

(The Essay)

Hitler Saved My Life

BY JIM RISWOLD

Jim Riswold is a legend in the advertising world. He's the reason you know that Bo knows. He's the reason you are Tiger Woods. He's the guy who paired MJ with Mars. He's the guy who paired MJ with a rabbit. Jim Riswold is one of the best copywriters ever. And like any copywriter worth his salt, he comes up with creative solutions to sticky problems. But this one—this one is a doozy.



I HAVE LEUKEMIA. Apparently, from everything I've read and been told, this is a bad thing and people have a habit of dying from it.

But as my always-the-optimist mother has repeatedly told me, "Son, every cloud, even the most thunderous one, has a silver lining."

Mom, the silver lining to my leukemia cloud is Adolf Hitler.

Yes, *that* Adolf Hitler.

And on August 8, 2004, *that* Adolf Hitler saved my life.

Yes, I know that an odd-mustached man best known for the death of six million members of the Jewish faith—not to mention a whole bunch of Russians, British,

French, Dutch, Belgians, Greeks, Latvians, Norwegians, Americans, Canadians, Australians, Austrians, Czechs, Romanians, Hungarians, fellow Germans, and assorted others—is an unlikely savior and, as such, raises some pesky ethical questions.

Again, I rest easier thanks to more of my mother's cheery wisdom: "Son, beggars, especially beggars with leukemia, can't be choosers."

And as Mom knows, this beggar with leukemia does tend to exaggerate. Not to take anything away from Hitler, but Mr. Führer did not save my life on his own; he had plenty of help from the likes of Stalin, Himmler, Tojo, Heydrich, Franco, Göring, Mussolini, and some really adorable dollhouse furniture.

ON AUGUST 16, 2000, at 10:38 A.M. PST, I asked an oncologist, "I have *what*?" Dr. Spencer Shao of Northwest Cancer Specialists had just told me that I had chronic myelogenous leukemia and that yes, to answer my next question before I asked it, having chronic myelogenous leukemia was bad.

A medical textbook said chronic myelogenous leukemia was "insidious." *Insidious* is a bad word.

It said that according to statistics, without a bone-marrow transplant, the rest of my

life would last somewhere between two and four years. That is a bad rest of a life for a forty-two-year-old.

Tests involving large needles were done to see if either of my sisters' bone marrow matched mine. Neither did, and, therefore, I had less than a 30 percent chance of surviving the operation meant to save my life. That is a bad percentage.

I started daily interferon injections. Interferon side effects include, but are not limited to, fever, chills, headache, fatigue, fatal and nonfatal ulcerative and hemorrhagic colitis, pancreatitis, thyroiditis, thrombocytopenia, rheumatoid arthritis, interstitial nephritis, systemic lupus erythematosus, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, bruising, bleeding, hypotension,

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arrhythmia, tachycardia, cardiomyopathy, myocardial infarction, hair loss, behavioral changes, mood swings, shortness of breath, memory loss, chest pains, swelling, and skin rash. Those are bad side effects.

Ryan O'Neal has chronic myelogenous leukemia. He is a bad actor.

Bad words, bad life expectancies, bad percentages, bad side effects, and bad actors notwithstanding, all was not bad.

My first and second all-was-not-bads were Dr. Brian Druker and Gleevec. Druker is a brilliant and kind oncologist who just so happened to be so kind as to live in the same city as me and to have developed a new treatment for chronic myelogenous leukemia called Gleevec that had far more success in combating the disease than interferon, with far fewer side effects.

In short, I had picked the right time and place to have the wrong disease.

And now should come the time when I bore you to tears with yet another clichéd self-indulgent tale of self-pity masquerading as clichéd inspiration, recounting clichéd fear, clichéd hope, clichéd cynicism, clichéd optimism, clichéd anger, clichéd forbearance, clichéd despair, and clichéd enlightenment, but I won't. It will suffice to say, long leukemia story short, it's a fucking hassle not to die.

Fortunately, I have spent most of the last five years doing well on the not-dying thing. Clichéd hope was winning out over clichéd fear; clichéd optimism over

clichéd cynicism, although clichéd cynicism is more fun; clichéd forbearance over clichéd anger; clichéd enlightenment over clichéd despair.

Then I got pneumonia. It's not a good idea for people with leukemia to get pneumonia. Oops. In my case, pneumonia led to shortness of breath and fatigue and dizziness and sinus surgery and nerve damage and relentless coughing and a paralyzed lung and an unwelcome twenty-pound weight loss and doctors and more doctors and doctor's appointments and more doctor's appointments and poking and prodding and more poking and more prodding and a lot of time in very expensive medical machines and four months off from work.

Yes, a thousand times yes, a four-month

paid sabbatical from work is a great thing and, yes, Mom, more than qualifies as a silver lining; however, I would not recommend the pneumonia + leukemia method of securing one.

March 6, 2004: John Henry Williams, the son of baseball legend Ted Williams and devotee of cryonics, dies of leukemia.

IT BECAME MORE of a hassle not to die, and as a chronically lazy person, I gave serious thought to going out on a lazy note.

Lazy Man Gives Up Fight Against Leukemia.

Then Hitler showed up. Laziness and Hitler don't mix.

Hitler exploited a weakness I had for art, specifically Andy Warhol's art. I am such a fan that back in 1976, while poor and in college, I started irrationally buying Warhol prints, much to the chagrin of my rationally minded college roommates, Pat McGough and Scott Smolinsky, and at the expense of such college staples as beer, food, and girls.

The Warhol bug never subsided. Warhol was inspiration. Warhol was creativity. Warhol was social commentary. Warhol was difference. Warhol was insight. Warhol was cool. And when he died in 1987, Warhol became an unexpected windfall financial asset for yours truly, again to the chagrin of my former and still rationally minded college roommates.

I always wanted to be Warhol. Warhol was rich, but more important, Warhol was a rich and important artist and, to bastardize a phrase from a commercial, when Warhol painted, filmed, photographed, spoke, or burped, people listened.

So I decided to spend my four months away from work trying to become a rich and important artist, never mind that the world is cluttered with artists trying to be rich and important. (They are called ham-fisted, pretentious, or poor.) I figured I had nothing to lose; after all, I did have both leukemia and pneumonia and, consequently, had a pretty good chance of being dead before anyone could label me ham-fisted, pretentious, or poor.

April 10, 2004: Ben Pimlot, British historian, dies of leukemia. Leukemia is spelled leukaemia in England.

I did, however, have an art idea—about toys, irony, ridicule, satire, Hitler, and hubris. Yes, I understood that Hitler was a somewhat sensitive subject, especially for a first-time artist trying not to be ham-fisted, pretentious, or poor, let alone insensitive, but, hey, this was art!

Plus, Hitler sells. Do a Hitler search on Amazon.com and you will find 3,911 Hitler books, 169 Hitler videos, 39 Hitler home-and-garden products, 11 Hitlers under popular music, 3 Hitler tool-and-hardware items, 2 Hitler video games, 10 arts-and-hobbies Hitlers, 3 Hitler industrial supplies, 3 Hitler medical supplies, and 1 free Hitler music download.

▪ *Heydrich's Skateboard*, 50 x 40, edition of 15, \$1,850 (unframed). Page 146: *Hitler's Bunny*, 40 x 40, edition of 15, \$1,250.



▪ *Three Dictators in a Tub*, 40 x 40, edition of 15, \$1,250.



All told, that's 4,152 Hitlers for sale, and that's a lot of Hitlers for sale.

You can also buy Hitler toys. You can buy a Hitler giving a Nazi salute in a brown uniform, hat, and Nazi armband. You can buy a Hitler giving a casual Nazi salute in a blue greatcoat and Nazi armband, hat in hand. You can buy a Hitler giving a Nazi salute in a black uniform, hat, and Nazi armband. You can buy a Hitler giving a Nazi salute in jodhpurs and a Nazi armband. You can buy a Late War Hitler giving a Nazi salute in a gray greatcoat while "deep in thought."

Yes, Mom, I know there's more to life than Hitler toys. There's Stalin toys; there's Mussolini toys; there's Tojo toys; there's Franco toys; there's the Sturmabteilung's Ernst Röhm toys, Riechsmarschall Hermann Göring toys, Hitler Youth toys, Feldmarschall Gerd von Rundstedt toys, Feldmarschall Erwin Rommel toys, Feldmarschall Wilhelm Keitel toys, the Schutzstaffel's Heinrich Himmler toys, the Sicherheitsdienst's Reinhard Heydrich toys, and Hitler's Praetorian Guard toys.

What to get the kids for Christmas—the Nuremberg Rally play set or the Gulag play set? Decisions, decisions.

I bought them all, each and every dictator and dictator's crony. After all, my mother always said, "Son, you can never have enough dictators-and-their-cronies toys." Or at least I think she said that, but please remember that interferon can cause memory loss.

June 2004: My mom and I watch a movie called Ripley's Game. In it a family man becomes a hit man because he has nothing to lose. He has chronic myelogenous leu-

kemia. This disturbs even my ever-the-optimist mother. I assure her I will not become a hit man.

Hitler and Stalin needed a home. More specifically, they needed a dollhouse. I needed a dollhouse expert; after all, Hitler and Stalin can't be in any old dollhouse. And I knew the valedictorian of dollhouse experts: my eleven-year-old son, Jake.

Jake, much to the chagrin of my meat-and-potatoes father—the same father who would never let me have a G.I. Joe as a child because it was "a fucking doll"—loves dolls and all things dolls. His room is joyously overpopulated with them. He did his third-grade biography project on Ruth Handler, the inventor of the Barbie doll. He has an original David Levinthal photograph from his Barbie series. The girls in his class bring their dolls to Jake, seeking his advice on matters from hairstyles to wardrobe.

When Jake talks about dolls, people listen. Jake said the wooden dollhouse from

"There's nothing to worry about," my oncologist told me. "I'll have you healthy enough to be lynched at your opening."

Back to Basics Toys was the dollhouse for Hitler and Stalin. "Dad, the expensive dollhouse from Back to Basics Toys," Jake said, "is large, spacious, and open for easy access and play. Dad, it's a beautiful American-styled home and has all the stuff an imaginative child like me could want—three levels, a garage and upper balcony, a ground-level deck with fence, and a staircase leading to the top floor. Dad, it's large enough for two children—for instance, myself and a friend—to play comfortably. Dad, it has a

handle on top to carry it around. Dad, it's made of solid natural wood with smooth, round edges so I won't hurt myself."

The only drawback, Jake said, was that all accessories were sold separately. These accessories included a pet set, a sports car, a gym set, a dining room, a child's bedroom, a playground, patio furniture, a master bedroom, a bathroom, a grill set, a living room, a kitchen, a utility room, and a nursery room.

Jake said Dad needed all the sold-separately accessories.

And Dad listened.

July 13, 2004: Arthur "Killer" Kane, bassist for the New York Dolls, dies of leukemia. I love the New York Dolls.

I HAD MY HITLERS and my dollhouse and my idea and, no, that idea was not building the world's greatest collection of Hitler toys. I did my homework; I knew what I wanted to do with my Hitler art; I knew what my Hitler art would look like; I knew what kind of lighting my Hitler art should have; I knew what kind of camera I wanted to use for my Hitler art; I knew what depth of field I wanted for my Hitler art.

I knew a lot about my Hitler art. I knew everything except how to actually do it. I am not a photographer and, quite frankly, couldn't tell you the difference between an f-stop and an F-16. In fact, my only real talent with a camera, acquired over forty-some years of playing with one, has been the ability to always get my thumb or forefinger in the shot.

But I know photographers. I hired a good one named Ray Gordon to do the technical things that I couldn't do, such as lighting, focusing, and keeping thumbs and

forefingers out of the shot, as well making sure I wasn't committing any crimes, taste notwithstanding, against photography.

I showed up at Ray's studio with my box of dictators, my dollhouse, and my complete set of dollhouse accessories, and was met by a less-than-enthusiastic Ray.

"Jim, I like you and Hitler as much as the next guy, but I don't get your Hitler-in-a-dollhouse thing," said Ray.

Okay.

"I just don't see it."

Okay again.
 “It’s not going to work.”
 Okay again.
 “The dollhouse is too big.”
 Okay again.

“The dollhouse is way too big.”
 Seriously, Ray had a point. The dollhouse was huge and unwieldy. It gobbled up Hitler. It gobbled up Stalin. It gobbled up Mussolini. It gobbled up Tojo. It even gobbled up Göring and he was fat.

Ray and I spent the next few hours staring; staring at each other, staring at the dollhouse, staring at each other, staring at Hitler, staring at each other, staring at Stalin, staring at each other, staring at Mussolini, staring at each other, staring at Tojo, staring at each other, staring at Göring, staring at each other—staring and taking exactly zero photographs.

Then I put Mussolini on a tricycle. And I had *Mussolini’s Tricycle*.

Then I put Hitler on a bunk bed. And I had *Hitler’s Bunk Bed*.

Then I put Stalin on a stroller. And I had *Stalin’s Stroller*.

Stalin’s Stroller was followed by *Hitler’s Bunny*, *Tojo’s Kitty*, *Stalin’s Puppy*, *Hitler’s Vacuum*, *Göring’s Lunch*, *Mussolini’s Ironing Board*, *Mussolini’s Laundry*, *Tojo’s Toy Box*, *Stalin’s Balcony*, *Hitler’s Balcony*, *Mussolini’s Balcony*, *Franco’s Balcony*, *Hitler’s Mirror*, *Hitler’s House*, *Hitler’s Sofa*, *The Hitlermobile*, and, and, and, and, and, and.

We spent the whole afternoon and evening putting Hitler here, Mussolini there, Stalin on this, Tojo on that.

Then we spent three more afternoons and evenings refining our Hitlers and Mussolinis until we had more than enough Hitlers and Mussolinis.

July 15, 2004: It is the fourth anniversary of Marianne James’s death. Marianne James is my mom’s mom. She died of leukemia.

In addition to knowing a good photographer, I also know good studio artists, good retouchers, and good printers. In other words, I know people who could make me look like I knew what I was doing, and they did.

I also know Steven Josefsberg. Steven is the patron saint of fine photography in Portland, Oregon. He had a beautiful gallery that brought some of the biggest names in photography to Portland. He has impeccable taste. He told me he would hang my Hitler art in his gallery even if he was Jewish. (He is Jewish.) He told me I had “done good.”

Then he told me he was closing his gallery. Although I was new to the artist thing, I knew enough to know that a closed gallery wasn’t the best place to display an artist’s wares.

Steven kept telling me things. He told me, against his better Jewish judgment, that he would show my Hitlers, Mussolinis, and Stalins to various Portland art dealers who might either have the guts or the sufficient lack of taste required to display them.

Bob Kochs from the Augen Gallery was that Portland art dealer. A professional bundle of knowledge and poorly tied ties, Bob brings the bigger names of the art world—Warhol, Lichtenstein, Ruscha, et al.—and their bigger price tags to Portland. (Yes, a number of those bigger-priced items have ended up on the Riswold household walls. Please don’t tell Mrs. Riswold. Thank you.)

Steven showed Bob my Hitlers, my Stalins, my Mussolinis, my Tojos, my et als. Bob looked at my Hitlers, my Stalins, my Tojos, my et als. Bob laughed. Bob said some nice things. Then Bob looked at them again. Then Bob laughed again. Then Bob said some more nice things.

Then Bob said, “Somebody has got to show this.”

Then Bob looked at them again. Then Bob laughed again. Bob said some more nice things.

Then Bob said, “Somebody has got to show this, but...”

Then Bob looked at them again. Then Bob laughed again. Then Bob said some more nice things.

Then Bob said, “Fuck it. I’ll show it.”

That was the moment Hitler saved my life. The redemptive power of art! The redemptive power of selling art! But please don’t get me wrong; it’s still a fucking hassle not to die. But at least now it’s a worthwhile fucking hassle.

August 18, 2004: Casie Snow, former high school cheerleader, nineteen, dies of leukemia.

FOR BETTER ART OR WORSE, my mother and her relentless optimism are behind all this. (Thank you, Mom.) However, cheery optimism aside, my mother is easily confused. (Yes, Mom, you are.) She did not understand it; she especially did not understand it when I told her the show was going to be called *Göring’s Lunch*.

She, of course, asked the question, “Son, what does all this Hitler stuff mean?”

If I were an intellectual heavyweight of an art critic—ha ha ha ha—I might say something profound like, “The dictator enjoys his monuments, his pageantry, and his spectacle; that’s why he’s a dictator. (Healthy doses of hubris, charisma, paranoia, ruthlessness, vanity, and immorality also come in handy.) The oversized monument, choreographed pageantry, and grand spectacle inflate the importance of the dictator. On the other hand, a toy—defined as ‘an object, often a small representation of something familiar, as an animal, object, person, et cetera, for children to play with’—deflates its subject with its very smallness. Instead of providing—as monuments, pageantry, and spectacle do—grand expositions mythologizing the dictator, toys, by definition, make their subjects seem small, childish, and trifling.”

If I were an aggressive and confrontational artist, like a Lou Reed with a camera, I might say something like, “Do a Hitler Toy Figures search on Google and you



■ *Himmler’s Homework*, 40x40, edition of 15, \$1,250.

will find 91,800 Hitler toy figures. Do a Stalin Toy Figures search on Google and you will find 27,500 Stalin toy figures. Do a Mussolini Toy Figures search on Google and you will find 14,800 Mussolini toy figures. Do a Göring Toy Figures search on Google and you will find 4,420 Göring toy figures. Do a Heydrich Toy Figures search on Google and you will find 529 Heydrich toy figures. You figure it out.”

But since I want to be Warhol, I am forced to say something infuriatingly vague and glib like, “I could have called the show *Hubris Revisited*, but *Göring’s Lunch* is much catchier.”

Damn. A month before the opening of *Göring’s Lunch*, I got pneumonia again. I ended up in the hospital for a few days. “There’s nothing to w-o-r-r-y about,” said my famous and Jewish oncologist, Brian Druker. “I’ll have you healthy enough to be lynched at your opening.”

December 28, 2004: Social critic Susan Sontag dies of leukemia.

JANUARY 28, 2005: Hitler invades Portland.

9:00 A.M. I wake up determined to take it easy today. I will fail.

10:00 A.M. Doctor’s appointment. “Doc, I have my first art opening tonight and it’s about Hitler and people are coming from all over the country and I need something so I don’t pass out, collapse, hyperventilate, or die tonight.” He gives me steroids. This is the first of many mistakes I will make today.

10:30 A.M. The steroids kick in. I am now officially overcaffeinated. I decide to have more coffee. This is my second mistake of the day.

11:35 A.M. I drop off a case of vodka at the gallery. It will prove not to be enough. This is my third mistake of the day.

12:19 P.M. I have lost my ATM card. This is my fourth mistake of the day.

12:20 P.M. I have lost my briefcase. This is my fifth mistake of the day.

12:21 P.M. I have lost my ATM card, my briefcase, I have a show featuring Hitler opening in hours, and my phone is ringing off the hook—something’s gotta give!

12:22 P.M. That something is me. I snap. I yell. I scream. I throw things. The dog hides under the bed.

12:23 P.M. I continue snapping.

12:24 P.M. I continue snapping.

12:25 P.M. I continue snapping.

12:26 P.M. I continue snapping.

12:27 P.M. I continue snapping.

12:28 P.M. I continue snapping.

12:29 P.M. I stop snapping. The dog comes out from under the bed. My briefcase is found. My ATM card is canceled.

12:30 to 2:59 P.M. I have absolutely no memory of this part of the day.

3:00 P.M. I finally lie down.

3:45 P.M. I stop lying down. This is my sixth mistake of the day.

4:15 P.M. What to wear? What goes best with Hitler? I decide on a suit. It’s 4:15 P.M. and it’s the first mistake I do not make today.

6:12 P.M. I get to the show.

6:13 to 8:30 P.M. It is all a blur. God, there are a lot of people from my past and present here.

8:41 P.M. It is hot in here.

8:47 P.M. Joe Pytka utters the quote of the night: “I’m going to buy the whole show so I can burn it.”

8:52 P.M. My daughter, Hallie, tells me somebody just told her, “Your father has some serious issues.”

9:30 P.M. I get to the bar. Mistakes seven through thirty-eight will take place here.

2:45 A.M. I go to bed. I think of everybody who showed up. I get choked up. I cry like a baby.

Thank you, Hitler.

APRÈS HITLER, the good stuff: sold more than forty prints, proving Hitler still sells; got only one bad review, saying I was “a David Levinthal rip-off without any of the talent”; David Levinthal tells me he likes my work and its “perverse whimsy”; got a commission, albeit a pro bono one to do “something like your Hitler thing, but without Hitler,” to raise money for Jake and Hallie’s French school; I say, “I’ll do Napoleon”; I do Napoleon; the Portland Art Museum inquires about a Hitler and a Napoleon for its permanent collection; the Hallie Ford Museum wants *Göring’s Lunch* for May 2006; Joe Pytka does not burn my stuff; my mom hangs *Hitler’s House*, all fifty-five by forty inches of it, in her living room.

March 21, 2005: Bobby Short dies of leukemia.

Après Hitler, the bad stuff: I spend a week in the hospital with pneumonia and a collapsed lung; a little old lady keeps coming into my room at all hours and muttering at me; she does not have anything on under her untied hospital gown; my doctors determine I am allergic to Gleevec, the medicine that keeps me alive.

I need my next Hitler. ■