

Antonia Baum

## Just Before Twelve

My fiancé should know I hate raw ham, I think, as I smooth the cloth napkin across my lap; we drink a toast, the glasses clink; today, once again, many people have lost their lives, “Cheers”, but who will shoot whom and when with a nuclear weapon I can’t really say, “To us!”, Europe lets refugees die outside its fortification walls, etc., etc. and all this happens on this earth, there and back to the middle, mapped and mounted, a thousand small explosions giving off no smell or heat, reported and not understood, and next year things will go on the same way, but, I think, as I am handed the ham by my fiancé, who is in the midst of his loved ones today and is celebrating New Year’s Eve with me and wants to announce our engagement, or actually my pregnancy, but, I think, none of that interests me, the mutilation of animals, vaginas and human rights doesn’t interest me, although of course world disaster should interest me given that I am spokeswoman for a human rights organization, but it doesn’t, even though generally I do also work at weekends, or at least I’m always contactable, and now New Year is coming up, but the only thing that really interests me, I think, as I clumsily tear off another piece of ham, is this man, my fiancé, whom I’m pregnant by and whom I should under no circumstances marry, and I know that, but I’m going to marry him and I’m also going to have the child, why, I ask myself, why on earth and what a shit situation, I think. I look to my left, there sits my fiancé. He looves raw ham. Some evenings he comes home late, stands in front of the fridge still in his coat and holding files under his arm and eats raw ham from the fridge, and perfectly oblivious of

himself and his fellow men he stuffs into his mouth the ham I make sure is there for him, saying: "I looove raw ham!" He can't help it and actually I envy him his obliviousness of himself and his fellow men. The man keeps a straight path and brooks no disturbance. Untroubled by doubt he has lodged his being in the ground and does not look for the blame in himself, whereas I want to apologize constantly, no matter where, all I want to do is say sorry, so I can't keep a straight path and I could never have subjected my fiancé to the truth, namely, that I hate raw ham, I haaate raw ham, but I've never told him, I've always declared the opposite, that I love raw ham, I truly love it. I looove it.

"Want some more ham? Olives?" asks my fiancé.

I shake my head and smile, he treats me like a child and this is down to the anti-depressants, and since I became pregnant things have got worse and are going to get even worse still. I am now thirty-five. "The ham is so delicious!"

Life's buffet is served, I think, still smiling and still shaking my head, I've laid it out for myself this way and now it has to be eaten. One has to eat what is put on the table, there are after all guests here and they're hungry. The mother helps herself. My fiancé's mother and father are about seventy, a lawyer and a housewife, and the housewife was saved when she at last became pregnant at the age of 30 and since then she has been allowed to call herself not just a housewife but also a mother. Opposite sits Christina, my fiancé's sister who works as an editor on a psychology magazine, and next to her sits her husband Christian, my fiancé's best friend; he too is a lawyer like my fiancé and his father before him, three lawyers, the same language, the same clothes, and the same faces. The lawyers are administrating the conversation at the table,

because they have naturally louder voices and these louder male voices have always wound me up ever since I started fighting with my father, who always used to tell me I should learn something sensible at last and drop the painting, and that's in fact what I did and now instead I represent others, the disenfranchised, I look after their rights on a daily basis, I make phone calls and I write e-mails defending the rights of the disenfranchised. My skin is made of glass, because you can look through it and take what you need, I think, and Christina talks to me past the lawyer conversation, saying that she thinks eight Euros an hour for a babysitter is totally okay, she prefers to pay a bit more, it makes her feel better about herself and her child, she says, and looks at Christian, who hasn't heard a word, he is citing the penal code, but my fiancé's mother, the monstrous mother-ship, as I can't help thinking every time I look at her, has heard Christina and nods approvingly in her direction, and especially in mine, because soon, she hopes, I shall enter the motherharbour, drop my anchor like a pot-bellied cargo ship and remain and care and conceive; conceive more and more new children inside me and give away ever more of my body substance until it's all gone, which is what the fiancé-mother present here at the table did, this mother has really given everything, that's the kind of mother one should be, my mother is dead, and that's why, according to my psychologist, at the beginning I threw myself so unconditionally into the arms of the mother present at the table, but I know better, I did it because of my fiancé, because when you're properly moored to the mother, your betrothed is not so likely to drift off so easily. The mother and I have kissed. We had our toenails painted in the wellness centre together and we looked out the carpet for me and my fiancé together, and we talked about children together. I looove children,

we told each other over and over again.

Christina stresses the importance of a good babysitter, the compatibility of children and career, how essential it is to receive support especially from one's husband, and generally the importance of domestic happiness, Christian nods at her with a smile and says "darling" or something like that, then he carries on with the lawyer conversation and the mother smiles contentedly. My fiancé and I have known each other for 18 months and I was the one who wanted to get married quickly, barely a week had passed and I was already playing with the idea of marriage, I think, as I empty my fiancé's glass of red wine, he has left the table to fetch some legal text. I fill up the glass, he comes back, the legal text in his hand, I sit up straight, he hasn't noticed anything and I tuck my hair behind my ears, to each of which is fastened a pearl earring.

The mother is also wearing pearl earrings, Christina too, and I have been presented with pearls too, twice in fact, since the first time I never actually put them on, not even in the presence of my fiancé's mother, and that was because I have always resisted family-imposed pearl-earmarking.

I just couldn't do it. If I give in to family-imposed pearl-earmarking, I thought, I might as well move straight into the family gulag, where the camp guard is the mother of pearls, whose role as a life supervisor was unmistakable right from our first meeting, as I found when I stood before her and she looked me up and down up with darting eyes as if I were the livestock destined for slaughter that produces the ham I stuff myself with incessantly against my will, then the pearl-guard looked me over once and she must then have come to the conclusion that my ear was just right for earmarking, and I was thankful, I was overjoyed, and thus finally in the grip of the family. But after the mother of pearls had noticed a few times

that the pearls were missing from my ears, she called my fiancé and asked where the pearl earrings had got to. He put it to me and I explained to him my unwillingness to wear them, and he was horrified and subsequently told a ridiculous lie about having had them stolen from me during a stay abroad, torn directly from my ear by the poor malnourished children I regularly visit. The mother-of-pearls beast may or may not have believed this, at least officially she had to show understanding for the terrible state of the world, as she's a church deacon; she gives herself a guilty conscience in order to have a clean one, which is what I do, except that I don't go to church, I work for a human rights organization. At the next opportunity the pearl-guard gave or rather prescribed me a new pair of pearl earrings and now at the New Year's Eve dinner they are on my ears, to please my fiancé and much to the satisfaction of my fiancé's pearl-mother, the Christian pearl-enforcer. My psychologist always writes "REMAIN MYSELF" in capital letters on her flip chart, one of the stupidest of all therapeutic catchphrases, I think every time she writes it up on the chart, as I sit opposite her nodding my head, because for me to remain myself, I must at some point have been myself, but I have no idea about this self, never had, I was always my father, my school marks, my scholarship, my studies, my Ph.D. thesis, my salary, my human rights organization, the suffering of mankind – and in the meantime I have become the fiancée of my fiancé, more than that I cannot say about myself at present, because I know nothing more, only that it has to stop, I can't go on, why, I don't know, but I love him.

The women have nothing to say to each other at the moment. The mother clears her throat, remarks that it is time for the main course and betakes herself into the kitchen. Christina follows her, so do I, there are three of us

standing in my kitchen or rather in my fiancé's kitchen, a brief technical discussion about the preparation of roast lamb and which delicatessen stocks the best gravy mix. All this talk about ingredients is really a bit too much, because the only conversation ingredients this mother ever had at her disposal in her day, and still has at her disposal now, are cooking ingredients and children and the church, and she throws them exclusively at women, she wouldn't sully men with them, but even today women put up with her ingredients crap and stir it and bake an inedible conversation cake, one that makes me feel sick, but which I eat again and again in a spirit of boredom, and by doing so I lend support to the dreadful, unbearable, inane, mindless, mind-numbing unculture of these kitchen conversations, standing in the kitchen, surrounded by women, who do right by the men of the world, those who discuss the world situation and legal texts, and wait for the food, but in truth they do wrong by them, to this day, just like the men, they do the women wrong, we live in a state where violent injustice rules and one of its nerve centres is the kitchen, where traditionally mind-numbing kitchen conversations are held, to this day, among women, of course, and from here the women make it possible for the men to exist, to exist in clean rooms, to exist without being disturbed, without time-wasting kitchen conversations, to exist so that they can hold global consultations that exclude half the public, the public is halved, the public separates itself from itself. The mother gives Christina instructions, the mother bustles around my appliances, Christina wants to help, but is no help because she is drunk "You're drunk," says the mother, I have no room, the mother says, "Just leave it, I'll do it", gently she pushes me aside and Christina asks me in a whisper to go with her on to the balcony to smoke a cigarette. Outside,

the air smells of sulphur, people are already setting fireworks off in the streets, which I don't understand; why do they set them off, why do they look forward to the new year, I wonder. It's cold, our breath is steaming. Christina giggles and solemnly lights two cigarettes for us. It'd be better if her husband didn't see her, she says. Mine neither, I say. We stand at the railing, Christina sighs: the job and the child and the husband, I am her ally, her cigarette and prison buddy, it makes me dizzy, she pours her glass into her mouth, I tear it away from her and, laughing, tip the rest into my mouth, she laughs shrilly, comes closer to me, her eyes crazed as she takes me by the arm, more tightly, what a shitty mess, she says, we laugh, we shriek, and her fingernails dig into my skin, be happy, you've got it good, she says, and don't do it, no children and no husband, mine is not even there at the weekend, in the end there's nothing left of you, and I say, I feel dizzy, as she pulls me towards her, pushing and squeezing and holding on to me, and from inside the mother announces that the food is ready and our eyes separate and hurriedly we go back inside.

The roast lamb stands steaming on the table, the men say: "Oh, that looks good," the mother says that's because of the special gravy. Everybody is seated again and in the meantime horns have started to grow out of their heads. The lamb is crying and speaks to me: life is meaningless and everything passes, alcohol and children are no solution but they are at least a distraction. Christina tries to kiss Christian, impetuously, the way people do at the beginning, when they're in love. Extinguished faces sit across from each other, and at regular intervals, because words fail them, they propose idiotic toasts and now I need something to drink too, I can't go on like this. I apologize and go into the kitchen.

I take a bottle of vodka out of the fridge, I hide it under my dress and flee

hurriedly down the corridor. I double lock the bathroom door and sit down on the edge of the bathtub, where my whole body starts to tremble and my eyes to water. On my side of our mirror cabinet are my sedatives. I turn on the tap, the water runs warmly and evenly down my fingers, out of my eyes tears drip constantly, we have a very nice modern bathroom, I think, and take my pills, four, no better, seven, which I wash down with some vodka. The colour of the towels matches the dark wood into which the wash hand basin is set. We have a very nice flat, we are very well fitted out, the colours have been chosen to match very harmoniously. I carry on drinking, my stomach is blocked, I keep on drinking and the water feels good as it runs warmly down my hands. I think I'll take a bath now. Head under water, it's quiet here and the vodka pads my brain, the warm bathtub is the womb we all want to go back to and which we should never have left, no one should ever have to leave the womb again, that will be the end of everything, I think, I take off my clothes and lie down in the bathtub. To find a man who wants to marry and to have a child is hard, everything else is tantamount to total social dispossession, which is why I want what my fiancé wants, I want him to stay with me, and so I do whatever he wants, for I don't want to be looked at pityingly at social events because I don't have a fiancé, I can't stand it any more. To a woman belong children and a husband, women in society buzz around society like bees, hardworking and dangerous, they fan out to get engaged and, humming nervously, they go on reconnaissance flights to check on the success of the other bees: are you engaged, do you have a husband, will you ever get one, do you want some sparkling wine, have you seen the unmarried man over there, do you have children, are you pregnant, will you ever be pregnant, so many stings on one's skin,

and I carry on drinking. My property is as follows: fiancé, pregnancy, profession, so I am in good shape, as long as I drink enough vodka, I'll see it that way too and painlessly forget the painting and my plan to travel around the world. Well, much is lost along the way, painting, my furniture and my will power, but if I'm really honest here under water, I have never had will power, I gave it up in human presence without a fight a long time ago, which is why the presence of people has always been deadly for me, I always knew people kill me, and also when I got engaged, I knew my fiancé would kill me because I love him.

If I'm surrounded by my fiancé, I cannot paint, if I'm surrounded by people, I stop wanting anything, I'll only do what others want, because that's when you're rewarded, that's the way you get taught and ribbons tied in your hair by admiration-craving, pearl-obsessed mother beasts eaten up by ambition who disseminate their deadly desire to please and keep on distributing bows, which in passing are appreciated by fathers who are oblivious to their fellow men and that makes the bow-wearers into something different, the other, namely the part that wants what the other wants and therefore only exists if the other exists, and so is extinguished, as my fiancé has extinguished me, a bow-wearer from birth, which is not his fault. I love my fiancé, all my thoughts pass through him, without him I die, that's the way it is and I hate him for it, that's the way it is. I put the vodka bottle to my mouth, it's already half empty, someone knocks on the door. "Everything all right?" I climb out of the bathtub, totter, dripping water as I flush the toilet, lose my balance and lie down on the floor. The knocks on the door get louder. I hear that my fiancé has brought reinforcements. The men discuss what to do, my fiancé's father suggests breaking open the door, Christina surmises I might have had

a circulatory collapse for which she is reprimanded by her mother but is backed up by her brother, my fiancé, who shouts at his mother that it is “entirely” possible, I am pregnant and the best thing now is to break down the door. I stagger into my clothes, sadly with the dress the wrong way round, whatever, the bath, the mother’s belly must be emptied and the runny makeup wiped from my face, by now the men are trying to shove the door open, Christina says the constant throwing up at the beginning is really awful, she wonders why women have put up with it for thousands of years, the mother hisses, then she is pleased, “darling” she addresses me through the door crying, and the pregnant darling has now actually managed to get dressed and has stashed the vodka bottle in the toilet. “I’m coming,” I slur as loudly as I can over the noise of the men kicking at the door. “Everything’s OK, I was just feeling sick, I am bloody well pregnant after all.” The doorknob blurs before my eyes as I lean on it, I turn the key in the lock and then fall forwards through the open door ending up lying at the feet of my fiancé’s loved ones. I am lifted up, inspected and congratulated. The mother weeps for joy, Christina says she now really does need a cigarette, just this once. My fiancé and his father carry me into the living room where they sit me down on a chair before the roast lamb. I feel sick, I can’t help it, I gag and throw up on the lamb, for which I apologize profusely, but I am making a great sacrifice here, I think, and apologize even more, sitting before the lamb topped with vomit which is still peppered with some undissolved pills. The mother claps her hands, tears of happiness still in her eyes, and says that she went through exactly the same thing. I start crying too, and sobbing “I don’t want to”. The mother says: “This can happen to anybody, I’ll just quickly rustle us up something else to eat.” My fiancé: “Please

control yourself, you know I love you.” The mother carries the ruined lamb roast into the kitchen, where she starts singing a song and sets about cooking. On the balcony Christian and Christina are quarrelling because Christina is smoking and Christian is having an affair. A mere 35 minutes later and the mother has found an adequate substitute for the lamb, for which she is universally lauded. Externally I’ve recovered, for which I am also praised by everyone. At twelve the sky is purple. We stand outside and drink to the new year, which I still don’t understand. My fiancé has to hold me because I’m so drunk I can’t stand on my own, and I tell him I love him, really looove him.