

BLAISE ROSENTHAL

Another Country, 2015
Charcoal and acrylic on canvas, 64 x 76 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JOHANSSON PROJECTS

RCA O'NEAL

My American Thanksgiving

I have been trying for some time to figure out how to explain things. I did take notes, you see, and I had always thought that the notes would lead to something else, or would be *useful* in some way. Yet, perhaps the notes speak for themselves, perhaps even more faithfully than fickle memory? I do think that some explanation is required, but what I want you to understand is that the notes themselves are true, they are as close to truth as any of us can hope to get. Therefore, understand that it was American Thanksgiving, a holiday of Competitive Family Obligation. Families feel obligated to come together, to cook large meals, and to talk. As near as I can tell, they compete with their neighbors to fill their driveways and streets with parked cars, to fill their dinner tables with people and food, and to generally appear to be bountiful in the Thorstein Veblen sense. This, of course, is only my preliminary observation, as I have not actually lived in an American city since I was four and a half. In any case, my family is ill prepared to compete in such displays of bounty due to a family tradition of late breeding and accidental death.

Harold, my grandmother's brother, was one such accidental death.

"Harold was a homosexual, you know," she says as if we had never figured it out, although perhaps referring as an accident to a death by depressive drinking following that of his own lover's is too simple. The point is that my grandmother says this in a conspiratorial manner, and in fact there was a conspiracy, as my mother explains to me: At ninety-three, Harold's mother, my great grandmother, wished to visit him before he died. His sister, having obstructed things as much as possible, finally revealed what she believed to be her trump card. To their conservative Christian mother, she shouted, "You know that Harold is a homosexual, don't you?"

She had apparently forgotten all the Thanksgivings and Christmases when Harold had invited his "friend," whereas not all Christians had forgotten the Doctrine of Forgiveness. With this in mind, I thus present to you my notes from this last Thanksgiving, as I took them down.

Cast of Characters:

The Mater: My mother

The Babushka: Her mother

Comrade Yuri Vladimirovich Andropov: Ambassador,
enjoys being scratched in odd places

Replacement-Severina: Smaller than Comrade Yuri
Vladimirovich

Sydney: Bad at texting

Yours Truly: Lord Ruthven

The time: Noon (one is late)

The time: 14:00 (one is late)

The time: 16:00 (yes, one is still late)

In a fit of Irish parsimony, the Mater had the idiotic idea of going to her new house in Kensington on Thanksgiving Day to tidy things up for the tenant who was to soon move in upstairs, and in a bid to further the idiocy, she decided to take her mother there with us, ostensibly to show her the new house, but secretly so that her mother would not spend all day calling her phone and complaining that we were going to be late and why were we leaving her alone on Thanksgiving and so forth. I think it smacked of a bit of hubris on my mother's part to believe that she could outwit a force of nature so easily. This scenario gave the Babushka material for a much more legitimate complaint, given that it was rather unfair to invite her over to show her the house and then expect her to wait around for hours while we cleaned it up and then as the Mater checked her email. There is no point in describing the particulars except for one exclamation of my grandmother's many that quite plainly summarizes the cynicism of her childish nature: "I'm not planning to kill myself or anything," she said, already cynically qualifying her statement so that my mother would not have grounds to section her into a padded cell as has been done in the past, "but if one day I just didn't wake up, that would be fine with me." The Mater ignored this and handed me a broom.

"Nobody loves me and I am going to die alone. The cats are my only reason for living."

"That's not true," I said awkwardly, not wanting to lie.

"I wish I had just died when I had the stroke. I just wish I would go to sleep one day and never wake up." It is hard to record here the exact manner in which she says these kinds of things, but it is very forceful, as if by some bodily process it is being expelled from among her entrails. The Mater still claims that all this is merely attention-seeking. But, holding the broom, standing next to the large windows in the salon with the view, I am, for the first time, struck by the thought that maybe the Babushka is correct—what has she got to live for? Yes, for the first time I see that her life is pain.

After only a few more tantrums, the expedition to Kensington ceased and we returned chez *grand-mère*, where my mother began to make the final preparations for the Thanksgiving meal, most of which she had cooked at home. At the very least this episode should illustrate how little Thanksgiving matters to my family, and yet it is something that we do, not out of any vestigial patriotic Americanness, but out of a sense of filial duty to one's elders, who use it as an excuse to see one, despite everyone having better things to do.

18:15 (lateness is no longer pertinent)

Having finally taken up residence at my grandmother's house, I turned my attentions to one of my grandmother's cats, the inimitable Yuri Andropov. Of course most cats like to have the sides of their heads rubbed, but Comrade Andropov is singular in that he generally likes having the side of his head rubbed, and nothing else. He is so peculiar in how he likes to have it rubbed that if one is not precise enough to hit upon the spot with exactly the right attack, he will take over the job himself, butting his head against one's knuckles, violently.

18:30

Yuri has decided that in fact he would like to have his stomach petted as well but is unsure as to how to go about turning himself over. I am astonished by this supposed desire for petting variety, and also rather pleased, as I had grown bored of the cat petting himself against my hands.

18:32

I have almost knocked Yuri off the top of his cat stand after suggesting to him gently that he rearrange himself so as to better expose his belly, if that is truly what he desires to be petted. He responded by vigorously pushing himself out flat, which led to his head and shoulders dangling off precariously.

18:33

After suggesting to Yuri that he might move to the couch, he has leapt from his cat stand and disappeared behind one of the couches, circling back, I suppose in front of the cases of antique Japanese toys.

18:35

The Babushka has entered the salon and demanded to know where Yuri is. She becomes terrified that he has escaped into the garage and out into the wild where no doubt one of the dogs belonging to her evil neighbors will swallow him whole, or that a mountain lion will carry him off and surely devour him whole. Or a coyote or a fox . . . Many, but not all, of her fears are straight from Prokofiev.

18:36

The Mater has made some light comment concerning feline imprisonment. Her mother, the Babushka, has retaliated by proclaiming that she wishes she were dead and the cats are her only reason for living, and that no one but them loves her.

I am inclined to agree.

18:36:39

The Babushka has directed in my general direction the comment *как вы поживаете?* Given her use of the formal *вы*, I wonder if she is addressing Comrade Andropov. I therefore repeat the comment to the cat, *как вы поживаете, товарищ Андропов?* The Babushka, upon hearing my Russian, remarks that she does not speak French. I am once again flauntingly reminded of the disgrace my terrible Russian is to the family.

18:38

The Babushka has noticed my violin case sitting on the davenport. She immediately becomes worried, waving her hands about in an odd manner. Once she uses her words, I realize that she is miming a cat pushing it off with its paw. This seems unlikely to me, given the generally malnourished disposition of her cats, the fact that I had already set it back from the edge, and the case's weight. Still, I am forced to shift it about until she is satisfied. But I know that it is still in the same place.

18:46

Having resettled the violin case, the Babushka now asks me whether I will play for her. I suggest this as an after-dinner activity. The truth is that my mother is cooking, and I want her to see me doing something nice for my grandmother.

18:49

I'm sorry. That was a lie. The truth is that I want my mother to hear me play because I want her approval. I hate that, and it is made worse by the fact that I blame her for still seeking approval from her mother. Obviously she is never going to get anything from the Babushka. What does duty have to do with it?

18:55

The cats seem to be hiding, which has led the Babushka to wander about yelling their names. I do hear a bell from time to time. It is only the Babushka's female cat, Tini, a replacement for the late Severina, who has a bell. I am tempted to suggest to the Babushka that such an indication device might make Replacement-Severina more at risk of predation by wolves.

19:00

The Babushka has apologized to the Mater for refusing to cook.

19:01

The Babushka has complained concerning the dryness of the air. The Mater suggests lotion. I fear this will start the usual fight.

19:01:15

The usual fight:

“My skin hurts, I’m wobbly, and,” here the Babushka grins with relish as she approaches a particularly succulent complaint, “my feet hurt so much I can barely walk.”

“Go see a podiatrist. Not being able to exercise isn’t good for you.”

“Podiatry isn’t covered.”

“Yes it is.”

“No it isn’t.”

Etcetera.

19:10

Dinner is served. The Mater has prepared “a simple meal,” by which she means it is only three courses. I had presumed this meant three dishes, but in fact, this means three courses involving a variety of minutiae. To summarize, however, my mother has decided to make a political statement by only cooking foods brought by various immigrant groups to the U.S., and to further complicate things for herself, she has required that each dish must contain one of the traditional Thanksgiving ingredients. This is an improvement over the year when she made acorn-meal biscuits, and we all got food poisoning. (Likely had nothing to do with the acorn biscuits, which were excellent. I mean, I kept eating them afterward and was fine. It was probably from the supermarket cranberry pound cake that someone brought that year.)

19:15

Squash and peanut soup good. Mother offended that I added pepper, “Before even tasting it!”

19:17

“You’re drowning out the flavor!”

Pepper also good. Added more to be passive aggressive.

19:17:30

I am wondering to myself whether peanuts are supposed to be one of the traditional American foods. Or perhaps they have been included because peanuts came from Africa?

19:18

I have remembered that the Babushka usually likes to complain about the Irish alcoholism of her first husband, the Mater’s Pater.

So far, nothing.

19:24

I have realized that the Babushka refused a glass of rosé. Perhaps that is of some significance? The Mater and I both drank it, although I found it rather bland.

19:45

Dinner complete, waiting for dessert. Babushka has asked the Mater for the bill. The Mater has demurred. The Babushka has grown adamant. I wonder if, in her forgetfulness, she has forgotten that she was ever married.

19:47

Yuri Andropov has returned to the living room and Replacement-Severina has also emerged from underneath a bookcase. It would appear that the cats have heard the sound of wet food being placed into their dishes. The Babushka apologizes to Tini for the wet food being cold. The Mater asks, surprised and amused, whether Tini prefers her wet food warm In Actuality. As if in response, Tini appears to turn up her nose and wanders off.

19:49

The Babushka has commenced Yuri Andropov’s feeding ritual. It works as follows: She places him on the sofa on top of an extra towel. A dish is placed before him and a few spoonfuls of wet cat food are placed in it. The Babushka sits behind the dish and stares into Comrade Yuri Vladimirovich’s eyes. He stares back. He sniffs the food.

He takes a dainty bite, but mostly he does not eat. The Babushka grows bored and takes his food away. Apparently this is how she has begun feeding him, which explains why he has lost so much weight.

19:50

The Babushka has decided to look through one of the family photo albums. In preparation she has removed one of the many thick, white Egyptian cotton towels that have been thrown over the davenport, the sofa, and the armchair, which are supposedly there to catch the cat hair, and she has now gone to the case that contains the many, meticulously organized, photo albums. She gets distracted by the sight of my mother whipping cream for the cranberry pavlova.

19:52

The Babushka has again demanded a bill from the Mater, who has in turn tried to explain that really, she does not know the exact cost of the meal, a startling lapse of Irish parsimony on her part.

19:53

I have turned away from the scene in the kitchen to discover that Tini has vomited on the sofa. On the one from which the Babushka had removed the towel. It just so happens that the Babushka has started to complain that my mother might have gotten crumbs on the floor (which she had not), which the cats would surely eat, inducing vomiting, and then possibly death. Without considering the possible ramifications, I inform the general populace of the state of the sofa.

19:55

The Babushka has calmly proceeded to clean the sofa cover and then has placed a new towel over the stain, proclaiming that the cats do it all the time, and it does not mean that they are sick or anything, it is just part of their lifestyle. “They just like to do it,” she says. This less than hysterical response on her part lends credence to the

*The Babushka
sits behind
the dish and
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Comrade Yuri
Vladimirovich’s
eyes. He
stares back.*

contention of the Mater that her histrionics are primarily cynical in nature. I notice that the vomit is composed of partially chewed kibble and wonder to myself if this is the Replacement-Severina’s attempt to let her scorn for cold wet food be known.

19:58

Cranberry pavlova served. Excellent.

20:00

I feel rather guilty. I have honestly been lying in these notes. Well, that is not fair to myself—I have been misrepresenting facts. The truth is, my grandmother never had a cat named Severina. She was named something else, but, although I can say it in Russian, I cannot actually spell her real name. The cat’s name did start with an S sound, however (C in Russian), so I have decided to call her after the Croatian pop star Severina, famous for the song “Gas, gas” and a sex tape.

20:10

Having returned to the album, the Babushka has come upon a section with pictures of her brother at Leningrad State.

The Mater clears the dishes, refusing help. I later realize that she has put the unwashed dishes into a crate to take home, where the dishwasher—me—shall do the dirty work. Apparently the Babushka cannot have greasy plates washed in her sink, no, they must be wiped with paper towels first, which the Mater considers to be wasteful. The Babushka has again demanded the bill. Now she turns to me and says, “Как вы поживаете?” Surely I merit a Как дела? Oh wait, she just addressed Товарищ Андропов by my name.

20:15

The Babushka sits us down to examine the album that she has selected. Somehow we end up in a section about a gold prospecting expedition to Siberia that someone or other went on. Excellent Edwardian script in the letters.

20:17

Some of the envelopes sent from Siberia have been preserved, along with the stamps, which catch my interest.

20:18

I have sent Sydnie a text message exclaiming that once my grandmother is dead I shall be able to add imperial Russian stamps to my collection!

20:20

Album section on Siberia concluded, now section on Babushka’s father and the First World War.

20:21

Sydnie texts back, expresses her lack of philateliphilia. I respond that it is not many people who can possess something connecting them back to *l’ancien régime*.

20:30

As I watch my grandmother combing the inimitable Yuri Andropov so as to demonstrate some new cat brush that she has acquired, I am struck by the fact that cats truly are always shedding, as my grandmother comments that she is not able to remove so much at the moment given that she already brushed him in the morning. The sartorial implication of this fact has possessed my mind, as I try to consider whether those Siberian babushkas, in their fox-fur coats, would be shedding equivalently. Perhaps I do an injustice to the canonicity of the foxes, having arrived at the line of thought via feline observation.

20:34

Having returned to the album, the Babushka has come upon a section with pictures of her brother at Leningrad State. There are some pictures of him and another man. “They were very good friends,” she remarks. I suspect that this would be better translated as “lovers.”

20:34:30

Now we have a picture of Harold with a woman. “They were lovers,” says the Babushka.

“I guess the truth is that Harold could more accurately be described as bisexual,” the Mater hypothesizes.

“Of course they didn’t last,” continues the Babushka. “Ah, and here is his other friend . . .”

The picture with the woman, though, is from when he was in Boston, concurrently studying foreign affairs at Harvard and violin at the Boston Conservatory. I always wish I had been able to get to know him.

“And there he is at Balliol,” says the Babushka.

We look at some more pictures of Harold and my mother finally makes the usual comment: “You know, you are so like Harold in so many ways. I mean,” she corrects herself, “you are almost like him.”

I say nothing.

20:38

Sydnie has assented to the curiosity of Russian Imperial stamps, asks if we are going to get sick on acorns again this year.

23:38

It wasn’t the acorns!

23:39

Sure . . .

23:39

I’d been more worried by the borscht that year, honestly. She forced me to eat it too. I think she messed up. It was practically vinegar soup. (No response. Sydnie has a Real Family.)

20:40

Replacement-Severina does not wish to be petted. The inimitable Yuri Andropov has returned to his cat stand.

20:42

The time has come for me to perform.

“That was Harold’s violin,” the Babushka says as I take it out, as if I am unaware, as if I have not known this fact

since I was a small child when I played with this violin as if it were a toy—that is until my mother had it appraised, realized that this was foolish, and took it away from me. Still, my two-year-old experiences with Harold’s violin were what led three-year-old me to demand lessons. Of course I have to admit that I have my grandmother to thank for this.

“You know, I saved that violin for you. That horrible woman was going to take it away.” “That horrible woman” being a colleague of his from the university. Apparently there was some deserving young woman, a niece of somebody or other, who needed a good violin, and according to my mother, Harold wanted it to go to her. My grandmother would hear nothing of it and demanded that it be saved for me.

“I remember exactly,” the Babushka says as I rosin my bow. “Harold said, ‘I want that violin to go to my grand-nephew.’ Yes, I remember it like yesterday.” The Mater shakes her head when she hears this.

It always comes up, and whenever they fight over it I always think about that young deserving woman, and how I could never have otherwise hoped to possess an eighteenth-century Italian violin, and obviously I think about how I am probably undeserving. The Mater says that Harold used to complain that his violin was not of sufficient quality and that this held him back musically; she also actively tried to prevent me from inheriting it in the first place.

20:46

Some trouble tuning. The air is much dryer here than at home, which throws things off.

20:51

Was finally able to start. Played the Andante from the Second Sonata. Recently, the Babushka has started to react in the same manner whenever I commence my playing; she starts pretend-conducting entirely off beat as though she feels that this is an entirely appropriate and natural reaction to music. There are other people who also react in this manner; it is a sort of performative act in which the listener wishes to demonstrate to other people that he or

she is listening, and more importantly, *enjoying* the music. I thought that in my family we all knew that enjoyment does not look like this.

While I was playing, my nose started to itch horribly, which I found very distracting. I played a few of the notes off. I know that the Mater noticed; I know that the Babushka couldn't tell the difference.

20:56

The Babushka has interrupted Bach's Prelude from the Third Partita by screeching at Yuri, who has found some bread crumbs on the floor and is consuming them.

21:10

The floor is now exceedingly clean. The Babushka informs me that she enjoys my playing but that she wishes I would play some of my own compositions because "those are better." I guess I won't be finishing the Prelude from the Third Partita. I tried to play something of my own, but halfway through they started talking to each other. I should remember that this likely had nothing to do with the quality of the music.

Reminder: Next time pretend Bach is own composition.

21:12

The Babushka was again asking the Mater for the dinner bill. I am suddenly struck by the realization that my visions of Thanksgiving were formed in the 1950s and that in many respects, this familial bickering has fully conformed to the modern Americana stereotype, and having no one, I turn again to the clawed embraces of Yuri Andropov for consolation.

20:49

The air is very dry and now I have a bloody nose. I ran to the bathroom spewing blood everywhere. I couldn't hold all of it in my hands so I had to swallow a lot as it ran down my face. It tasted like Thanksgiving dinner, it tasted of cranberries and pepper, very faintly of squash. There are bloody handprints all over the inside of the bathroom

door now, because I wasted time trying to lock it from the inside. I forgot how the Babushka's late husband, Edward of Transylvania (yes, really), was feeble in his old age. He had been blackballed by the Communists and was stuck here, in her "care." He might have fallen in the shower, so they took the lock off the door; she still sent him to a home, though. But what it meant is that anyone could have seen me like that, licking Thanksgiving Dinner off my hands—anyone could have seen me, but I was more worried about someone blaming me for the stains on the walls. Of course this is when Sydnie decided to text me back, but I couldn't do anything about it because I didn't want to stain my trousers as well.

Later, Comrade Andropov paid more than usual attention to the tips of my fingers, and I realized that I had missed some places. Anyway, if you want to understand what happened, I would refer you to that Dara Ó Briain joke. He says that everyone is a Catholic, just some of us are better Catholics than others. He is wrong, of course. Slightly. Everyone is Catholic except for the Eastern Church, and those Orthodox are just *heathens*.

RCA O'Neal enjoys Baroque music, fencing, travel, swing dance, and Graham Greene. He has played violin since the age of four, and composes in the Baroque style.

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The Undefeated, 2016
Charcoal and acrylic on canvas, 68 x 96 in



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