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Looking In

Blumenbar at Aufbau

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Chapter 1, plus excerpts from Chapters 2 and 3

1

When Raoul is in a good mood we play Places I'd Never Want to Live. When he's in a bad mood, but still not so bad that he can't be cheered up, we play Places I'd Never Want to Die. When I notice he's getting sullen, I let him win. I bite my lower lip and pretend I'm thinking hard, even though there are a thousand places I could name where I would never, ever want to die. In the vestry of St. Stephan's cathedral. In the home stretch on the Nürburgring. On a bench in the garden of the Magenbuch Clinic.

When Raoul realises he's going to win, his mood improves instantly. He rubs his hands, sometimes he pinches my cheek. I can't stand that.

"Shall we celebrate?"

"Quickly," I say. "I have to leave."

Keeping his eyes on me, he unbuckles the belt of his jeans. His legs are as white and thin as fluorescent tubes.

I warm up my oral cavity with tea. Rose-hip.

I could have avoided defeat, easily. Well, too late now. Raoul holds the back of my head tight; occasionally, he kneads my earlobes.

I try not to begrudge him his victory, for blessed be those who sacrifice willingly; theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Of course, that's not a real Bible verse. Or as Frau Weinzierl always said, "That's not what the Good Book says!" The three wooden-bead rosaries on top of her Förster upright piano

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vibrated whenever I played fortissimo. And I played fortissimo a lot. “Louder, child!” she’d call. “Otherwise the good Lord can’t hear you,” and I’d hit those keys as hard as I could, even though it hurt my fingers and ears. On the wall of her piano room, a tiny chamber in the Karl-Marx-Hof, hung one single picture: a photo of Frau Weinzierl gazing into the Pope’s eyes. Frau Weinzierl was kneeling before him, like me with Raoul. Willing to do almost anything. The photo froze the moment the Pope lifted his hand. I often wondered what happened next. Probably he laid his hand, with a papal look of beneficence on his face, upon her piano-teacher arm. But maybe he pinched her cheek. Who knows what a pope thinks up when the audiences get overlong.

The Pope is long since dead and beatified. Raoul is alive and warm. He pulls me so close I practically gag. I open my eyes, Frau Weinzierl fades out and is replaced by a close-up of Raoul’s lap. Some pimples around his navel are inflamed – tiny volcanoes about to erupt. Tonight I’m making schnitzel with mushrooms. I’ll buy the meat at Samson’s, on the corner of Taubenmarkt and Sariastrasse. Samson has the cheapest pork in the district. He pounds the schnitzels till they can’t make a peep.

Raoul moans: “Ruth, Ruth, Ruth,” his voice shifting into a pleading, a crescendo in A-minor as if I were far away and had to run to him quickly, although I’m here already – it doesn’t get any closer than this. I manage to look at the clock. Quarter to ten. High time. I grab his butt cheeks and dig my fingernails into his flesh. Come on, come on. My knees hurt. Raoul’s body arches. He sighs as if he’s had bad news.

“Finished,” he says.

In the bathroom I take a hefty swig of Chlorhexamed. It burns my tongue and the roof of my mouth. I rinse and open my mouth to inspect my gums. An expanse of soft, red craters. The mouth is an overrated body part. As long as the lips are closed, the misery is contained, but a look down the gullet reveals the true, wretched state of the creature. Nothing more than a digestive tube spruced up with a couple of decorative features.

Our bathroom is tiny and windowless. Furnished with a tub in which Raoul huddles like a baby grown too big for his bassinet. Bathing together requires advanced training in acrobatics. For aesthetic reasons there’s only the glow of a single 20-watt bulb in here, a merciful light that falls over the little jars and cologne bottles on the shelf above the sink. Most of them are Raoul’s – I don’t care much for cosmetics.

One step and I’m standing right next to the wall. I lean forward, my forehead touching the cold tile. Metallic ochre. Another place where I don’t want to live or die. Not here, on the 12th floor of

the Bruno Kreisky high-rise apartment building on Przewalskistrasse. 602 square feet – but hey, the balcony faces west – laminate flooring, wood-chip wallpaper.

To make some sort of noise, I turn on the tap. Stretching out an arm puts everything within reach: our matching, rainbow-coloured bathrobes that look fluffy, but aren't; the wall-hooks that look sturdy, but aren't; the shampoo bottle that looks like an exclusive brand, but isn't. Nothing here delivers what it promises.

I paw through Raoul's toiletry kit. Toiletries soothe me. Moisturiser, foot balsam to soften calluses, medicinal toothpaste, extra-strong. Tweezers, a Swiss army knife, an information leaflet without the pills that go with it. Parkemed 500 for pain and inflammation. At the very bottom a wooden comb with several of Raoul's hairs.

Maya told me about a charm: you entwine a hair of your partner's with one of your own. It's called "extracorporeal fusion" and strengthens your relationship, she says. I tried it, but my hair shed Raoul's like a body rejecting a transplant. Our hairs didn't last a second together. I should have known it was a sign.

When I come out of the bathroom, Raoul has the balcony door open a crack and is standing there bare-chested, smoking. I start listing what we need: lettuce, tomatoes, cucumber, dishwasher detergent, preferably the 6-phase tablets, the ones with the blue dot.

Raoul says, "The cheap ones are just as good, the ones without a dot," and I say that the dot isn't what's important, it's the better technology, and he grins and says, "What's technological about a dishwasher detergent?"

"Then do what you want," I say and brush my palm over his chest. It's stubbly. He's been shaving his chest recently. The lawn I used to rest on has been mowed. What was he thinking? I feel like removing the top of his skull so I can see what his thoughts look like. It was his naturalness that attracted me in the first place, and he knows that. Maya would say: There's something fishy. A man doesn't change himself for no reason. After all, he has to justify every change, and there's almost nothing that scares a man as much as justifying himself.

Back when he still had chest hair spilling over the top of his shirt, we played *The Seventh Slut* a lot. He'd walk along the wall and act as if he were looking at scantily clad women lolling behind full-length windows. It looked ridiculous, but I told myself, if it doesn't look ridiculous, it's not love.

So Raoul would saunter up and down, bow-legged, like a sailor on shore leave, thumbs hooked through his belt, something he never did otherwise. I'd be sitting on the couch, patiently

waiting until he was finished with his inspection. Sometimes he'd click his tongue or shout obscenities at the phantom sluts: "I'll fuck you senseless," or "Now you're laughing, sweetheart, but just wait till I'm finished with you."

For Raoul it was crucial to prolong the street scene as much as possible so that he would come across me more or less by chance: the seventh slut.

Before noticing me, then, he'd already have made an in-depth examination of six women who, of course, were disappointed that such a stud was slipping away from them. He told me to give him a mischievous, seductive scowl. *Mischievous* because I'd lured him away from the others, and *seductive* because, after all, I couldn't be certain that he'd pick me. Suspense until the very end. Before he got down to business, he'd inundate me with a cornucopia of promises, all formulated, as with the imaginary whores, in the future tense: I'll eat you out, I'll stuff it in your mouth, I'll fuck you silly, I'll this and I'll that. Most of the time he did nothing of the kind. He just kissed me, as shy and clumsy as a schoolboy. It was so touching it brought tears to my eyes.

Now I remember: tissues, we need tissues. "Tissues," I say to Raoul. "The three-ply ones."

"Six phases, three plies," Raoul says. "Anything else?"

He stubs out his cigarette in the soil of our sad rubber tree plant.

"You don't have to get the meat," I say. "I'll take care of that."

He hesitates. "Then why don't you get the other stuff, too? You don't have anything else to do."

Cold look. Quickly, I button up my cardigan.

"I have to go to the Society," I say.

Raoul is already switching the computer on and hides behind the monitor. I don't know what he does there all day; he doesn't seem to be very productive. Sometimes I hear him curse and kick the table leg. Raoul had business cards printed up. They say *LSD—Litzka Software Design*, and have our address: Przewalskistrasse 54, Door 22. That's it. No e-mail address, no telephone number. Raoul says he doesn't want anyone to call, and I wonder why he even had business cards made, because no one has ever come to the door, either. I suspect that the term 'software designer' is just window-dressing, like 'parquet-care specialist' for a cleaning woman, or 'shelf supervisor' for a stock boy. If anybody asks me, I say that Raoul is a programmer. That sounds like he's got things under control.

I step out onto the balcony. It's Assumption Day but too cold for the middle of August. I shiver. Our balcony is the size of a single bed and made of concrete. I lean over the railing. To Raoul, it might look as if I'm watching the traffic on Przewalskistrasse, the quirk of an unemployed woman.

But in reality I'm leaning over the railing to look into the Wesselys' apartment, where marital un-bliss in all its myriad forms can be observed. That's a game I play alone and always win, guaranteed.

The Wesselys live on the eleventh floor of the Schütte-Lihotzky high-rise apartment building, a veritable bin of misery that wends its way heavenward directly across the street from the Bruno Kreisky high-rise apartment building. The Wesselys' apartment has dark, coffered ceilings. A bunker where the sun never shines. It's a mystery to me why anyone would ever choose to live in an apartment like that. In the meantime, the Wesselys also seem to regret their choice bitterly. Judith Wessely wears dark rings around her eyes like a medal for exceptional forbearance. Moritz doesn't sleep at night, she says, never for more than an hour at a time. Phil Wessely says that Moritz is a year-and-a-half old now, and it's about time he got it through his head that people sleep at night, and Judith says, "It's about time *you* got it through *your* head that it's because of this apartment."

Last Friday at 10:24 p.m. I witnessed an eerie scene that was over as quickly as it had begun: Phil Wessely opened the French windows, grabbed Moritz firmly under the arms and dangled him over the railing, like Michael Jackson did with his youngest son. Moritz was wearing his blue pyjamas and was so bewildered that he just made a face, he didn't cry. Far below, traffic was rumbling along Przewalskistrasse.

Throw him over here, I felt like shouting. Give him to me if you don't want him. And when Phil Wessely lifted his head, our eyes met.

2

The Society for Reintegration is on Lisztstrasse, at the corner of Palffygasse. It supports unemployed women who are over thirty-five and childless – who, in other words, have failed three-fold in their duty to society. The Shelter, as Raoul calls it, isn't funded by the government but by industrialists with social reflux. It's all the same to me, as long as they pay.

I like the word 'reintegration' because it implies that at some point in the past one was in fact integrated. I'm not so sure that's true in my case. A short-lived attempt at medical school and a long-term internship writing obituaries – that's all I can show as proof of my endeavours to integrate.

The long-term internship consisted of sitting behind a desk and collecting data: date of birth, occupation, marital status, died, suddenly, unexpectedly, torn from this life, following a long illness, following a long, difficult illness, following a short, acute illness, following a hard-fought battle against debilitating illness, following years of suffering from a courageously borne chronic illness,

following severe illness and having made his peace, closed his eyes forever, the hard-working hands at rest. Called home to the Creator, called home to the Heavenly Father, called home to the Lord, crossed over, reached the end of his Earthly path, finished, finito. In our hearts you live on and on and on. A couple of semesters of medical school weren't enough to learn what all those people died of.

For the last eight months, I've had to report to the Why Society twice a week. I call it that because every time I go I find myself asking – why? Why am I here? Why am I doing this to myself? The only answer I can ever come up with is that otherwise they'll cut off the benefits.

I walk along Przelwalskistrasse to Bertagasse. On the right the shoemaker, on the left the second-hand shop. In the language of real estate: Class B location. Outlying area, acceptable transport connections. Tired-looking Wilhemine-era buildings in need of a facelift interspersed with Socialist public housing: fortress-like dwellings with bathroom windows like arrow slits. In the middle of all this the brightly coloured display of the One World Shop, which used to be called the Third World Shop back when there was still a Third World. Nowadays they peddle the usual emerging-market trinkets: Pan flutes and macramé bags, chocolate from a factory that supports one-armed women in India. *One world*. A big, fat lie, I think every time I walk by it. An offensive lie. After all, there are at least three worlds in our apartment building alone.

The sidewalks are so choked with bicycle riders and mothers that I have trouble making headway. The children are unbearably happy. A girl with braids is walking on a wall that separates a front garden from the sidewalk. She's holding her mother's hand tightly and emits piercing, short shrieks now and then. The mother watches her with a tight-lipped smile. Suddenly I too feel like walking on a wall. I could ask a passer-by to lend me a hand, and at the same moment I know that I would make myself ridiculous, absolutely ridiculous, ridiculous, ridiculous.

As on every Monday, I choose the way that leads past the Magenbuch Clinic. I turn into Bertagasse and cross Kaminsky Park. Up by Cafe Kurbel, through the curtain of chestnut trees, you can make out the long, drawn-out ENT wing, behind that, Paediatrics. The hospital lies there like a sleeping turtle. It never ceases to amaze me that you can't tell just by looking at a building that there's extensive suffering going on in there. I keep expecting to see waves of heat radiating from the walls, or at least a reddish wall rash.

I take up my observation post, and that is, without a doubt, my favourite Monday moment: when I am concealed behind the bust of the operetta composer Franz von Suppé, I'm no longer Ruth Amsel – I'm only eyes and ears, one big soundboard for the agony that oscillates and resonates.

Eleven minutes after ten. I pull out my tiny notebook, hardly bigger than a credit card, and peer over von Suppé's shoulder into the garden of the Magenbuch Clinic. The composer is well placed: his enormous bald head and broad shoulders form my protective barrier.

The hospital garden likes to pretend it's a real garden, but it's actually just a giant sedative and designed only to prepare people for death. Boxwood, periwinkles, marigolds, windflowers – nothing but cemetery ground cover growing here.

Looking into a hospital garden is like watching futuristic television with the channels Dementia, Arthritis, and Cirrhosis. An old man takes his I.V. pole for a walk. He takes a step, then drags the pole along like a balky dog. In between he wheezes. Step. Wheeze. Pull. Wheeze. Several patients in bathrobes are walking along the gravel paths and look almost like they could be in rehab, if only they weren't so pale and dishevelled-looking and kept stopping after a few steps.

3

The Society is on the ground floor of a stately-looking Wilhemine villa. At the entrance are the nameplates of law firms, real-estate agencies, and doctors. If I hear footsteps in the hallway, I put a business-like look on my face and walk up the stairs. I wait in front of the massive wooden door of Dr. Mörbisch, Attorney at Law, until the footsteps die away. I like standing in front of that door. It smells like leather briefcases and wood polish. By now I've waited there so often that I see it as my birthright to stay until everyone else has left the stairwell. No one needs to know that the lawyer's office isn't my destination, but instead Room A084, in which Herr Othmar resides.

In front of Herr Othmar's door it smells of Lucky Strikes and nervous sweat. I memorised the appearance of the room on my first visit, so that I wouldn't have to look at it again: the green Formica desk top with chipped edges; the filing cabinet, black with chrome-plated handles; the coat-tree that looks like the X-ray of a real tree; the back of the silver picture frame with the price tag still on it – Interio, €12.90. This terrifying order that reeks of irreversible adulthood.

"I've been waiting for you, Fräulein Ruth Barbara," says Herr Othmar. He says that every time I enter his office. Even when I'm right on time. Even when I'm early. A tactic to wear me down. Or an idiotic habit that has slowly merged with him to the point that you can't tell where the habit ends and Herr Othmar begins.

Herr Othmar is the only person who calls me 'Ruth Barbara'. Disgusting. Ruth is enough. Short and to the point, without an 'a' on the end to soften it.

This ‘a’ ruins everything: it makes breasts grow and the rear end bulge. ‘Ruth’, in contrast, has always protected me from superfluous feminisation.

That’s probably what Raoul liked about me: no hint of coquettishness, no pretence. I don’t try to make more of myself. What’s already there has to be enough.

Herr Othmar is of a different opinion. “Be grateful you bear the name of a saint,” he says, and I can’t help wondering what he’s trying to tell me. I looked up the legend of Saint Barbara and was upset for three days afterwards. More than anything, Barbara wanted to convert to Christianity, but she wasn’t allowed to. The rebellious little wench wouldn’t give up, and that led to a whole slew of punishments. Barbara was locked in a tower, tortured and tormented, abused until her skin hung from her body in shreds. She was beaten with clubs, burned with torches, and sentenced to death. Before her own father personally decapitated her, he cut off her breasts, just to make sure. Still, as a martyr, she did an absolutely top-notch job.

“I wish there were something that you had a burning desire to do,” says Herr Othmar.

I don’t burn, I feel like saying. I meet every fire prevention requirement there is, my frame of mind is Teflon-coated. Especially since that thing with the baby, but that’s out of place here in Room A084.

Just because I show up twice a week here at the Society for Reintegration doesn’t mean I am demonstrating the will to change, Herr Othmar says.

What does this man know of my will? Herr Othmar leads a child-proofed life – no stumbling hazards or sharp corners. A family taken from the pages of the handbook for model citizens. Two girls, twins. A little chubby, but competitive gymnasts all the same. A wife, Cecile, an attorney imported from Paris, who, since moving to Vienna, redecorates their semi-detached house according to the season.

Herr Othmar shows me a photo of him and Cecile in the Jardin du Luxembourg. They’re arm-in-arm and smiling up at the Parisian sky. Him: full head of hair. Her: full figure. Everything bursting with happiness. That was in 1992, says Herr Othmar, and looks at the picture as if he were seeing it for the first time.

Out of politeness I ask if Cecile doesn’t miss France, and he answers: “What do you mean? We eat fresh Gervais and Camembert,” though the way he says it makes it sound like mouldy chunks of cheese.

Herr Othmar asks: “What are you average in? The market doesn’t need any specialists; it needs solid mediocrity.”

I act like I'm thinking it over. I stare at a distant point just past his head and press my lips together. Now and then I nod slightly to simulate the progression of thought. Finally I look Herr Othmar in the eyes.

"I don't know," I say. "Honestly. No idea."

I have to be very careful, because every word could be one too many, and just like that I'd be dropped from the reintegration program and into self-employment training. This must be avoided at all costs, because then you're thrown into the shark-infested waters of the free market so that the Why Society can quickly chalk up another success. A lot of these newly self-employed go under and get washed up on the shores of some desert island of the economy, never to be heard from again. Since I found that out, I take great pains to restrict myself to statements that keep me safely anchored in the holding tank of the Society.

Herr Othmar sighs. He looks at me with a mixture of pity and exasperation.

"What do you *like* doing?" he asks, fumbling with his moustache. "If you could have your choice. Anything at all. What would you do?"

I think for a second. "Obituaries," I say. "I can write obituaries."

"Anything else? Do you like to sell? Could you see yourself in retail?"

Herr Othmar is wearing a tattersall shirt. Cufflinks. Matching beige tie. An administrator of failure. An official in the castle of losers. The Why Society can be proud of a worker like him. Does his duty from eight until five. I think to myself: he *has* to ask that. Surely, he doesn't like it. It's just that he has to.

"No," I say. "I'm sorry, but I can't sell." I'm programmed so that I can lie only to people I know. Like Raoul or Herr Othmar. It doesn't work with strangers. Not in a million years could I bring myself to say, "Honestly, I just *love* that dress on you!" And in between false compliments, changing clothes on anorexic mannequins – possibly even in that awful Boutique Monique – no sir, with all due respect!

"How's the family?" I ask, to turn his attention from the disappointment. Eyes trained on the monitor, he slowly nods his head up and down.

"Très bien, très bien. What do you think of this? Twenty hours a week in the 'Rosenkavalier' refugee hostel. Teaching German to Albanian refugees."

"I don't believe I can teach."

"You don't believe?"

"I'm afraid."

"You're afraid?"

“I’m dyslexic,” I say.

I feel sick. Raoul is always saying we need a second income. That sounds as if we already had *one*, but the truth is the money from the Society is the only thing keeping us afloat. What Raoul pulls in from the Internet projects he lands doesn’t even cover our paltry rent.

Reaching over the Formica top, Herr Othmar hands me a brochure.

“Maybe there’s something for you in here.”

Fake smile. I’d like to stuff a baguette in his mouth sideways.

“Give my regards to your wife, even though we’ve never met.”

Always stay friendly. After all, Herr Othmar can do whatever he wants to a person: write a comment in their file, cut their funding, or throw them out of the Society altogether, for his is the power and the glory, and everybody says yea and amen.

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