

# ONE

## BEGINNINGS AND ENDS

While on honeymoon in Trieste, Adolf infected his wife with syphilis. On their first night, side by side between the chafing sheets of a hotel-bed, Adolf reached over and turned off the gas lamp, black-blinding Marie. His wheezing drew closer, a finger and thumb clawing at the embroidered chest of her nightgown, her spine arching away from her railway inspector husband. Marie threw back the blankets, scurrying out of the room and up the corridor to the communal bathroom where she sat on the edge of a copper bathtub, her legs crossed and her nightshirt buttoned up to the throat. That first evening, Adolf followed his bride and tapped at the bathroom door, whispering pleas through the gap in the frame. On the second evening, he was begging Marie to come to her senses and rest her head in their marital bed. By the third evening, he was bellowing at the door, ordering Marie to fulfil her wifely duties, shouting over her whimpers and the protests of hotel-guests. Adolf never joined his weary-eyed wife in bed on the fourth evening. After dinner, he left her sitting in silence at the table and walked down to the promenade on the seafront. Within half an hour he had procured a prostitute and a reasonably priced room three doors down from the hotel where his new wife pretended to sleep.

The following morning, Marie was still sitting at the breakfast table when Adolf's lean frame came in through the main entrance.

He saluted her ironically, placing an index finger on the peak of his hat, and continued through the hall and up the stairs. Their paths did not cross again until dinner when Adolf re-emerged from the bedroom, refreshed from his daytime sleep, and strode through a bustling restaurant to her table. Marie had been waiting in the hotel bar the entire day, making only occasional trips to the bathroom on the fourth floor, climbing the staircases to tread carefully past their nuptial room, pressing her ear against the lock to hear her husband's somnolent breaths. Over dinner they talked. For the first time in four days, they smiled at each other, discussing the charms of the sun-baked houses along the promenade, the lilting accent of the waiter and the countless embellishments they would make to the bourgeois life awaiting them back on the banks of the Danube. After dinner, Marie got up from the table and placed her hand in Adolf's. He smiled, leading her through the foyer and back up the four flights of stairs to consummate their marriage, planting the seed of infection in their sweat-soaked union.



For two weeks prior to Egon's birth doctors shuttled back and forth along the thirty-kilometre stretch of track separating Vienna and Tulln. They rushed into Marie's room, confronted with her knotted and swollen body, sometimes naked, sometimes mummified in warm towels. After the requisite checks they packed up their instruments and were sent away.

'I tell you: it could be any day now,' said Adolf to one of the doctors as he closed his leather bag and climbed back on the train. 'I'd be grateful if you could remain on call. I'll be sure to contact you as soon as...'

'She seems to be progressing just fine, Herr Schiele. I doubt it'll be necessary to return for at least another week.'

'But what if...'

'As I said, she is progressing fine.'

Adolf pressed a booklet of rail-tickets into his palm.

‘Just to be on the safe side, why not come by tomorrow.’

The doctor flicked through the booklet. Adolf pulled a second one from his pocket and handed it over.

‘For the lovely Frau Neumann. I’m sure she’d like...’

‘The day after tomorrow you say?’

‘Tomorrow would be better.’

‘I’ll be here.’

Adolf knew how to flatter the handful of birth specialists already acquainted with the complications of Marie’s womb, that fickle chamber which had given life to two daughters and stolen it from three of their stillborn siblings. Such incentives ensured the doctors kept coming until Egon’s fragile body finally appeared one sunny morning in June 1890.

As Marie’s womb contracted around what was to be her third surviving child, Egon’s elder sisters, Melanie and Elvira, waited in the neighbouring room on the top floor of the station building. They barely heard the intermittent wails of their mother over the whistles of passing trains. They sat at their bedroom window, their elbows on the sill, looking out at the rolling countryside, watching it disappear momentarily behind swirls of coal smoke. Egon’s two sisters had sat through this same experience three times before, each operative week ending in the hushed sobs of their mother. Each time, a doctor (rolled-up sleeves and blood-streaked forearms; thick, matted adult hair) would exit the room with yet another of their lifeless brothers nestling in a bucket under a spattered towel.

Egon was the exception: the only surviving male before his mother’s womb reverted to type and produced one final daughter. Unlike his brothers before him, Egon did not leave the upper room with his back cold against the insides of the dented bucket; rather, as he took his first breaths, he was wrapped in a woollen bed-cloth and lowered into his mother’s limp arms. She grimaced, revealing a row of irregular teeth, their calcium sucked out by those who came before him. She looked Egon in the face and then between his legs, passing his pink, puffy body back to the doctor. Her arms fell by her sides and the muscles in her face relaxed into well-worn ridges.

‘For Christ’s sake!’ The gaggle of midwives and maids leant in around her bed. ‘One of you go down to the signal box and tell him he’s finally got a son.’



As Egon grew, his mother dressed him in tailored suits in the winter, in a sailor’s costume in spring, and in summer in the striped garb of South Bohemia where she had been brought up. On the porch of the station building, Adolf sat the boy on his knee, bobbing him up and down as trains pulled in and out. Egon slept through the screeches and the avalanche of descending boots thumping the platform. The night cargos trundling towards Danube ports failed to rouse him from sleep, snuggled in a cot in the corner of his sisters’ room. Soon, thick dark tufts of hair began to spread across his scalp, hanging over his ears, a moor of unruly divots which he was first unable to tame and with time willingly cultivated.

The tale he would recount as his first memory was entirely manufactured: the burial of one of his elder sisters. Over time he groomed the falsified anecdote, describing how the half-size coffin of ten-year-old Elvira was lowered into a hole in the town cemetery; he mentioned the burnt umber soil sweating in the heat and the staccato scratch and thud of the wood sliding and resting in its pebble-strewn grave. But beyond the artificial constructs of memory, at the precise moment that Elvira’s coffin was being drummed with lumps of clay dropped from trembling hands, Egon sat on the floor of his bedroom in the station building, scribbling coloured twirls on old newspapers. While Adolf led his wife away from the graveside, their shoes clogged with fresh mud, the boy surrounded himself with crayons and cascades of colour. The maid watching over him turned away, hiding her reddened eyes from the child.

Egon’s earliest genuine memory was far less lyrical than Elvira’s funeral. Buried deep in the shadows of his mind was a summer

afternoon when one of the many traders who passed through the station approached his mother on the porch, addressing her in the same vernacular Slavic she used when out of Adolf's earshot. The peddler stepped off the train from Znojmo on market day and raised his hand to Marie.

*'Dobrej, pani Schielová.'*

*'Dobryj den, pane.'*

Every market day Egon would witness the role-play of his mother rising from the bench at the front of the station and greeting the peddler in her native packets of vowelless clicks and rolls. He rarely heard the rest of their conversation, their hushed voices drowned out by the clamour of the platform; instead, he sat captivated by the bag swinging around the trader's neck. He sucked his thumb and waited for his mother to return with a sugar-coated treat – dug out from the worn leather bag – which she placed in his mouth, smiling as he squirmed with the dancing sensation on his tongue. Through citrus tears he watched his mother saying goodbye to the trader; Marie opened her purse to pay him, resting her hand on his for an instant as she placed several coins in his palm. In turn, he twisted his shoulder back and fished out a folded square of paper from his satchel, pressed it into her hand and then stepped back up onto the train.

His mother's blunt yet musical greeting quickly became associated with the fizzing numbness in his mouth, the gravel-like texture of rough-cut sweets which sparkled behind his eyes. As she picked him up and repositioned him on her lap, Egon said proudly:

*'Dobryj den, pani Schielová.'*

The smile melted from Marie's face as Adolf appeared in the doorway. He picked Egon off his wife's lap and pinched the boy's chin with a calloused hand before slapping him across the cheek.

*'Guten Tag.* Round here it's *Guten Tag.* We're not peasants like your mother's lot.'

*'Guten Tag,'* Egon repeated.

*'Again.'*

*'Guten Tag.'*

‘Enough of that Slavic filth.’ He turned to Marie. ‘Watch your bloody mouth, woman.’

Adolf stood up, ruffling the spiky crop of hair which hung over Egon’s forehead and strode back into the station building.

That was Egon’s first memory.



He came to admire the Austrian State Railways, marvelling at everything from their imperial reach, mapped out on the faded charts above his father’s desk, to the unbearable beam of their headlights. Tulln was a transit station, a passing point for most cargoes entering and exiting the capital. Egon’s father was a respected man; although of middling rank, he ran Tulln impeccably, forging its reputation as a place where trains stopped on schedule and made up time lost at more slovenly stations out in the provinces.

He grew up against the backdrop of wagons linking and unlinking, hobnail boots embarking and disembarking, containers loading and unloading, and the babel of passengers’ tales. The fabric of his clothes carried the industrial odour of oil and coal despite his mother’s scrubbing. The boy would sit on the platform for hours, watching the machines as though they were beasts emerging from the folds of the countryside and then disappearing into the hills and valleys behind a veil of smoke. To Egon the steel dragons were more vivid than the beasts that populated the picture books on his shelves; they were more alive, more physical, ingesting black food and billowing darkness from their lungs. As a nine-year-old, he would walk alone to the end of the platform and wait for one of the few trains to pass which did not stop at the station. The driver’s whistle would warn him off, but he remained rooted to the spot. His toes stuck out over the edge of the platform and the swirling waves of air, pushed away from the front engine, wrapped around his small body, spinning it, caressing it, until the last carriage passed and he exhaled, stumbling backwards engulfed in smoke.

As Egon grew, Adolf granted him free local tickets, enough to

transport his introverted son away for an afternoon, dropping him a mile or two up the track next to the Danube in a nether land of limitless escape. Occasionally, Egon would take an early morning train and disembark just as the sun was rising. On a roll of waste paper picked up from his father's office, he would spend the sunlight hours outlining engines and rolling stock. Initially, everything was in pencil, scribbled on the backs of old maps and timetables; then briefly, he used lumps of charcoal that tumbled from passing wagons, but the rocks drew uneasily on the page, his penknife unable to hone their irregular edges. Finally, he settled on stolen ink.

One afternoon, Adolf came looking for his son. He found him in a clearing of trodden meadow, lounging among papers, pencils and pots of colour. Egon looked up at the figure silhouetted against the sun and cowered; a raised hand threw shadows over his sketches. Instinctively, the young boy stuck out his ink-stained hands for inspection. Adolf bent down so close that a small black speck on Egon's thumb smeared across his father's cheek.

'Where did you get all these things from? Have you been snooping around my study again?'

He removed a handkerchief from his top pocket and dabbed his face until the spot appeared on the white cloth. Egon bowed his head.

'Answer me! Where did you get this?' Egon shrugged. 'If I find out you've taken this from the office you'll get the belt. In fact...'

Adolf reached for the boy's arm, raising it and twisting his body to expose the backs of Egon's naked legs. As he did so a bundle of papers spilled out onto the ground, the wind filling their sails and sweeping them into the cords of grass. In an instant, Adolf glimpsed the elaborate patterns of steam engines, complete with windows, cabins, chimneys and pumps. Father and son stood still and watched as the pictures bounced, rolled and danced over and through the grass.

'Gather this rubbish up, boy, and get home. Your mother's got the dinner on.'

'Yes, Father.'



‘You will study to become an engineer,’ said Adolf, leaning forward on his desk, his sleeves rolled up. Egon looked at the map behind his father, tracking the lines north to Prague, west to Munich, east to Budapest, all converging on Vienna, *regina urbis*, the star of Mitteleuropa. ‘Following this, it is my intention that you join the Bohemian railways.’ Egon’s eyes wandered to Trieste. ‘Look at me when I’m talking to you.’

‘Sorry, Father.’

‘Like others before you, you will become an inspector. If – and I stress *if* – you show promise and work hard, I’ll see to it that you take over the running of Tulln.’

‘That would be an honour, Father.’

‘Indeed, it would. Now get out of my sight and don’t let me catch you stealing again.’



Egon never recorded the exact order of the schools he attended nor the circumstances of his expulsions; the terms just slipped into each other with the seamless progression of the seasons. The colour of his cap or the hoops on his socks would change according to the school, but each time it ended in the same way: disgrace, punishment, and imprisonment in the coal shed.

It started when he was ten. Adolf fetched his son from a dusty classroom in Tulln early one afternoon, yanking him down the corridor and into the yard, shouting obscenities while small round faces appeared at the windows. After a night in the coal shed, Adolf put the boy on a train to nearby Krems, with a letter for the head-teacher and a scribbled map in his pocket indicating the location of his new school.

When he was expelled eighteen months later, Egon arrived home with an envelope from his teacher, which he left propped

between the ashtray and the gas lamp on his father's desk. The envelope stood there, covered in swirls and jagged pencil lines scratched by his bored hand on the train home, until Adolf returned from the night shift and tore it apart. He only read the first two lines before storming upstairs to drag Egon from underneath his feeble defence of blankets and pillows. After two nights in the coal shed, Adolf sent him to Klosterneuburg, the only local school left which might make an engineer out of the softly-spoken youngster.



One year on, and Egon was wandering slowly home, unwilling to hasten the confrontation with his father. Scrunched in his fist was the offending sketch the teacher had torn from an exercise book and launched across the room. There had been just enough time to stuff it into a pocket before the teacher grabbed him by the neck and bundled him out the door.

With the sun already low in the sky, Egon appeared on the station platform, a bag slung over his shoulder, his jacket hanging over the strap of the bag. He unfurled the sketch and looked again at the comic penis protruding from between the figure's legs.

His father's office door was open and he was sitting at his desk with a file of papers in front of him. Egon stood in the doorway for a moment, expecting his father to look up, pull from his pocket a telegram or some other incriminating evidence and point in the direction of the coal shed. Instead, he just sat there, sorting through the embossed share certificates which he usually kept locked away in a safe-box under his desk. Egon had only seen them once before, several years earlier when Adolf had waved them drunkenly in his wife's face, threatening to leave and take the family's fortune with him. But now, Egon watched as his father held each of them up to the low flame of the desk-lamp to reveal the blue ink against the pale watermark of the Austrian State Railways. Adolf read the number aloud before closing his eyes, bobbing his

head and repeating the number first forwards and then backwards under his breath. He then laid the certificate back into a maroon-leather file, adorned with a bronze and gold buckle, and removed the next one.

‘Two-two-six-one-nine-eight-zero. Zero-eight-nine-one-six-two-two.’

Adolf opened his eyes, checked the numbering was correct and moved on to the next, holding it up to the lamp.

‘Two-two-six-one-nine-eight-one. One-eight-nine-one-six-two-two.’

Egon took two steps back and walked up the stairs and along the landing to the room he shared with his younger sister, Gertrude.

‘He’s been at it all afternoon.’ Her voice was muffled in the bedcovers. ‘Yesterday, too.’

‘On his own?’

‘His neck was bleeding again.’

‘Did you fetch Mother?’ Egon watched the back of her head shake, her face pressed into the pillow. ‘Always go find her. Remember what she said?’ He took off his shirt and trousers and climbed into bed alongside her.

She rolled over and into his arms, murmurs barely audible through her cupped hands. The two siblings lay there, listening to their father’s voice at the bottom of the stairs, counting back and forth every single share of his life’s investment.

‘Story please.’

‘I’m too tired.’

‘The one about the magician and his helper.’

‘You had that last night.’

‘I want it again.’

‘It’s too late. And besides I don’t want to light a candle.’

‘You know enough of it by heart anyway.’

‘Can we just get some sleep? I’ve had a long day.’

She rolled over, turning her face in towards the wall.

‘How was school?’ she mumbled.

‘Fine.’



Egon was too young to recognise the symptoms eating away at his father, but alongside Gertrude, he witnessed Adolf's mood-swings, the wild unpredictability of his palm. Their mother's crowing echoed around the house as she shouted back at her husband, devoid of sympathy for his crumbling body and the disease he so deserved. As Adolf retreated into the darkness of his study, she stepped out of his shadow; she hurried the children to school in the mornings and had them washing and cleaning the house in the evenings; when once she would have remained silent, she now spoke out openly, addressing the peddlers in her mother tongue, bossing the station-workers on the platform and chastising her children as her husband had done. Melanie, Egon and Gertrude observed the switch, watching the gradual withdrawal of their father, hearing his words from their mother's mouth instead. Meanwhile, paralysis crept through Adolf's body: he stopped trains at a whim, ordering the passengers and the entire crew to dismount; he demanded to see their tickets, folding them and then biting each one between his back teeth as if checking a coin; he insisted on laying an extra place at the dinner table, ordering Marie to make enough food 'for our guest'; unprompted, he asked Egon what his three favourite boys' names were; he demanded Melanie sleep in her shoes.

Eventually he retired from work, encouraged by a colleague to take a break. As his children's bodies filled out, his own creased flesh began to hang from his neck, the skin peppered with weeping sores. For the last months of his life, he sat at the upstairs window above the porch and looked out at the trains pulling in, waving as they pulled away.

One afternoon, he was discovered lying motionless on the roof of the porch, several feet below his window.

'What are you looking at?' screamed Marie at her children. 'Go to your room and don't come out until I say so.'

Egon and Gertrude dropped below the windowsill.

‘Did you see it happen?’

‘No. You?’

‘He just collapsed over the window ledge,’ he started. ‘His arms tucked into his sides.’

‘Stop it!’

‘And the dent in the porch roof. The tin cushioned his fall.’

‘That’s Father you’re talking about.’

‘Do you think he was trying to kill himself?’

Gertrude pulled a blanket around her head and rolled up against the wall.

‘I don’t want to hear you mention any of this,’ Marie shouted up at the landing. ‘It was an accident. That’s all. The Hallings. They waved to him from the midday train. He lost his balance.’

‘But...’ said Egon, leaning over the balustrade, looking down at his mother.

‘Neither of you are to disturb him. He’ll be in bed for a few days. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, Mother,’ they answered in unison.

From then on Adolf was confined to his room, initially by force and later by necessity. First, leather straps, which had once held down cargo on transit hauls, bound his sinuous limbs to the bed frame. They were later removed when he resigned himself to the steady atrophy of his mind and body. Doctors carved slits over his paralysed back, applying warm jars of morphine; mercury was rubbed into his neck. Some days the pain would vanish and he would make it over to his barred window and look out; other days, as if cured, he would make sudden, worrying appearances at meal times, longing for the company of his family, his daughters squirming at his lesion-ridden face. On some days he was an immovable hunk of opium-scratched flesh; on others, he would come into the children’s room at night and sit at the end of Gertrude’s bed, her shoes in his hands, picking her fine ginger hairs off the blanket. They began to lock the bedroom door.



‘There’s someone outside,’ whispered Gertrude.

‘Don’t be stupid.’

‘They’re on the platform.’

Gertrude rolled closer to Egon, putting an arm across his chest.

‘It’s just the mechanics. Now go back to sleep.’

‘And that noise?’

‘Go back to sleep!’

An hour later, Egon opened his eyes. He saw the familiar flickering glow of open flames, different from the headlights he had learnt to recognise. He slipped out of his sister’s arms and walked to the window. Down on the platform, he saw Adolf standing in front of a roaring bonfire on the tracks, watching as it tossed flakes of ash into the air. He took his coat and shoes, unlocked the door and joined his father on the platform, placing an arm around his waist.

‘Come on now. You’ll catch a cold. Back to bed.’ Adolf stared at his son vacantly, gave a near imperceptible nod, turned and walked back inside, his face red with the glow of the flames.

Egon waited for the door to close behind his father and then picked up a bucket of water from the coalhouse, taking it over to the fire. He raised the bucket and looked down at the ashes which were already scattering across the platform. He could just make out the singed remnants of his sketches: the smouldering corner of a train carriage, the charred branch of a lime tree, a church, a barn, a river. He put the bucket down on the floor, resigned to the loss of his sketches, and looked behind him to see Adolf walking slowly up the stairs, his white nightshirt floating like smoke past the windows as they glinted with the reflection of flames. Egon stood there until the fire subsided, opening his coat and letting the heat wash up over his legs and chest. He saw old train tickets, the occasional corner of one of his pictures, the wicker weaves of an office chair, the spines of novels, and, at the bottom, where the embers still flushed with swirls

and gusts, he saw a bronze and gold buckle and the delicate pastry of four hundred leaves of charred paper, packed tightly together, their blue ink occasionally burning with the orange flame of a water mark before passing into ash.