warning tone.

"You are embarrassing yourself. How dare you behave like this in front of the children," Mella screamed at him.

Uncle Pauli unsuccessfully tried to help Mom up. Her high heels and her much-too-tight, black dress immobilized her. The former embodiment of *Hausfrau* perfection, once proud Rose-Queen of the Dentist's Ball just lingered there, disgraced and humiliated.

"This is unacceptable, Herbert," Great-aunt Mella yelled.

"You think you own everybody you nosy wench!" Pappa angrily screamed. "This is my life, not yours, and none of your business."

The restaurant went dead silent. You could have heard a pin drop.

Nobody ever yells at Great-aunt Mella!

“We’re leaving!” Pappa commanded Mom, who obediently took her shoes off and stumbled to her feet.

“I am sorry Aunt Mella,” Mom said as she grabbed her handbag and jacket. “Come on children.”

That was the evening, Pappa screwed himself out of a fortune. There was no turning back, no undoing of the assault and no unsaying of these hurtful words.

Not long after that, as predicted by Aunt Rosi, Pappa left Mom for Hannelore.

In the following months, various people consoled Mom, including Uncle Jupp, who became a frequent visitor. I didn’t miss Pappa, but I was horrified by the thought of trading him in for that one-legged fascist. The only one I desperately missed was the sweet-smelling, voluptuous, dark-haired, blue-eyed, hedonistic Hannelore. She was my secret first love... before Pappa stole her away.

17. *Aunt Rosi's Ischler*

“Chi-Chi, you are tender like a girl.”

I hated that phrase. One of Aunt Rosi's favorite pastimes was telling the story of my birth, how I was too weak to breathe on my own, and how the doctors would have taken me out of the oxygen tent if she hadn't intervened.

“You were such a gorgeous baby, Chi-Chi, but your poor lungs... My *Ischler* and I saved your life.”

The secret recipe of *Ischler* pastries, Rosi's staple bribe, allegedly passed down several generations from her great-grandmother, the pastry chef of the Emperor Kaiser Franz Josef, was Rosi's *modus operandi*. She strategically pushed her caloric, crumbly, chocolate-covered *Ischler* onto anyone she wanted to manipulate. She used them to get uninvited access to parties, family gatherings, and PTA meetings. Government officials, doctors, plumbers, electricians, mailmen, teachers, even the police, after Rosi reported her dog missing, submitted to the incredible power of her *Ischler*. Needless to say, Pushkin, Rosi's *Dachshund*, was found only a few hours later, after the entire police

force of the third district was deployed in the search.

I loved hospitals. I celebrated my thirteenth birthday in the pulmonary wing of the Barmherzigen Schwestern hospital, an institution tightly run by an army of white-hooded Catholic nuns. Their clean hallways and bright bedrooms with ironed, white sheets fascinated me. Everything was so organized and structured. Three beds to a room, which meant a perfectly clean slate—and two possibilities of new friends.

I was busy from morning to night, beginning with a prayer at 5:30 a.m., recited in the hallway by the Sister in charge, which echoed into all the rooms of the entire wing, followed by informal visits by motherly nurses and attentive, smiling, and joking doctors. I endured cyclical interruptions of hourly breathing exercises and welcomed most visiting family members. This felt a lot happier than home, where Mom sat in front of the television at night, accompanied by a double liter bottle of *Grüner Veltliner*, which was surely provided by Uncle Jupp.

Sitting at my bedside in a costume of yellow taffeta, and biting into one of the *Ischler* half of which she had carefully packed for the nurses as bribe, the other half for me, Aunt Rosi declared:

“You have the face of a girl, Chi-Chi, my Chi-Chi. Your mother really wished for a girl when you were born.”

With one hand carefully padding my IV-speared arm, and the other grabbing another *Ischler* from the nightstand, she continued. “And you need to eat more. I made these especially for you with extra chocolate.”

Aunt Rosi took a bite before thrusting the other half under my nose.

“One for me, Chi-Chi,” she chirped, with a full mouth and a delighted wide-eyed expression. Obediently I parted my lips.

“Good!” She eyeballed me as I chewed and swallowed, then she shoved the rest of the piece into her own mouth. Licking her thumb and index finger, Rosi fiddled out a bunched-up tissue from the sleeve of her jacket with her clean hand. She should drink a sip of water, I thought. Her mouth must be so dry. I watched the remnants of *Ischler* mush stick to her tongue and the gaps between her lower teeth as she spoke. It made me gag, thinking of the pending goodbye kiss.

“You poor child... your mother should never have trusted Hannelore. I saw it coming! I warned her! It’s all in the genes, Chi-Chi, the good and the bad, you know?”

I didn’t know. I was desperate to point out the piece of chocolate still clinging to her chin as she carefully dabbed her lipsticked mouth.

“I have to leave now, my Chi-Chi. Pushkin is waiting for me. You just watch and learn from your father’s mistakes... Oh, one more thing.” Aunt Rosi pointed to the lower half of my body. “Keep your hands on top of the blanket. I mean it! A man has only a certain number of shots, you know? Don’t waste them!”

I watched a melting chocolate crumb detach from Rosi’s chin and land on her *décolletage* only to disappear into the depths of her cleavage as she folded the soiled tissue back into her sleeve and got up from her chair.

Just as Aunt Rosie was getting ready to leave, Pappa and Hannelore came in. Cordially, Rosie endured Pappa’s awkward, Viennese, first-left-then-right double kiss on the cheeks while ignoring Hannelore. Hannelore ignored Rosi’s ignoring her and hugged me, leaving an alluring and confusing scent on my neck and upper body. Pappa handed over the obligatory birthday present. I ripped it open and unearthed a Black&Decker power drill.

“Thank you, Pappa. This is exactly what I needed,” I lied, while Aunt Rosi sat back down in the chair next to me, blocking Hannelore’s access to my bed. Oblivious to the tense atmosphere conjured up by the opposing forces orbiting my hospital bed, I stared at Hannelore. She just stood there, smiling at me in her daring, tight, red summer dress that outlined the parameters of her pointy nipples. A haze of raging hormones inundated me.

Hannelore's sapphire-blue eyes and moist, cherry-red lips were framed by glistening, chestnut-colored hair. She looked perfect, just like the L'Oreal covergirl, who in a seductive, sultry voice promised:

“Sexy hair for sexy women, through the essence of Herbal Shine.”

I kept an unopened shampoo bottle with the image of the Hannelore lookalike in my nightstand drawer. I remember the alluring sounds of harp music accompanying that TV commercial. All heads turned when the angelic-looking creature floated through the lobby of a glitzy casino in a symphony of red satin and lace, tossing her Herbal-shined hair back and forth. Just like these people, I couldn't take my eyes off Hannelore.

I was unaware of the icy small talk that transpired between Pappa and Aunt Rosi until her coarse and obnoxious throat clearing—“Hut-hum”—yanked me out of my daydream. Up until now, Rosi's alpha-female manner, which she systematically employed to take an entire room hostage, had failed to affect Hannelore and me. Aunt Rosi looks crazy, I thought, just like that time when she got in an argument with the conductor on the crowded Viennese tram.

18. *The Unsuspecting Tram Conductor*

I always avoided sitting near Pushkin, Rosi's paunchy, pungent *Dachshund* who never left her side, because he would ride my leg, which embarrassed me. When I tried to push him away he would snap at my hand and Aunt Rosi would laugh. Rosi and Pushkin occupied the front bench of the tram, while I quietly sat behind them next to a man reading a newspaper. A young and unsuspecting conductor approached from behind, which startled Pushkin. He barked, which scared Aunt Rosi and made her drop the chocolate bar she was about to shove into her mouth.

"Don't you have anything better to do than sneaking up on us and scaring my dog?" Rosi flared at the man.

Pretending to be an innocent bystander, I curiously waited for the conductor's apology. To my surprise, the conductor kept his cool and replied:

"My dear Madam, all dogs, no matter what size, need a muzzle on public transportation. I might let that slide if you put your dog on the floor at your feet against the wall."

No one should mess with Aunt Rosi when she's upset.

“I am not your dear Madam, young man. Who do you think you are? My dog is afraid of feet and can’t be on the ground. My veterinarian can attest to that.” Rosi handed him her ticket. “Here. Now leave. I could have you fired for your unprofessional and rude conduct.”

The conductor nervously took the ticket and said, “Dogs are not allowed on seats because of public transportation regulations. They are dirty and... ”

And then Rosi lost it. She screamed at him. “I am pretty sure my dog is cleaner than you, young man! I expect an apology.”

Spellbound, I watched the battle build up between almighty Aunt Rosi and the young train official. Fellow travellers got involved, and a mash-up of opinions, name-calling, and threats, mixed in with Pushkin’s barking ensued, all coming to a crescendo at the next tram stop, where I quietly witnessed Aunt Rosi and Pushkin being thrown off the tram. Because of her upset and the commotion, Rosi forgot about me for a moment, and just when the automatic doors closed behind her, she realized I was still on the tram.

In one arm Pushkin, and in the other her handbag and umbrella, Aunt Rosi screamed my name and banged at the door of the departing tram. I ignored her. The people on the tram must have thought that this deranged woman had completely lost it. I

got off at the next stop and waited for her. I felt guilty when I saw Aunt Rosi. She was sobbing. She hugged me tightly, rambling on about what she would have told my parents, or God if she had never found me.

Later, after a carefully prepared box of *Ischler* found its way to the desk of the vice president of the Viennese tram, the long, drawn-out drama came to a victorious close for Aunt Rosi. She got her revenge in the form of an apology letter from the poor tram conductor.

19. *A Potentially Fatal Situation*

Aunt Rosi detested Hannelore. I think she was ticked off by the way everyone, including me, responded to Hannelore. Rosi cleared her throat and without further warning, started the “He was such a gorgeous baby...” speech in Hannelore’s direction. Alarmed, I knew the emasculating “but he should have been a girl” was about to erupt from Aunt Rosi’s big mouth. With the split-second decision-making skill of my hero, bronze metal World Cup winner Hans Enn, I reacted before Rosi could finish.

Feigning a cough-seizure, I jerked my right hand toward the nightstand and flicked the plastic teacup toward Rosi’s chair. In a rapid and astonishingly limber move to save her faux Chanel cocktail dress, Aunt Rosi vaulted backward, and for a split second, it looked as if she had saved herself. But, part of her bottom-heavy body was lodged between the seat and the backrest, lifting the chair off its feet. When the chair dislodged, Aunt Rosi lost her balance, sending her to the floor, legs flailing in the air.

I stammered as Pappa and Hannelore rushed in to help.

But she would have none of it. With a primal grunt, Rosi pushed Pappa and Hannelore’s helping hands away. Like a sea

lion on land, she labored onto her side, eventually leveraging her carriage up, holding onto the toppled chair.

A nurse rushed into the room.

“Is everything okay?” she asked, looking at the tipped-over chair.

“Everything is fine!” Rosi flared.

Pappa put the chair back on its legs and picked up Rosi’s handbag. Without even glancing at Pappa, Aunt Rosi snatched up her bag, walked up to my bed, and kissed me on the forehead. “Happy Birthday, Chi-Chi,” she said in a broken voice. “I will come back tomorrow.”

With her head held high, she turned around and exited the room.

20. *My Year of Highest Learning*

When Pappa married Hannelore, it threw the family into a schism. Pappa's Protestant-Italian side broke with my mother's Catholic-Austrian side, turning the familial matrix of obligatory relationships, previously connected through blood, burial plots, and prospective inheritances, into a calculating, partisan network of *Schadenfreude*.

Uncle Pauli's wife was harmless, while Uncle Pauli more or less turned out to be a backstabbing opportunist. One afternoon, after the divorce was final, he invited himself unannounced. According to what Mom told me years later, Uncle Pauli made his move on her, but she pushed him away. Embarrassed, Uncle Pauli apologized for the "botched" kiss, concluding that he wouldn't be coming around anymore and that he was sorry for being forced into taking sides with Pappa. The rest of Pappa's family followed suit, abandoning Mom, but also Ingrid and me.

Looking back at our "perfect" 1978 family photo that even included Burschi, our *Dachshund*, posing next to dad's new car, I know that under my father's auspices, I would have followed in his footsteps, getting married and becoming a dentist who

ventured into the public realm for recognition, gratification, and sex. He surely would have squashed any attempt by me to pursue the bohemian life of an artist and world traveler. My quest for adventure, love, and creativity would have been extinguished long before I brought my first boyfriend home to spend the night.

Mom quit being my parent after the divorce. She was humiliated, broken, and defeated. She was more of a friend than a mother, an ally in my conquests, living vicariously through me. I began calling her by her first name.

Exhausted from job, pliable and a bit drunk when Sebastian entered our living room for the first time, it wasn't even difficult to break the news. Ten years older than I, Sebastian was gregarious, handsome, charming, polite, worldly, tall, and a talented artist and set designer at the Vienna Opera. He had a soothing voice, was the son of an Austrian Baron and lived in a real castle with his wife Elisabeth and two small children. While Pappa never would have allowed me to live with Sebastian and his wife Elisabeth as a burgeoning teenager, mom was a supporter and confidant during a year of my highest learning.

But that is another story.



7. *An Austrian Adolescence*, © 2012, 140 x 60", Oil on Canvas



IMAGE LIST

1. Cover – N/A
2. *Big Brother*, © 2008, 72 x 60”, Oil on Canvas
3. *Everything is Ridiculous*, © 2010, 72 x 60”, Oil on Canvas
4. *Red Riding Hood*, © 2010, 48 x 36”, Oil on Canvas
5. *Bubbles*, © 2012, 72 x 50”, Oil on Canvas,
6. *As Far As Conversation Is Concerned*, © 2011, 17 x 14”
7. *An Austrian Adolescence*, © 2012, 70 x 60,” Oil on Canvas
8. *Levitate*, © 2012, 70 x 60,” Oil on Canvas