



Bucharesters

By Gabriela Dragnea Horvath

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Introduction



Gabriela Dragnea Horvath was born in Sibiu, Romania, in 1955 and grew up in Bucharest. She completed a BA at the Romanian Academy of Journalism and an MA in Germanic philology at the University of Bucharest, then she worked as an English teacher and a broadcaster for the Radio Bucharest World Service. In 1985 she met Ladislau Petru Horvath, a classical musician. Gabriela and Ladislau married in 1986 and had two sons: Petru, born in 1987, and Anton, born in 1989, both of whom eventually became musicians. In 1990, the family emigrated to Italy. Gabriela took a second MA in English literature with a concentration on religion and philosophy at the University of Florence and a PhD in philosophy at the Free University in Berlin.

Since 2013, she has been part of the New York University Florence faculty, where she teaches in the Global Liberal Studies Program and serves as general editor for the on-line publication *Voyages-Journal of Contemporary Humanism*. In 2019, she won the Teaching Excellence Award of the Global Liberal Studies Program of New York University. She has published books, essays, translations of poetry, and book reviews in Romania, Italy, USA, Canada, Britain, and Australia.

Her first short story was published in the school magazine when she was eleven years old. Throughout her distinguished academic career, Gabriela has continued to write and publish short stories. Some of these are collected here under the title *Bucharesters*: “Seascape,” “The Snow,” “The Scream,” “Scarred,” “The Daughter,” “Beach Party,” “The Smile,” “Wild Rose,” and “The Mother.” The brief comments below are designed

to suggest the flavor of each story and the recurring and uniting themes of the whole volume.

Seascape

The original version was published in Romanian in *Preludi epici*. Pavel, a husband bored in his marriage, is tempted by Cora, an unconventional woman who seems full of joy and life. Cora and her lover are staying at a nudist colony near the beach where they meet Pavel and his wife every day. Pavel finally sees the nudist colony as a pathetic attempt to declare independence and claim pleasure and Cora's carefree carnal personality as vulgar and voracious. The story examines with minute attention the different ways we judge the same characteristics in various moods and under various influences.

The Snow

Flori, a young single woman with a dull bureaucratic job, longs for love but is surrounded by lust and exploitation. At a party organized by powerful older men looking for sexual adventure in the absence of their wives, she feels her self-esteem under threat, but her loneliness makes it difficult for her to leave. The reader watches with increasing anxiety the predatory circling of the powerful men and Flori's vulnerability. This is one of the things that Gabriela does best: she shows how desire for human contact coupled with naivety can lead one into dangerous situations, but the outcome is never predictable and always ambiguous.

The Scream

Two very different young girls – Carmen and Ina – experience their first intimations of desire and womanhood. This initiation is seen almost anthropologically as a passing down of sexual knowledge from female elders – Ina's mother and her aunt. The attitudes towards masculinity and femininity that Ina receives from these older women are conflicting and confusing, and her own insecurities and longing for love make her more vulnerable than her confident and superior cousin Carmen.

Scarred

The original version was published in *Preludi epici* and later reissued in English under the title “The Mark.” It is written from the point of view of a middle-aged man who has a secret: the explanation he gives of how he got a scar on his chest is not the truth. Lying on the grass, trying to get a little peace from the demands of his wife and son, he remembers the true origin of the scar and his youthful infatuation with a woman far out of his league in terms of social class and sophistication. She was from the capital and the daughter of a professor, whereas he was a poor student from a provincial family. Even though, in the present, he too has become a Bucharester and prospered, nevertheless he still feels the pain and humiliation of her father’s contempt for him years ago.

The Daughter

The original version was published in *Preludi epici*. It was reissued in Italian, in 1993 and later still in English, translated by the author, with minor changes, in 2021. The narrator is a young woman in love with a divorced man. On a day out with her lover and his daughter, she comes to realize how very marginal she is to his life. The young woman’s narrative alternates with descriptions of photographs of the three of them taken during the outing. Towards the end, the ideas of narrative and photography come together in a startling image:

I wonder if we could ever invent an X-ray-like system that reveals feelings, enabling us to distinguish in someone the zones of love, of indifference, of doubt.

Beach Party

Silvia is divorced, the mother of a grown-up daughter, and works at a beach-resort hotel on the Black Sea. Having been disappointed in marriage and motherhood, she is anxious about aging, both fearful of and excited about launching into a new independent life. The narrative focuses on a beach party and Silvia’s encounter with Alex, an attractive and much younger man.

Here, as in “The Snow,” we see all the elements of a disastrous situation assemble: Silvia’s solitude and sensitivity; the casual hook-ups

of the hotel clients; the vicious gossip. The fact that Silvia is much older than Alex adds a poignant irony: she is nevertheless the younger of the two in terms of experience and expectations; her expectations – or at least her hopes – are romantic; his are perhaps cynical and self-serving. Nevertheless, this ending too is ambiguous, with the fleeting possibility of Silvia “feeling good in her skin,” a luxury Gabriela’s women characters rarely enjoy.

The Smile

Despite his reluctance to return to representative art, Andrei accepts a commission to sculpt the portrait of a musician who died young. This piece of literary art focuses upon a piece of visual art that commemorates a musician, and, in doing so, it offers an intricate and original meditation on the three arts and their different ways of capturing life and emotion. For example, showing photographs to Andrei, the musician’s mother compares her son’s changing face to music:

It may be difficult for you to capture an expression that is typically his. I do not think I had one son, but various ones: one for every age. He used to say that we are musical phenomena in continuous transformation. In music every moment is unique, even when the sounds repeat themselves.

Wild Rose

At the theatre with his wife and daughter, a middle-aged archeologist sees a woman he knew when he was young and remembers their strange love story. Below the narrator’s fascination with the enigmatic Mira is a subtle and lucid exploration of nature and culture, the past and the present. The excavations in which the narrator engages are both literal and metaphorical – attempts to unearth the natural spontaneity symbolized by the wild rose of the title.

The Mother

As a young man, Radu Petrescu moved from the provincial town in which he grew up to Bucharest and became a successful architect. His

mother Emilia would have preferred him to stay in his hometown, marry, and have children. “The Mother” begins a week after Emilia’s funeral and is told mainly in flashbacks: Radu’s memories of his parents, his youth, and his mother’s funeral. These memories are riddled with shame, resentment, hostility, and regret. The story vividly dramatizes the way parents fail their children and children their parents, the yearning love and the furious resentment felt on both sides. The narrative keeps returning to the drive, as the sun is setting and the shadows lengthening (both literally and metaphorically), to his old home, the life he left behind, the past to which he can never return.

Bucharesters as a whole

There is a kind of electric intensity of gaze in these stories that never flinches, despite the worlds of sadness and disappointment they portray, and regardless of whether they are written from a man’s or a woman’s viewpoint. The characters are of all ages, with a wide variety of professions, social classes, personalities, and aspirations, but – whether they are crude or sophisticated, knowing or naive, confident or self-effacing, charming or repulsive – they are all represented with sharp insight, compassion, and occasional flashes of humor.

With meticulous realism, *Bucharesters* describes the lives of ordinary people living in Ceaușescu’s Romania. The regime is never placed at center stage: we glimpse it in the background in the stultifying conformity, the entrenched power relations, and the tedium of everyday life under those restrictions. At center stage are fundamental human emotions: longing, loneliness, love, insecurity, anxiety, anger, fear, shame, bitterness, and the moments of tenderness, hope, or sudden revelation that fitfully illuminate these ordinary lives.

I will close with one such moment from “Wild Rose.”

We listened to him in silence, between the sky crammed with stars and the crickets chirping, and we felt transported back in time, towards those distant ancestors whose objects we touched during the day, and who had seen the same stars and heard the crickets as we did.

Dorothea Barrett
Florence, March 2022.

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Seascape

Gliding past his wife's pale shoulder, Pavel's gaze rested on Cora's smooth sunburnt skin, taking in every detail. Seated leg-crossed in front of them, she sifted the sand through her fingers telling them about the week she and her partner had spent in the Danube Delta before coming to Mamaia. Her restless eyes were roving around, captured by anything that moved: a foreigner inflating a rubber mattress with a foot pump, a little boy hopping after his father, a ball thrown up in the air. Whenever she turned her head to follow those moving targets, the breeze blew her curls over her mouth, and she promptly brushed them away with a nervous motion of her wrist. From behind his sunglasses Pavel was trying to fix Cora's facial features, to dominate, just for an instant, this woman's provoking mobility, but he had to give up, as he had to recognize that, even though he found her story alarmingly trite, he was fascinated by her presence and her colorful way of describing things. It wasn't flattering for him, but he found himself an excuse: on the beach towel stretched next to theirs, Gelu, Cora's hairy man, lay on his stomach, arms folded under his chin, and listened to her without blinking, a mesmerized bear with a sun hat on top of his head.

Every now and then his wife Madeleine asked a question and Pavel thought it was just to keep Cora talking rather than out of pure interest. He knew they would never go to a place where you had to imbibe your skin with a sort of tobacco brew to keep mosquitoes away and fish soup was made with Danube water.

Suddenly Cora turned silent, reclined her head on the shoulder, then shook her hair energetically and said with a mysterious air: "I've got a surprise for you!"

With great agility she started fumbling in her straw bag, took out four apples, jumped to her feet, and headed for the showers. A few minutes later she offered each of them a freshly washed apple, the sweet-sour greenish sort that ripen first in the summer. After sitting down again, Cora started talking about one of their ex-professors at the university, who was shamelessly courting her, so she said. Pavel was trying to catch his wife's reaction. She and Cora had studied together at the university. Madeleine looked curious, she had no idea about this story, so she wanted more details, and Cora started pouring them, taking voluptuous bites at

the apple flesh with her strong teeth. Madeleine was nibbling at her apple slowly, as if pondering Cora's story, without any expression or gesture that would betray more than bland amusement. Her attitude fit her thin, not yet tanned shoulders, her long graceful neck and her blonde hair, evoking to Pavel the enduring plants sprouting on the sandy shore.

Soon he ceased to follow Cora's words and Madeleine's reactions, absorbed by the picture he had in front of him: a woman with indefinite dark green eyes and wavy chestnut hair, tumbling wildly down her shoulders, was passionately speaking and laughing. When she laughed, wrinkles formed at the corner of her eyes and they fit perfectly with her entire being, just like the thin thread of perspiration in the cavity between her breasts. Behind her, the pale sand stretched widely, monotonous and indifferent to the palpitating green sea in the background. After she finished her apple, Cora jumped to her feet and said joyfully, clapping her hands: "Come on, up we go into the water! Don't be lazy!"

As soon as she said this, she turned on her heels and headed for the sea, flaunting her hips. Her man stood up and followed her like an arrow shot from a bow. Pavel smiled ironically at Gelu's reaction, but then he himself felt a strong impulse to go for a swim. He gave a last bite to the apple, jumped to his feet and asked Madeleine: "Aren't you coming for a swim?"

She did not even bother to answer. Just waved her pointing finger in denial and moved on to the rubber mattress. He dropped his sunglasses in her beach bag and started for the water with long decided strides.

For a while he lingered on the shore watching Cora and her man: she dived into the water, he plunged after her. When they started splashing each other, Pavel could not perceive anything, apart from her excited screams. Then silence. Cora had disappeared underwater and Gelu was looking around dumbfounded. He dived and returned to the surface holding Cora tight in his arms. With strained muscles he lifted her above his shoulders and dropped her which made the water whirl for several meters around them. A few seconds later, Cora leaped out, shaking her hair. She looked towards the beach, noticed Pavel hesitant on the shore and blew him a kiss. He waved in response and threw himself into the water. When he reached Cora and her man, his first impulse was to enter their game, diving and resurfacing in a spectacular manner as he used to do in high school. But he feared the ridicule and

swam away enjoying the light movements of his body in the warm welcoming sea. With the rhythm of his arms and legs, his thoughts started rotating around one theme: Cora. What a woman! He had met her only three days ago but couldn't help wondering how intensely she lived her life. Everything she did, no matter how small or ordinary, filled her with joy. Even laying the towel on the sand was a great pleasure: she shook it vigorously, let it pose itself on the sand and then smoothed it with her palm with undeserved tenderness. In the three mornings they had spent together she played handball with an improvised team on the beach, offered him and Madeleine ice-creams and apples, hired a paddle boat with Gelu to reach out beyond the buoys and swim where the water was fresher. Then with the same excitement she sat on the sand in front of them and recounted things she had seen or heard the previous evening in a shop, in a bar, on a terrace.

As she described them, all those little entertainments that filled the days at the seaside abounded in secret pleasures. Coming to the seaside, not to look for rest and comfort but just to taste the gifts of life. Cora and Gelu slept in a tent in a nudist camp, north of the beach. She was euphoric about it: "You feel free of any constriction. That is what Paradise must be like."

This appealed to Pavel. He would have preferred to go to the fisher village close to the Bulgarian frontier, where the intelligentsia gathered and practiced nudism in defiance of the political regime's prudishness, but that would be unthinkable for Madeleine's sense of decency. The more he thought about Cora, the more he admired her for everything, including the unattractive red sunburns on her shoulders he had seen the day before. He had joined her to buy Pepsi-Cola. With every step she used a new infantile stratagem to make him come out of his reserved manners, and he couldn't help but let go, as if he were no longer himself but had made his own that woman's senses, her energy, her way of being. He remembered the scene at the low hedge that separated the beach from the kiosks and smiled, turning on his back and swimming slowly, eyes wide open towards the sky. To take a shortcut, Cora had jumped over the hedge, then she had turned back towards him as he stayed undecided on the other side. She placed her hands on his shoulders and urged him: "You're really funny! What are you afraid of?"

Her words seemed to mean something else, and he tried to read that meaning in her slippery gaze that seemed to conceal a promise and

a threat. He kept on swimming for another while, getting farther away, still thinking about Cora, then decided to get out of the water. When he stepped on the dry sand, his expression was of wistful longing and concern.

The beach was full now. He lost time trying to find the others. He noticed Cora standing with her hair bound in a ponytail. She looked much younger, a round-shaped, cheeky teenager. Gelu was smearing a solar cream on her back, careful and tender, as if he were taking care of a child. Stretched on the rubber mattress, Madeleine was absently perusing a magazine. She did not seem to notice his presence. Neither did he announce himself but simply moved towards the showers.

The cold shower turned his thoughts cuttingly clear. For the first time he was thinking over his marriage with a certain detachment. He remembered meeting Madeleine five years back at a party. She studied art history, he studied design, they had subjects in common, so they hit it off right away. He had no idea what she thought about him, but he was struck by her delicate lineaments, her amber eyes, her blond hair, her contained gestures, symbols of gestures, so different from the other girls of her age. At the end of the party, he knew he desired intensely that reserved young woman, closed in the calm of her mystery. Their story ran smoothly, she accepted him as her boyfriend as if it had been the most natural thing in the world. After they graduated, he proposed, and she nodded lowering her lids with a thin smile. Now he was wondering whether she accepted out of love or because her father had died recently, and she and her mother wanted to fill that void with another masculine presence. Just the thought of it was so unbearable that he threw his head under the shower to wash away this suspicion.

After he moved in with Madeleine and her mother, he set in a peaceful routine: he went to the lamp factory early in the morning, where he acted as the assistant of the quality control inspector, came back in the late afternoon, and passed the evenings in his atelier, improvised in a box room, creating art objects he sold in the artists' shop. Then they dined, and on the weekends went to concerts, took walks, visited exhibitions. He had highly cultured conversations with Madeleine's mother, a retired French professor who never missed the opportunity to praise her deceased husband, a law professor, whose study was a sort of sanctuary, with his writing desk, his books, and his favorite objects dusted reverently every day. He was lazy enough to leave everything else, apart

from his work, for them to decide. In this arrangement there was barely any space for spontaneity or outbursts of passion.

When he returned, Madeleine was alone. He lay down next to her and she pulled herself away, to avoid contact with his cold, wet skin. Then he saw her stand up, with almost closed eyes, like a night walker, due to the strong sunlight, or just her usual drowsiness and heard her ask him with a vaguely interested air: "What is the sea like today?"

She waited for his answer with an apathetic expression, then she walked to the water, thin and straight, stepping carefully on the hot sand with her toes. He watched her step into the sea until the water reached her knees, she bathed hastily her shoulders and arms, and turned back to their place with a face heavy with fatigue and disgust. It dawned on him that her lack of stamina was due to being the child of an elderly couple, their tiredness of life had passed on to her.

After lunch, Madeleine and Pavel were seated at a table on the restaurant terrace of their hotel. He had ordered a beer, Madeleine a lemonade. He observed her attentively, while she turned around the straw in the tall glass and sipped in, without thirst, without a shadow of pleasure.

Pavel used to like relaxing moments like this, but now he was getting bored.

Madeleine turned towards him: "Maman said she would go with her friend Cornelia to the mountains for a week. Then she comes to spend a week with us."

Pavel suddenly felt he had been confiscated by Madeleine, her mother and her father's ghost. He now felt guilty for growing apart from his parents, who were never invited, maybe because they were looked down on: his mother was a nurse, his father a technician at the phone company.

He gazed questioningly at Madeleine's fine profile and her thin wrists he liked so much: he would have wished to discover in them a spark, a nervous flicker.

Then he heard himself asking for Madeleine's opinion on Cora.

She replied: "Well, I wouldn't say she's strikingly deep... the adventuresome type. When we were students she had an abortion, then who knows how she managed to marry one of the French faculty lecturers. One year later, after she got her residence in Bucharest, she left him. It looks like she gets quickly bored" She sipped another drop of

her lemonade, set her white lace hat better and went on: "... and for the rest she's too noisy and always needs the attention of the others, which I find in bad taste. Like sleeping in a tent and practicing nudism."

She had talked with a level voice, rancourless, aloof. He listened to her apparently untouched, but inside he was opposing her opinions with mounting irritation. "Venomous," he thought. "You know Cora outshines you in vitality."

He was wondering if he could change the subject. Ah, yeah, Gelu, Cora's man. He had scrutinized him on the beach: the classical profile and the grey hair gave him an air of distinction. But the hairy body, muscular strong arms and legs, the rough skin and the unkempt nails cancelled the first impression. He asked Madeleine with a voice he wanted to sound as indifferent as possible: "What do you think about Gelu?"

Madeleine answered with an indulgent smile: "Well, this bunch of simple instincts does a good job in a nudist camp."

He wanted to ask her if there was a way to avoid seeing them as she disliked them so much. A useless question: they had never planned to spend their time with Cora and her man, just met them casually a few days ago. Madeleine had told them they used only the beach in front of their hotel, and since then the two came to keep them company uninvited.

As if she had guessed his thoughts, Madeleine continued, "It's fine, I can cope with it. I've seen you find them entertaining, don't you?" launching an inquisitive gaze to him, so intense that he felt like an insect trapped in an amber drop.

Pavel refrained from making any comment and tried to shift his attention to a boisterous family at the next table gathered around ice creams and coffee. All the things he had admired in Madeleine suddenly appeared in a different light: her refusal of vulgarity, her mania for hygiene, her fixed habits ceased to appear as marks of a classy woman; they now seemed an agile way of concealing her incapacity to vibrate to the many rhythms of life. Could spending his life with her hamper his creative energies?

Pavel fastened his furrowed gaze on Madeleine who lay on the deck chair with closed eyes. He had a vision of her 20 years later: a distinguished stodgy lady, with graceful thin arms, a white lace hat, and a fine handkerchief spread over her décolleté to protect her skin already

reddish from sun exposure. With a mute rebellion, he thought that his future life would be a tedious treadmill without any stimulus.

An hour later, in the hotel room, he announced to her impatiently: "I'm going for a swim."

"Fine, I'll finish my book and maybe take a nap."

She answered with her usual calm voice. They never went to the beach in the afternoon. They rested, read or simply idled on deckchairs on the balcony of their room. Each day the same schedule and the same mood: calm, deep calm, immobility, monotony. With some variations: Madeleine's headaches or bad moods.

From Cora's chitchat he found out how entertaining their afternoons and evenings were. They went bowling, dancing, or played cards, they watched a film in the open-air cinema or made a fire in the camp and feasted with other nudists sharing food and drinks. All their dinners were improvised: fish soup in a beach pub, next day a "lords" menu in a restaurant, or just canned meat, popcorn and beer in front of their tent. All this culinary disorder caused Madeleine barely to withhold grimaces of disgust, used as she was to her mother's soufflés, soups, and vegetable pies.

The beach in front of their hotel was quite crowded at that hour. He started walking distractedly, trying to avoid the people standing in his way, and only stopped every now and then to fix the sea, as calm as a sleeping lake. Two steps away from the water, a little boy was digging a hole. He noticed it late, when he almost destroyed the child's work with the tip of his toes. Dirty with wet sand, the face red from effort, the boy reproached him: "Why don't you look where you step?"

Taken aback he pointed to the miserly turbid water in the hole: "Why are you digging for water here, when the sea is only two steps away?"

The boy pierced him with a mature look: "Yes, but that's not my water! I haven't discovered it!"

This brief encounter changed his mood. How interesting to desire that drop of yellowish water only because he had discovered it, when the sea, so inviting, offered itself to everybody? What will become of this child, who knew something he had never thought of: you own only what you discover. And suddenly he realized he had always taken the line of least resistance: he had kept a safe distance from Madeleine's moods and

silences, accepting her rules. She may hide a different woman inside, and he would need patience to find her.

He slid into the water and swam far from the shore with decided, almost furious arm strokes. When he returned to the hotel, he felt clarified: it wasn't fair to rebel against his wife, since he had never tried to know her better. He found Madeleine reading with half-drawn curtains. He greeted her, his mouth dry from emotion. She stood up from bed and asked if he wanted an instant coffee. Without answering he came closer and took her by the shoulders, with burning eyes, ready for a mad embrace. She pulled herself out of his arms with a reproachful look: "Ouch! It hurts!"

He felt so disappointed that he let his arms fall. He blurted out: "You have never really desired me, have you?"

"What do you mean?" she retorted in offence. "Is forcing me a way to trigger my desire?"

Her gaze stood up to his firmly. He felt guilty, tactless, a beast and took refuge on the balcony and started smoking. She joined him after a while, placing a tray with two cups with instant coffee mixed with sparkling water, and two tumblers with sour cherry liquor on the low table. She sat on her deck chair without a word and started drinking her coffee. He felt her distant, closed in her world, a world he couldn't access. But maybe this was life, after all. Each of us has a secret impenetrable world, and our worlds barely touch each other, but they never fuse. Why should it be different with the woman you have united with in marriage?

Pavel drank the liquor in one gulp and started drinking his coffee standing, his elbows leaning on the balcony balustrade. The quiet sea and the clear sky were joined by the horizon like the two sides of an open shell: a transparent blue-greenish side and a silvery one. A couple of sail boats were quivering in the afternoon sun. In a balcony nearby one could hear a woman's joyful voice.

This voice dissipating the immobility of the moment brought back to his mind Cora's laughter, like a water spray, in which the zest of life gurgled out, insatiable and fresh. He drew her features in his imagination, the fine wrinkles at the corner of her eyes, the full lips. And what if, like in a fantasy game, it would have been Cora waiting for him in the room instead of Madeleine...?

The next three mornings he waited anxiously to see them coming along the shore from the camp and welcomed them with increasing joy. Cora seemed to grasp what was going on in his mind and started responding in her own manner: she touched his arm as if by accident, she splashed about when he joined her and her man in the water, or she kissed Gelu, jumped into his arms, pulled his ears and played with him, only when she was sure Pavel was watching her. One day they arrived late, when he and Madeleine were ready to leave for lunch. Cora had rings under her eyes, dry lips and a husky voice. "We threw a crazy party last night on the beach with a group of funny guys."

Madeleine answered with a critical look, and Pavel knew exactly what she thought: Cora was having a bad day and should have stayed in her tent to recover. But he liked that soft lassitude that turned Cora vulnerable. It was like a surrender and a call. He was eagerly taking in her tousled hair. The breeze was playing with it, and he would have been able in a moment of loss of control to grasp that hair and cover those dry lips, that kept on chatting about the night party, with brutal kisses.

Each day, the hours when Cora was not with them made him more nostalgic and silent. Cora had proposed a few times to go out together in the evening and dance on one of the open terraces. Every time Madeleine had declined in a kind but cold manner: "Thanks for the idea, but we do not dance!"

It was true, she loathed public places where people turned ridiculous in the dance frenzy. In the evenings they took long walks on the promenade, stopped at a cafeteria for an ice cream or stayed in their flat and made love with the lights off, as she preferred. She abandoned herself to his embrace, and he was blindly sculpting her shapes with his hands, but his sensations were slipping through his fingers, as he could not seal them with his sight. Their soft embrace was fleeting, which gave him a sense of insecurity, until it all ended up with her sigh; he never knew if it was of pleasure or relief.

One evening Pavel accompanied her listlessly on the promenade. It was late, there were ever fewer people around. Wrapped in her large shawl Madeleine was walking in silence. When they passed by a discotheque where they could hear applause, Madeleine stopped, grabbed his arm and squeezed it. He thought she wanted to tell him something important and was caught by a violent emotion.

He looked at her inquiringly, and she started to speak with brilliant eyes: "Well, you know..."

But she was interrupted by a shrill voice: "Look where they're hiding in the evenings! You're caught! Surrender!"

They turned around and saw Cora, her face shiny with sweat, wagging her pointing finger in reproach and shaking her head which made her heavy earrings sway. Gelu kept his arm around her waist so tightly that he had rumpled her dress. Pavel and Madeleine greeted them without enthusiasm. Cora went on undaunted: "We have danced for two hours non-stop. Then we had to go out, it was deadly hot."

She was blowing the fringe wet with sweat from her forehead and was uselessly trying to push her liquored up man aside as he was trying to kiss her on the neck, while ready to tell others about an incident between a young woman from Prague and a tipsy local man.

This time Pavel paid no attention to Cora. Next to him, Madeleine wasn't listening either. Half turned towards the sea she was scrutinizing the darkness. A new thought dawned on Pavel: what if Madeleine was secretly longing for another man? Two steps away, Cora was cheerfully chattering. In the calm of the night, her laughter sounded vulgar. But that woman wished to communicate, she was alive. So alive, that her burning body was emitting its call around, and he apprehended that call.

In an unexpected moment of silence, they heard Madeleine's voice: "Tonight, the sea is sparkling blue!"

They went on the beach. In the moonlight, the refulgence of the moving waters was launching mysterious signals in brief flickers. The silence was oppressive, as if the air had been pervaded by an unknown presence that absorbed every sound and turned the dark strangely dense. At the beginning they commented on the phosphorescence. Cora exclaimed in a shrill voice, but then she too was silenced by the atmosphere. They were almost afraid, and stood there motionless and wordless, letting that indefinite powerful thing overwhelm them. The women took off their sandals and started walking in front of the men barefoot. The traces of their feet on the wet sand of the shore glimmered for an instant and vanished in the dark. Under the cover of that enormous immobility each of their lives appeared as a short, insignificant breath, and thus, Pavel found himself wondering if the intensity of living could

really matter. Or, on the contrary, did that brevity mean that one had to experience, enjoy and taste as much as one could?

Madeleine turned back towards him. He could see her well in the moonlight. She was livid and thin, like an apparition suspended between this world and another one. What if she was really able to capture the deepest rhythms close to that immobility of the air, while he was catching only life's surface bustle?

Cora's voice cut the silence like a crude knife: "What about leaving our clothes on the sand and jumping naked into the water?"

Her nostrils were quivering, and her eyes hid a provoking glitter. Nobody answered. Not even Gelu who stood there as if hypnotized. Shortly afterwards the two couples separated. That night, after taking a shower, Madeleine went to sleep exhausted. Pavel stood on the balcony watching the shimmering waters till late. His mind was imagining feverishly, teen-ager like, a night swim in the sea. The characters were Cora and himself.

In the morning he woke up very early after a heavy sleep troubled by chimeras. He found the room stifling. He had to go out in the sun, move, breathe. He asked Madeleine if she was ready to wake up for breakfast, but she answered without opening her eyes, that she would rather skip it and sleep the whole morning. He set out with stiff joints and a dry mouth. On his way to the restaurant, he decided he didn't want any breakfast either, so he headed for the beach.

There was nobody on the beach yet, only seagulls walking on the wet sand, white question marks between the sleepy yellow of the sand and the palpitating green of the sea. The breeze was stunningly fresh. He suddenly thought of the stories with sirens and smiled. In an intact seascape like that one any dreamlike creature could have a place. As if forged by his fantasy a character appeared unexpectedly on the shoreline. Judging by his dress, shorts and sweatshirt, rucksack and alpenstock, he seemed to have come to the wrong place, mistaking the sea for the mountains. A pointer dog was running by his side, now darting towards the water, now spinning in circles on the shore. The old man was walking with regular steps, indifferent to the dog's play. This made Pavel think that for that man there were no more doubts or quests, the sea could be equal to the mountains, nothing could deviate him from his path.

Intrigued by his allure, Pavel started following him. He wanted to see his face: he imagined it petrified in one expression and wondered

if it was irony, sadness or disgust. What would Madeleine say about this apparition? And Cora? He himself had no idea how to judge him, but it seemed to him that the old man had appeared to guide him towards the north, pointing to one place: the nudist camp. He followed in his steps until he saw the first tents on the beach. Then he lost him and stopped disconcerted. The first dozy nudists were getting out of their tents. Where could he find Cora and her man? Was it appropriate to visit them without notice? He smiled at his own scruples. Etiquette was not for people like them. He wandered between tents and cars while trying to remember details from Cora's stories. Yet nothing relevant came to his mind. He was ready to leave when he caught sight of Cora next to a blue tent. Standing, nude, she was combing her hair with lazy arm motions. He did not know what to do. His legs were carrying him towards her, while his eyes were trying to look at her decently, winning over his curiosity. In an instant Cora noticed him and came forward naturally, as if she had been expecting him. Her body was showered with water beads.

"I've had a swim," she said for a greeting. "I needed to refresh myself after last night's dance."

For an instant Pavel thought of Madeleine, pale with shadows beneath her eyes, lying in bed, waiting for her headache to pass.

"Where's your wife?" Cora asked, as if she had read his mind.

"At the hotel. She doesn't feel very well and doesn't want to go out before lunch."

"I'm on my own, you know? Gelu went fishing very early. He said that after the shimmering we watched last night, fish come stunned towards the shore, or something like that. Want a coffee?"

With easy gestures she lit the camping stove and put a coffee pot on the flame. They drank the coffee in plastic cups: she closed her eyes after each sip to enjoy the aroma. He lit a cigarette, so embarrassed that he couldn't utter a word, let alone an entire sentence. She peered at him, in silence, while scrawling spirals with her big toe on the sand. Then she suddenly stood up, took his cigarette from his mouth and asked, "Aren't you curious to see our den?"

He followed her into the tent. It was stifling inside. A blanket lay crumpled on a rubber mattress, and clothes were hanging from a cord across the space. Cora did not give him much time to look around. She slipped her hands under his T-shirt and started caressing him. Her touch unleashed his repressed desire, and, on an impulse, he bit her lips and

dug his fingers into her flesh as if ready to tear it. Theirs was not an encounter, but a strife in which each of them freed their wild drives. Her embrace soon turned domineering and he gave in to that pleasant force that made his body lose heaviness, as if he had unexpectedly fallen into the void, devoid of hearing, empty of thoughts.

Pavel did not realize how long he felt like this. When he started recovering, he felt as if he were rising from the sea bottom towards the surface. He could hear the voices of people outside the tent. He opened his eyes: Cora was lying next to him, with a triumphant smile on her swollen lips. She kissed him on the neck, then jumped to her feet and put out her arm: “Come on, let’s go for a swim!”

They walked into the sea hand in hand. The sun rays were crossing the limpid tranquil water, making the sand grains glint like crystal drops. When he realized that his body, completely naked, was revealed by that limpidity, he felt ashamed.

His shame grew into panic when they returned to the shore. The beach was full of nudists. He thought everybody was looking at him and all knew what had happened between him and Cora. The thought that Gelu could come back any moment upset him completely. He left her behind and rushed into the tent where he put on his shorts and his T-shirt with trembling hands.

Cora followed him into the tent and asked in a rough voice: “Running away? Deserter!” Then she started laughing: “Oh, yeah, the gentleman needs his outfit!”

She put a towel around her body and waited for him outside. When he got out of the tent, she grabbed his arm and whispered into his face with a low, visceral voice: “I want you to be mine! Leave her! You are made for another type of life. From the first instant I saw you, I knew you desire something else. No wonder with a half-mummified woman like her!”

He was listening to her completely stunned. She went on: “I’ll teach you how to live! You have to feel the blood burning in your veins!”

After these words, Cora dug her nails into his arm and brought her face close to his, fixing him with cold eyes. He lowered his lids and felt invaded by the smell of algae and salt water from her hair. This smell made him nauseous. He pushed her slowly aside and started trying nervously to find a cigarette in the shorts pocket. She was nailing him to

the spot with her gaze, expecting an answer. He muttered: “You are catching me off guard.”

“Yeah, and your dear wife may play the desperate part. Maybe it’s better to go slowly. Let’s just meet in secret for the moment. Tomorrow on the beach I’ll let you know when and where we can be together again.”

He tried a way to back off: “What about Gelu?”

She burst into laughter. “Come on, you know that if I want to, I can send him away today. He’s just a pastime!”

Her impertinent tone struck him like an icy wave. His nausea got stronger. Cora was not in the least upset: “So?”

He tried to find a way out: “Please, don’t spoil this magical moment! Give me time to recover and think... I need to go now and be on my own...”

It wasn’t true. He was simply afraid of her, of her man who could return any moment, of his own wild drives he felt rising inside, ready to blow up. Cora squeezed his hand with unexpected tenderness: “I’ve taken you too quickly, haven’t I? Don’t worry. You’ll learn to let yourself go.”

He stood up to go away. She took off the towel and hung it on a tent rope. Then she threatened him with a playful air: “You’ll be mine!”

Pavel shuddered. After a few steps he looked back. She waved a good-bye and turned her back on him, going into the tent with an insolent gait. He took this as an insult and started walking quickly along the shoreline. Whenever he came across a nudist, he jumped back to avoid contact. He put on his sunglasses to attenuate the sight of their exposed nudity. The paradise! A painful monkey colony. And that’s where Cora belonged. Where she was queen. The passion he thought was shining in her eyes, was just a desire to possess. Madeleine was right to despise her. This woman was not able to elevate herself, and then, in revenge, she troubled other people’s lives, sinking, crushing and drowning everything in her womb.

He had been an idiot to interpret her desire to overpower others as the source of life, the miraculous source that could have ideally helped his creative energies flourish. Pavel was desperately angry with himself, and everything around annoyed him: the dazzling sun, the sand that was already burning and the little waves stubbornly clinging to his heels.

Out of the nudists' area, he was now crossing a portion of untended beach that separated the nudist camp from the first row of hotels. He took off his flip flops and started walking on the whitish burning surface, glad to be alone on that expanse and crush under his feet rough stones, dry thistles, sharp sea-shell splinters.

He found Madeleine on the balcony, a book in her hand and a glass of lemon juice on the table. He felt so grateful to find this familiar image again, that his greeting sounded like a deep sigh. Madeleine lifted her eyes from the book and smiled at him, a slight sense of wonder shining in her calm amber eyes. He shunned her gaze and went back to the room to pour a juice for himself.

In the afternoon, the sea suddenly changed aspect and started swaying dangerously. From the height of their seventh floor flat, he watched the sea in silence, discovering that its undulating fullness contained a latent threat. During the night the tempest started: the wind howled, the waves crashed. Next day they were advised to stay in the hotel because of the turbulence. They took the lift downstairs to have their meals and got immediately after back into their room accompanied by the continuous roar of the sea. He passed long minutes at the window, looking horrified at the dark waters, sinister and wrathful. "No wonder it's called the Black Sea," he thought. His heart was trembling; he wondered what had happened to the people in the nudist camp. Cora would have been able to take refuge at their place, she knew they had a two-room flat. He was hanging around, furtively searching for Madeleine's eyes, tense and embarrassed, with a corrosive sense of guilt. She was the same, silent, graceful, a little absent. She walked around lightly as usual, prepared instant coffees, ordered a soup when she didn't feel like going to the restaurant for dinner, then lay down on the bed to go on reading, or came close to him, without any sign of passion, just like a soft breeze, to fix his hair.

Two days passed. Cora did not materialize. The third day, the sea was wavy, but no longer threatening, and some brave tourists were already sitting on the wet sand, even if the sun was covered by clouds and the breeze was strong. Pavel and Madeleine decided to take a walk on the shore. She kept the scarf around her head with a hand and held his arm tight with the other. They went northwards, until they came to the place where the nudist camp was supposed to be. All tents had disappeared, as if swallowed by the sea. Pavel breathed a sigh of relief.

He looked at the sea: it was still swaying and had a bilious color. During the tempest it had thrown out on the shore heaps of algae, shells, dead seahorses and fish. Repugnant and indecent waste coming out of the sea's womb.

As they were walking back to the hotel, Pavel set his eyes on his wife's fine profile. He felt so grateful that she was the same. With a shudder of disgust, he tried to shove away the image of the other woman, wishing the wind could wash off not only his face, but also the hurting memory of what he couldn't undo. With this strong desire inside, he was pacing the humble and patient sand, that covered with its mute body both human steps and the sea's mutinies as it knew its silence was cutting time's zigzag like a straight line.

The Snow

Outside the window, the bare trees with their damp branches moving in the wind looked like old women shaking rancorously in lament for their lost dreams, their lack of future. Flori was absorbed by that sight, and deep down was glad the wind had risen. For more than three weeks Bucharest had continued to macerate in dampness, and everything looked desolate and grey, which intensified the sense of her own stagnant, loveless life. She returned to her desk and said to her colleagues with a sort of liberating sigh, "Let's hope this wind brings us snow!"

The old comrade Ene launched her a questioning glance above his thick lenses, shrugged his shoulders, pulled out of his pocket his nasal stick and started dedicating himself to his nostrils. From behind the pile of papers stacked on her desk, Mari, placid and cumbersome, commented, "What do you want the snow for? Getting wet feet and slipping on ice when it freezes?"

Then she went on nibbling at her dry biscuits with an empty gaze that seemed to say "What are you hoping for? There's nothing to hope for in this world." Flori felt a sort of cold quiver deeply inside: she dreaded becoming like her one day, indifferent to everything, starting from her body.

Ana, standing by her desk with the latest ministry report in her hands, pointed out, "If our suppliers are creating problems for us now, imagine what happens with the snow..."

Flori kept quiet. How could she explain to these city people that, in the village where she was born, the snow brought the joy of the winter feasts, and its mating with the earth was a promise of fertility, of new life, of abundance?

She looked at her wristwatch. Another three hours in the office and then home. To do what? Tomorrow a free Saturday, another dead day. She had seen every film in town, there was a disco, but she would never go there by herself, no party in sight. New Year's Eve was in a month, and her mother wanted her home. She was ready to go, but they expected news from her. They wanted her settled with a Bucharester, a man with a good income, while she was still lonely, three years after her fiancé had left her.

As soon as she could, she went out to visit Tina, the typist. In Tina's office the wind was creeping through the old frames. But Tina did not care. She was wearing her shearling coat on her shoulders and kept herself warm with her Kent cigarettes. The other women around were right to envy her. She was very good looking, always well dressed and self-confident. Tina smiled at her, passed the cigarette to her left hand and pulled out a bag from her desk drawer:

"Here is the fashion journal. Make sure you bring it back on Monday, I have to take it to the seamstress!"

"Yes, of course," Flori nodded with a saddened air. Tina had her nice dresses made by the seamstress, but Flori was trying hard to sew some for herself with an old sewing machine.

Nothing escaped Tina's sharp eyes: "What's wrong? Why are you making this face?"

"I have nothing to be happy about!"

Pessimism irritated Tina: "My dear girl, you are really depressed. You have to do something about it. This is not possible. Set yourself free, come on! Stop thinking about that man, every woman has a failed engagement in her suitcase! Much better than a failed marriage and a child to raise on your own! And then, what the hell, this was two or three years back! I can't believe you haven't recovered. We're no longer in the 1800s."

Almost three years had passed, really, but she hadn't forgotten anything, neither their story, nor the broken engagement. Looking back, she had ceased living afterwards. It was as if she had no air to breathe; she suffered in silence and tried to understand. When she had decided to change her life, she fell into brief liaisons with men of no sentiment, who left her even more dejected. Tina stood up, straightened the back seams of her elegant stockings above her new ankle boots. Everything she wore came from the West, as did her fashion journals. Flori was admiring her gold rings. What is the secret to make yourself loved? To make love last?

Tina looked straight into Flori's eyes and asked, "Listen, do you really have nobody to think of, just to keep yourself busy?"

Flori replied in an unconvinced tone: "Well, I met someone at a party, he called me up once, and then nothing."

Enveloped in her French Opium perfume that all the women commented on, Tina came closer and rested her hands on Flori's shoulders. Her voice was compassionate: "Poor you! You're still a little

provincial girl. Waiting for Prince Charming! Men are different today. Why don't you call him up with an excuse?"

Flori shrugged her shoulders. She knew Tina felt pity for her, she knew she was provincial, but how could she not be? How could she become a brazen Bucharester? Tina went to the window, looked at herself in the glass, arranged a rebellious strand of hair, then turned around: "Make sure you don't get stuck with this man you met recently. Even if something comes up, you have to try various men before finding the one that fits you. Get at it, time flies!"

Tina was right about the time. But Flori did not believe she had to try men like clothes. And yet, one has to have a go at it. That's easy for Tina to say, she had found a handsome man who played in the national handball team. He left her free when he went away for matches and tournaments, and, when he returned, he showered her with gifts.

Back in her office, with the fashion journal under her arm, Flori had a disheartened air. She was not able to conquer the depression Tina caused her with her good life and her self-confidence. Every time they talked Tina came up with another thing that hurt her. Now she was provincial, unemancipated, a poor hopeless case. Yet just a quick glance at Mari gave her the power to fight, not to let herself be defeated.

Towards the end of the working day, the engineer Emil entered the office, a big smile under his black moustache. "How is it going, dear colleagues, are you working hard today?"

He tilted his head towards Ana, one of his main collaborators, tapped Mari's cheek and saluted Mr Ene with his palm at the temple. Ana put down the receiver: "Engineer, I was just calling you up to let you know the dates of the next meetings at the ministry of economics."

The engineer dismissed her raising his palm. He didn't feel at all like talking about work. His sharp gaze was fixed on Flori. As he smiled, his strong white teeth shone below his moustache. "He's handsome, even if he's not young anymore, and he is not married," Flori thought. Her eyes betrayed her admiration. The engineer caught that timid message and said to the others in a loud voice, "During the trade union meetings, I have been reproached that I do not take enough care of our employees and I ignore their problems. So I have decided to change attitude." Once

he finished the sentence, he bent towards Flori: "I am very curious to find out how the new generation of employees is doing!"

"Good, thank you," Flori replied embarrassed and stood up as in school when summoned by a teacher.

Emil continued his play: "Miss Flori, you have a nice pair of overalls. How the hell do you take it off? I can't see any button!"

Flori turned around and showed him the long zip following her spine from the neck to the waist. "I made it myself copying it from a fashion journal!" she explained blushing.

"Ts, ts, ts," the engineer replied with tight lips, "a pretty young girl like you wastes her time making herself clothes!" He invited her to the center of the room, made her spin, holding her hand as in a dance, and concluded: "I'm going to say at the trade union meetings that our young employees perform very well!"

Comrade Ene was swinging his head, an unctuous smile suddenly widening on his flat face. Mari was listening with her mouth open, a large mouth, deep like a cavern. Ana was not enjoying this at all; she cast a severe glance at the engineer.

Back at her desk, Flori did not dare lift her eyes. She was troubled. How come the engineer had started taking an interest in her? A very attractive man, nice and neat hands, lips one guesses soft under his moustache. She started to fantasize, pretending to put some papers in order in one of her drawers. Actually, it could be him, it didn't matter that he was much older than herself. He was so elegant, he had a nice car and travelled abroad. Why not? An image with the two of them getting out of that car to visit her parents flashed in her mind for a second.

As usual she left the office with Ana: they took the same bus and got off at the same stop. It was dark already. They found themselves on the pavement advancing against the cold wind. Ana pulled her woolen shawl over her shearling coat with an abrupt gesture, which meant life is harsh, but one needs to be ready to face it. Next to her, Flori, wrapped in a thick shawl over her sports jacket, was walking almost absent-mindedly, dragged by Ana's energy, while her gaze was roaming over the faces of the passersby. One of those men pushed by the wind in front of them rushing home could be her great love. How could she recognize him?

A car drew up at the curb. The engineer Emil lowered the window: "The ladies are invited to get on."

Ana replied drily: "Thank you so much, comrade engineer, you are really very kind, but we have to do some shopping. Together."

Emil stared at Flori: "Miss Flori, are you sure you don't want a lift?"

Flori stopped undecided. Ana squeezed her arm and answered for her: "Please, don't embarrass her!"

Emil sneered at Ana, started whistling *la donna è mobile*, then pulled the window up and drove off.

Flori was upset. Why did she let an opportunity slip by? Wasn't she stupid? What would Tina have said? She felt angry with herself and above all with Ana: why did she interfere with her life? She spoke with barely hidden resentment: "Why did you reject this courtesy? Now we'll have to wait half an hour for the bus in this icy wind!"

Ana answered unmoved: "Listen, somebody has to warn you! Will you please stop encouraging this old Don Giovanni! You are new with us, but I know many girls who fell for him. A one-day adventure, a nice present, as he's a gentleman, and on to the next. That's not for you!"

They defended themselves from the wind in the entrance to a shop. Flori kept silent, then said with a grumpy air, "You are right, but sometimes I am so depressed, I feel I do not count for anybody in this world..."

Ana kept her point: "This is not a valid reason to do silly things. This gentleman is looking for a new toy. You are fragile and quite confused, so you could swallow the bait..."

Flori was silent. Ana went on: "As a matter of fact I've noticed you are becoming frivolous. I mentioned to you those specialization courses, today was the last day for the application, but you had fashion journals on your mind!"

Flori touched her big bag with a guilty air, breathed in and replied in a defiant tone: "Would that course have made me happy?"

"Definitely not, but at least it could have been an asset in the future. You have to have self-respect if you wish to be respected by others. Do not expect much from men; you will be really disappointed."

On the full bus they ceased talking. Flori looked at Ana's sharp profile. Ana had been harsh to her because she cared for her, this much she knew. She would have liked to be determined like Ana. Yet not so rigid and ambitious. But maybe Ana's inflexibility was due to her hard life. Divorced with a son, she often took her office work home and went

out only to take the boy to the skating rink or to her parents. And yet she never complained about anything; she had found her balance. Flori sighed: never would she be like Ana.

After they got off the bus, Ana asked, “What are you doing tomorrow?”

Flori thought for a second, then said, “I have two invitations, I’m not sure which to take.”

Ana smiled wisely: “If neither of the two is convincing, come to me. I’ll make creme caramel and we can watch TV.”

Flori nodded and waved her hand covered in the thick woolen glove. She had no invitation but hoped to do something more interesting than watching TV with Ana. She turned around the corner and went straight to the cafeteria to buy herself cakes. She just felt she needed to treat herself nicely. With the bag on her shoulder and the cake packet held with both hands, she started towards her flat, sniffing out the smell of the coming snow as she used to at home: the wind gusts blowing into her face gave her an unexpected sense of hope.

Her small flat was on the top floor, next to Clara’s. She found a ticket stuck on her door with tape: “Dear Flori, I am at my sister’s. I haven’t committed suicide yet. Clara.”

“Isn’t she nuts?” Flori thought, tearing the note as she entered her flat. It was cold inside, the heating never reached up there properly. She took off her shawl and heavy boots and entered the kitchen, trembling from cold, with her jacket still on, to put some milk on the gas cooker. Then she turned on the radio; it kept her company.

Flori was trying to build up courage. Tina was right. She should dive right in, what could this endless waiting bring her? The young man she had met a month before at a party came suddenly to her mind. She decided to call him up, see if he had forgotten her or had simply lost her phone number. This idea made her so impatient that she instantly picked up the receiver, then stood immobile for a second and breathed in deeply to calm down her emotion. The phone rang for a long time, and at the end an irritated male voice picked up, shouting in the receiver to cover the loud rock music in the background: “Hello! Who’s there?”

Flori lost her courage. After a brief pause, she almost shouted, “It’s me, Flori, good evening. We met at Eugen’s party, a month ago.”

The rock music stopped. The man’s voice replied without enthusiasm: “Ah, hi, how are things going?”

Flori felt ever more insecure: “Well, I just wanted...”

“Pardon?”

“I’ve been looking forward to hearing from you. What are you doing?”

The other answered annoyed: “I’m with... I have people here, get it?”

Flori kept quiet, her lips dry. Then, pulling out the words with difficulty: “If one day you’re free, I’d like to see you again.”

The man retorted: “As you can see, I’m busy for a while. I’ll call you! Bye!”

“Do you have my number?” she asked, but the other had already hung up noisily.

She hung up too. Her face crumpled; the eyes filled with tears. No, she couldn’t be modern, uninhibited, nothing! She ran to the kitchen. The milk had boiled up and overflowed the margins of the little pot, widening in a sticky spot. She turned off the fire and went weeping to the window. Every evening, she looked out at the windows in the block of flats opposite her own. Simple family scenes, all were moving around quietly, each of them seemed to have a purpose, a path. Only she, on the 8th floor, as in a nest on top of a solitary tree, had no idea how to shape her life. And then the past love, the old wound, re-opened hurting: she had come here, leaving everything behind – parents, siblings, friends – to follow him, and he had left her for an older woman who lived in Bucharest and had issued his residence documents.

Her father’s anger returned vividly to her mind: “Saucy wench, you leave like that without marrying, with the first comer!”

It was her mother who pushed her: “Go,” she said, “follow your fortune...”

She sat down once again to read the letters her ex-fiancé had sent her when he was doing military service: “My love, the evening passes slowly, and I imagine you’re here with me... “And yet those words were once true. Or not? That love was not her fantasy. She read all the letters again and the diary where she used to copy famous sayings on love. Then when she finally warmed a little under the thick eiderdown, she fell asleep exhausted.

Next morning, she woke up with a sense of being surrounded by a strange silence and light. She jumped from her bed and ran to the window: it was snowing, the snow was falling heavily, thick and dense,

swirled by sudden wind blasts. She could barely distinguish the block of flats in front of hers. She was so happy that the snow's white body had covered the deadly depressing gray.

She had barely finished drinking a glass of warm milk when the bell rang. Her neighbor Clara stepped in, wrapped in her normal tragic air, a lit cigarette in her right hand. She was in her early fifties, dressed in a pair of worn jeans and a colorless baggy jumper. She walked past Flori and headed for the kitchen. "How's life my deary? You're a little bit pale. Where did you spend the night?"

"At home... it must be my bladder..."

Clara started aping her: "My bladder! Oh, oh, my bladder! Just wait till you find the right man, and the hell with the bladder! What time did you hit the sack? I stayed on at my sister's till late, and the lights were off in your flat when I came home."

"I started reading in bed, and then I fell asleep. Have you seen outside?"

Clara got closer to the window, shrugging her shoulders and waving her arm: "Got it! Wet feet again, I haven't had my boots repaired yet!"

"What? You don't enjoy the snow? Why don't you go and play with your nephews? Make them a snowman."

Clara gave a laugh with her wide mouth, a stupid empty laugh, and sank her hands in her jeans pockets. "Yes, of course! Just go around with those two devils and come back home deadly tired but satisfied for having done another good turn for my family. Aunt Clara, a golden soul! Give me a break! Why don't you make me a coffee and offer something to drink instead?"

"Why don't you eat a cake first?" Flori motioned at the cakes on the table.

"Neah! You know I don't like sweets. And you? Are you trying to deceive yourself into thinking that life is sugary?"

It was early for the drink, but Flori was used to Clara's habits. She put the coffee pot on the fire, pulled out the cups, a tumbler and the bottle of walnut liquor. Clara vanished into the bedroom and came back holding the letter package in her hand: "So then? Still weeping for the dead love? Can't you, brainless creature, get it that finished stories are finished?"

Flori motioned to a chair, measuring the sugar distractedly: “Yes, I know, once they’re done, they’re done, but I cannot live without love... and I don’t have Ana’s strength to go on by myself...”

Clara lit another cigarette. She pulled in a mouthful of smoke, blew it away, shook the hair that was hanging disorderly on her forehead and said: “Ah, Ana, the great warrior!... Listen, I will never let myself be deceived by these strong lonely women! All of them try to make a career to replace the husband or lover they don’t have. Puah! As if it were not enough, they try to inculcate this crap in others too!”

Clara drank her liquor and filled the glass again. When Flori poured the coffee, her neighbor grabbed it with her nervous fingers covered in rings that left dark marks on her skin, then pointing to the bottle of liquor she burst out: “Where the hell did you get this? If Prince Charming barges into your flat, are you going to offer him this shoemaker’s glue?”

Flori took a small delicate sip of her coffee. Irritation was rising under the red of her cheeks: “When Prince Charming comes, I’ll find some treat for him. I know both you and Ana think I’m silly, but I’m sure that if I really fall in love, I’ll know how to deal with it.”

She shut up intimidated by her own fervor. Clara was listening to her seriously, concentrated, her face tired, with purple shadows under her eyes. Her gaze was so skeptical and bitter that Flori thought it could poison anything it rested on. Clara pouted her lips in disgust: “You see, that’s our weak point! I started like you, with these crazy ideas! I left my husband because one morning I woke up with the conviction I did not love him! My sister, much smarter, married the first one who didn’t suck, she promptly gave him two children and that was that!”

Flori lifted her gaze distrustfully: “And is she happy?”

Clara burst into a fit of laughter that risked choking her: “Really? When do you think someone like my sister, playing one match after another, has time to think of it? It’s us, the ones standing on the sidelines, who rack our brains about happiness. Shall we run after it, or is it going to come on its own, hopping in its golden shoes?”

Flori drank the last coffee drop and stood up to rinse her cup. Her neighbor was quiet, nervously squashing the cigarette butt in the saucer, with a sort of pent-up rage. She lost herself in her thoughts, then unexpectedly shook herself and started talking, widening her mouth in a

grimace: “Do you know what matters, my child? Taking a direction! That’s why I was talking to you about suicide...”

Flori interrupted her, squeezing her arm with a shiver: “I won’t listen to such things anymore! It’s terrible!”

“Don’t worry, dear! I lack the courage to do it. But why do you think people take their lives? It’s as simple as that: to take a direction! Either to another world, if it exists, or food to the worms, full stop. At least you take a decision to govern your life: you wanted to crush me, ok, I’ll crush you instead!”

Flori was always assailed by anxiety when she heard her talking like that. Clara stood up and looked out of the window: “It’s a battle, but not the way this Ana of yours understands it...it’s a serious battle with time. There comes a time when every day is an enemy to knock down.”

The other protested: “Please, Clara, stop frightening me! Is there nothing worth living for?”

Clara tightened her lips till they turned into a subtle line: “Mah! It depends what you expect from life. I started like you... with love and all the bullshit attached to it. Puah! What matters is having a soul close ... now that I’ve turned wise, if I wish to get something, I have to humble myself. Do you remember that man who came to Bucharest for work, spent a few days with me, then returned to his wife? I did my best to make that crap work. So squalid! To keep him I pretended he was not married, had no children, he was the most handsome male around, had a perfumed skin, when he sweated like a horse... and so on, and so on ... And yet, it was him who left me... I get it, I’m no longer desirable... that’s why I think suicide is more dignified than all this misery!”

Clara drank up her liquor in one gulp, her eyes shut. Flori stood behind her and put her hands on her shoulders. The other pulled herself together: “Oh, thanks, would you give me a massage?”

Flori obeyed. She was patiently working her bony shoulders and was glad to see her relaxing, so glad that she said with a little girl’s enthusiasm: “How beautiful the city covered by snow must be!”

Clara answered with a softer voice, enjoying the massage: “Really? This snow is a great lie! A fur coat for an ugly old hag!”

Flori pretended she did not hear: “Shall we have lunch together?”

“No, listen, I’m going out with a work colleague, and in the evening I have a bridge game.”

“Interesting people?”

“No, nothing of the kind. Married people.”

Flori ceased to rub her shoulders and touched her forehead:

“Clara, I want to make you up! Come on, let’s have some fun!”

The other lit another cigarette and answered in a husky voice, from a smoke cloud: “Why should I make up?”

Flori turned pathetic: “To feel pretty! I’ll spray some good perfume on you, I’ve bought one recently!”

Clara smirked. Flori would not give up. “Come on! I want to make you feel pretty!”

“Who am I supposed to make myself pretty for?”

“For yourself!”

Playing with the lighter on the table, Clara blurted: “If nobody bets one cent on me anymore, why should I?”

Flori’s face betrayed her delusion.

“Don’t worry, my dear Flori, I’ll find some decrepit guy to take care of... or maybe I should get a dog, to have some affection in my life... even if I’m not sure I would not forget to feed the creature or take it out...”

Her speech ended in a bitter smile. Running her index finger around the rim of the saucer, Clara continued: “Don’t lose hope because of me! You are young and have a lot of time to find someone. But remember, lost chances are lost.”

When Clara left, Flori felt panicky, tormented by questions: what was she going to do with her life? Would she get old and hopeless like Clara? She needed fresh air, she had to get out, breathe in the snow and shake off this desolation.

The wind had stopped, it was still snowing, but this time in rarefied thin flakes. After a while, it ceased to snow altogether. Flori was walking slowly on the pavements covered in snow and enjoyed its pure whiteness as if it had been a gift to herself. The city had ceased to convulse. It felt as if time had stopped, and everything plunged into a huge, linear expectation.

She was convinced that somewhere around a young man in search of love was breathing in the freshness like herself. There were no people in the street, only some intrepid man was shoveling the snow off the pavement in front of his house. Further away, in that unreal silence, the municipality’s machines were cleaning the tram tracks. On the boulevard there were more people. A man reeking of alcohol approached

her and tried to start a conversation. She turned away offended. Later she stayed for a long time in front of a shop window. Something had to happen. But nobody stopped next to her. Yes, she was expecting a man to love, but why was she fixated that the snow would bring him to her? Tina was right. One has to take action. She decided that if she saw an attractive man, she would find an excuse to talk to him. And so she did. In an appliance store she saw a good-looking young man and went straight to him to ask about the performance of a radio set. He stared at her doubtfully and pointed to the shop-assistant, who, certainly, knew more about this than himself. Flori blushed, ran out of the shop and took a side street. She felt miserable. The beats of her humiliated heart intensified with every step in the soft snow. All that white richness, which she had taken for a gift, appeared now as a lie. Clara was right. But no, she did not want to succumb to her neighbor's pessimism. She had to save herself. For the moment the only solution that came to her mind was calling Ana; she always knew how to give her a boost. The next instant she had already given up the idea and entered a cinema to watch an old adventure film.

When she returned home, it was already getting dark. As she fumbled for her keys in her bag, she heard her phone ring. It was Eva. She hadn't heard from her for months. Flori was upset with her. In the summer she had lent her a good sum of money, but afterwards Eva had simply vanished. Now she addressed her in an intimate tone, as if they had seen each other just the day before: "Where were you? I've been calling you for two hours. Make yourself pretty, I want to take you with me to a party!"

Flori's mood changed. She forgot about being angry with Eva. "She is fun after all," she thought, "and she's not so selfish: she thought of taking me to a party." She actually was grateful to her. Yes, of course, no need to abandon yourself to despair, occasions pop up sooner or later.

She looked at her watch. It was six o'clock already. She ran to the bathroom to wash her hair and tried to give it some shape with the dryer and a brush. She ironed her black trousers and put on a new red sweater over her black turtleneck. She brushed a green shadow on her eyelids and sprayed a good dose of perfume behind her ears and on her hair. Before leaving she took a last look at herself in the mirror. She looked really good, and her eyes were shining with excitement.

Eva met her at a tram stop. She had just come out of the hairstylist's, was heavily made up, all freckles and energy: "Wasn't it a good idea to call you? It's so long since I saw you last time, feels like a century ago!"

Flori could not help pointing out: "Yes, it's five months since I lent you that sum!"

"Oh, how stupid of me, I had completely forgotten about the money! You proved a true friend, thank you! You'll have it back soon. You helped me get out of serious trouble. I was pregnant, but everything went well, I found a good doctor, if you need him, no problem... I'll take you there."

The snow was crunching under their steps. Flori asked impatiently: "Where is this party? Who's coming?"

"A nice party, you'll see, all big shots! Directors, doctors, do you get it?"

Flori's expression changed: "Are they old?"

"They're full of money! And know how to enjoy themselves!"

Flori was hesitant. She had hoped for a different kind of party. Should she give it up and return to her cold flat or accept the adventure? "New people meant new opportunities" echoed in her mind, and she was not sure where that thought came from.

Eva stopped in front of a small villa with the front garden completely covered by snow. A cheerful man in his fifties opened the door and fixed his eyes on Flori: "Hey, look here what a pretty girl! Well done, Eva, you've kept your promise!"

Flori was impressed by his good manners: he helped both of them take off their coats and invited them in. They were the first to come. The host led them to the kitchen and asked them to help him make the sandwiches. It was a large kitchen, with furniture Flori had seen only in the foreign magazines Tina lent her. As Flori spread butter on the bread, she looked around in admiration. Then she asked Eva in a whisper: "Who is he?"

"Alecú? He's an important guy, the director of a big department in the ministry of tourism. If you need promotion, or something, he can help. He's got power and is a kind type."

Flori was excited. She had never been in a big shot's house. She was no longer sitting on the sidelines as Clara would say.

Their host came to the kitchen to supervise their work and passing by kissed Eva's wrist. The bell rang. Alecu went to open the door: "This must be Voinea, our surgeon."

A tall, robust man with the grey hair glued to his forehead came in. He brought a huge cake and a box full of champagne bottles. He was accompanied by two young girls he introduced as Aura, his assistant, and Felicia, the assistant's friend.

Then Flori heard the surgeon whispering to the host: "Man, we have too many girls, how can we deal with them all? Shall I call some friends?" Then he pulled out an address book out of his huge business bag.

Eva knew that house very well. She found things without fail. She opened some cabinets and drawers and produced an elegant tablecloth, plates and cutlery. In her zeal she broke a glass:

"What the hell have you done, Eva," said Alecu, "my wife is going to make quite a scene. This is our best crystal set!"

Flori flinched. Their host was married then. What if his wife suddenly turned up?

"Eva," she asked in a low voice, "what happens here, where is this guy's wife?"

Eva threw her red hair backwards and pushed her half bare breasts forward:

"Who cares where she is? She travels abroad you know, she has money and a passport, she's not like us... But now for a while we are the ladies of the house." That idea was exciting her in an almost cruel way.

Flori was stunned in admiration. Eva was right, maybe. Getting a little bit of power. Tasting what women luckier than themselves enjoyed!

They finished making the sandwiches and placed them on platters on the low tables in the living room. Flori had time now to observe the newcomers. Aura, the surgeon's assistant, was smoking, inspecting the paintings on the walls, the crystal vases, the silverware in the showcase. Her friend, Felicia, was combing her hair in the little bathroom on the right with the door open. They were at ease, so much so that Flori had a strange feeling of being out of place.

The surgeon had gone to a dark room on the left. "Where's the light? I can't read the numbers in my address book?"

Aura found the switch and turned it on with a precise gesture: “Who are you calling?”

“I’ll see, how many are free at this time on a Saturday?”

He tried to make various calls, but nobody answered. Finally, they heard him talk to someone: “You are my man. There’s something you can do for me. Take it seriously. Tonight, as soon as you can... No, no it’s a party... alone, yes, ... let her be, come on, I’ll call her tomorrow and tell her I needed you in hospital, there’s so much fresh stuff here... too much for me and my friend. The snow? You have wheel chains, what the hell...”

Aura and Felicia had made themselves comfortable on the sofa and were nibbling peanuts. The surgeon announced to them: “Valentin is coming, he always saves me! He deserves a bonus.”

“Who is Valentin?” asked Alecu.

The surgeon patted him on the shoulder: “A golden boy. He’s a technician. Checks our devices. Excellent party companion, and a very discrete guy...”

Eva emptied the largest shelf of the fridge and fixed the big cake inside. The champagne bottles were still in the box. The surgeon tried to stick some bottles in the fridge, but there was no place left. Flori came in after some napkins. She was two steps away from him.

“These bottles, shoot, ... What can we do?”

He looked into Flori’s eyes. She answered in a quiet voice: “There’s so much cold snow outside!”

“Ah, you’re the clever type! I’ll take you as my secretary. A busy surgeon like me, needs a smart secretary like you. Let’s go, open the door for me!”

Flori was excited. The director had told her she was pretty, this one wanted to take her as his secretary. She imagined becoming the secretary of a surgeon could be much more thrilling than spending her time in that boring office.

The entrance hall lights were casting an eerie glow on the whiteness in front of them. They pulled the bottles out of the box one by one and buried them into the soft snow. In the effort Flori touched the man’s heavy body.

“You’re bright! You’re exceptional!” He bent and kissed her cheek.

“What are you doing?” he said surprised. “Are you backing off?”

He clutched her and pulled her towards him and gave her a long, forceful kiss.

The man had a good perfume, but that greasy, sweaty face repulsed her. She endured that kiss, thinking that nothing serious had actually happened, just a little bit of loathing. She even wondered how she could stay indifferent, as if her body did not belong to her. The doctor took a little snow and, jokingly tried to slip it behind her neck. She ran back into the house screaming, surprised that this big man was playing with her like the boys in her village.

Finally, Valentin arrived. He looked youngish, dressed in jeans and a dark blue turtleneck. His narrow forehead was made higher by his receding hairline and the remaining hair fell over his ears and along his neck. He had brought audio cassettes, and the girls were soon around him, asking for western disco music.

Eva started to dance on her own in the middle of the living room, her shapely bottom accentuated by the brown leather trousers of obvious foreign make. Flori was watching her: Eva was certainly a modern girl and an accomplished Bucharester, elegant and uninhibited. She was not ashamed of her plump body, or her freckles. On the contrary she seemed to be proud of them.

The director Alecu caught Flori by the hand and whispered into her ear: "Come, pretty girl, let's dance!"

Flori felt suddenly intimidated and wanted to pull her hand back, but he firmly told her: "There are no preferences here! We have fun together, is that clear?"

The man dragged her to the middle of the room and forced her to dance a tango to pop music. She felt ridiculous, but his hands had a strong grip on her. When Valentin had to change the cassette, she and the director stopped in front of two photos framed above a chest of drawers.

"Who are they?"

"My wife and my son!"

"And where are they now?"

"My wife is abroad, and my son and his friends are in the mountains in the villa our ministry owns in Sinaia."

The son was very handsome. Flori sighed, voicing a secret thought: "Your son looks good."

"I know it, but I will not introduce him to you, I'm not stupid!" Saying this, he moved away to pour himself some wine.

The surgeon Voinea was dancing with Eva now and was touching her breasts.

“A pig!” Flori thought, but Eva was having a lot of fun. So were the other two who were dancing around Valentin clapping their hands to the rhythm. The surgeon stopped dancing and gave a long kiss to Eva, accompanied by the others’ excited applause. She abandoned herself softly into his arms. Valentin came out with: “Have you seen how a high-class specialist works! Successful surgery.”

The surgeon turned towards him slowly and bowed his massive body to his assistant: “Write him down for a bonus. I’ll keep my word. And I can give a bonus to myself too, I have invented a method to anesthetize the patient without drugs.”

Eva caressed his fat cheek with her red nails: “Silly boy, your method is not narcosis, but arousal!”

The people around met her reply with a big laugh. Flori sat down on the sofa next to Felicia. They started to get acquainted. The other was only 18 years old. The heavy makeup was covering her fresh face like a mask.

“I finish high school in June, and I’ll look around for a rich foreigner to marry.”

She certainly had clear ideas. Flori was disturbed. She asked: “Have you known these people for long?”

“No, I’m here for the first time. But we had other parties with the doctor. He’s a generous guy!”

Flori had cold shivers along the spine. What was she doing there? What kind of entertainment were those preparing for? True, she was confused and unsettled, but she decided she did not like these things at all.

Alecu pushed Flori and the other girl aside and sat down between them. Now with his arms around their shoulders he was trying to steal a kiss from each of them exclaiming: “Mm! What marvelous freshness!”

Valentin was busy changing the music, Eva was sitting on the surgeon’s knee, fanning her heated face with both palms. The 18-year-old said in an innocent voice: “I’d like to have something sweet!”

The director put his hand on her thigh and said teasingly, “There’s one put aside for you, very sweet indeed!”

The surgeon burst into a crazy laughter, that made his belly shake. When he calmed down, he said with mock seriousness: “The cake, of course, the cake!”

Alecu stood up pulling Flori from the sofa to her feet. “Let’s go, dear, help me bring the cake!”

The cake was pompously set in the middle of the tall table in the corner of the room, where the champagne glasses had been arranged. Together with Eva the surgeon brought in the five champagne bottles, laced with white traces of snow.

When the first two bottles were opened, Aura and Felicia accompanied the ritual with excited squeals. With a glass in hand, Flori took refuge at the window. She felt alien to that party, so she preferred to look outside where the snow glittered quietly in the feeble light of a streetlamp. Valentin came near: “So, you’re the romantic one tonight!”

She said to him distraught: “I would love to take a walk outside in the snow!”

He turned towards the others, proposing in a loud voice: “Hey, there, maybe the young ladies would like to take a walk out in the snow!”

“Not really,” the surgeon disapproved, his mouth full of cake... “here we need to keep up warm, otherwise...”

The director came towards Valentin and Flori with two portions of cake. “Come on, kids, calories! We need them!”

Valentin smiled at Flori, an innocent smile, almost fatherly. And she turned more timid, trying to chew delicately on her cake. This man seemed a little different from the others, but he was ugly, with rough skin and small eyes of a washed-out blue that reminded her of a rodent. Aura did not give them time for a conversation, she came straight to Valentin, took him by the hand, pulled him in the direction of the cassette player and put her arms around his neck: “Come, play some slow music for us!” She called out: “There’s too much light here. Put out the chandelier!”

Flori suddenly felt alarm. She left the saucer on the windowsill then disappeared into the entrance hall and started looking for her winter jacket and her large woolen scarf. Alecu was busy putting out the lights, and, when he wanted to switch off the one in the entrance hall, he surprised Flori pulling her things from the peg.

“What are doing? Are you crazy? Where are you headed to?”

He snatched the clothes from her hand. Flori was scared and instinctively put her hand in front of her mouth. The director looked a little tipsy.

“What do you think you are doing? Are you playing the game or not?”

“No, no, no!” she replied in a low voice barely coming through her clenched teeth.

He looked at her with a melancholic air: “Do as you please, you won’t be missed.”

Then he opened his arms widely, like the weary wings of an old vulture: “Life has many possibilities.”

After this comment he opened the door, put her jacket over her shoulders and almost pushed her out. Flori heard the heavy front door close behind her. She looked back, the door opened again, and the man threw her the shawl that had remained in his hands. The shawl fell on the snow at her feet. She picked it up and covered herself shivering. It was really cold outside.

She was getting nauseous. She felt everything rising up to her throat: the sandwiches, the peanuts, the champagne, the cake. The cold was biting, the snow shone glassy in the dim street lightning. She headed to the tram stop. The street was slippery and seemed endless, like the darkness covering her. She had only one tenacious desire: get back home, shut herself inside, snuggle under the eiderdown, keep her eyes tightly shut and wait for another day.

No tram in sight, no taxi in the street, only an old drunkard was stamping his feet from the cold in the tram stop. She decided to go on, following the tram line that took her to the boulevard. As she walked on, tormented by anger, nausea and an annoying headache, heating herself with the vapor of her own breath trapped in the shawl, she heard a car approaching. If only it were a taxi! The car stopped. It wasn’t a taxi. She was picking up the pace, then heard herself being called from the car: “Flori, come on, I’ll give you a drive, with this cold night, what the hell... at least there’s a car...”

It was Valentin.

The car radiator helped her loosen up a bit, but the headache was throbbing. She started to explain frantically: “Listen, I met Eva during the summer in the swimming pool, we went out together with common

friends a couple of times, she invited me tonight, I don't know what she thinks I am, but I don't lend myself to such things..."

Then remembering a conversation with Ana she said, "I don't want to lose my self-esteem!"

The man pulled out a cigarette from his pocket and offered her the packet, but she refused with a wave of her hand. "I understand, but don't get angry and don't blame these people, they are not bad, I know the ones in hospital, they need a vent every now and then. The life of a surgeon is hard. I wouldn't mess with the people's guts for all the gold in the world."

The car was advancing slowly, the street was slippery, the girl silent. The cigarette smoke was increasing her nausea. When she couldn't hold it anymore, she prayed Valentin to stop. They were in front of a restaurant. She went inside, ran to the bathroom and threw up. Then she came out, wobbling on her feet. Valentin was waiting for her seated at a table, a glass of vodka and lemon in front of him. He offered her the glass: "Take this, it will do you good!"

Flori drank a little, and suddenly felt her stomach warm up. After all the tension of the evening, she was moved by this man's disinterested gentleness. Fixing the glass she said, "You are a kind man!" Burning tears were welling in her eyes. With a sob she added: "I am very lonely!"

He took her hand: "No worries. And stop being so polite. I'm not so old!"

When the car reached her area, Valentin parked it in the piazza and walked with her to her block of flats. There was no light on the stairs and the lift did not work. He decided he would not leave her there alone. They could hear voices somewhere, up the stairs. They took the stairs too, groping in the dark. He turned his lighter on and grabbed her arm to help her. His warm breath close to her ear made her feel well. It even crossed her mind that she had taken away the only passable man at the party.

The electricity was off in her flat too. Valentin looked briefly around with his lighter on. "This is where you live, then!"

"Yes!" she replied, suddenly humiliated by the comparison with the elegant villa they came from.

"It's nice!" the man said, even if he could not see much. Flori got to the kitchen, feeling the walls and pulled a candle out of a drawer.

“Can I offer you something?” she asked with an intimidated air. The man came closer, kissed her on her hair and told her tenderly: “You are a little girl! A little girl!”

In the spectral candlelight Flori could see his baldness, his wrinkles, the small eyes. She felt both disgusted and sorry for these marks of his age. Did he ever have a great love? He looked sad and arid, after all. She asked him with a nervous air: “You are not married, are you?”

He smiled. “No, this is something I’m no longer interested in.” Then he changed subject: “Nobody will come to fix the lights at this hour!”

“You are right. I feel a little dizzy after that vodka on an empty stomach. I’d rather make a coffee.”

“I’ll take one too.”

They drank their coffee without much conversation. Then he stood up: “Listen, it’s late, if you don’t mind, I’d rather...”

Flori turned lucid in an instant. No, she wouldn’t let him go. He would have gone back to the party or somewhere else, leaving her alone here in that dark cold flat. For an instant, love appeared to her as a strange illusion, while she was invaded by a concrete, visceral desire to annihilate solitude. She leaped up from her chair, determined, and put her arms on his shoulders. Then with an unexpected lightness, she lied to him: “I like you so much!”

Suddenly aroused, he started whispering loving words into her ear, then lifted her in his arms and took her to the bed, barely visible through the open bedroom door. Flori was glad all this happened in the dark. Thus with a throbbing heart, she felt his avid hands searching for her under the heavy clothes, and could imagine him different. He could be any of the men she had dreamed about for an instant. And she was immensely grateful, that in that huge and alien city, wedged between the night and the freezing snow, he was re-awakening her body, with blind tenderness and a wheezing breath that seemed to articulate: life, warmth, life.

The Scream

The sudden heat wave had wrapped the garden in a tight veil of liquid air that muffled sounds and slowed down rhythms, to the point of disconnecting things from their purposes. Instead of eating the breadcrumbs prepared for them, the sparrows preferred to refresh themselves in the bird bath. The tomcat who usually chased them, was now lying a few steps away, fixing them passively. Somewhere nearby a harmonica was emitting sounds that refused to gather in a meaningful melody. In that torpor, Aunt Violet's voice sounded harsh: "So then? Your mothers remember me only when in need, don't they?"

Her gaze was full of ironic reproach. After having studied the effect of her words on her two nieces, she puffed on her cigarette and went on in a different tone: "But I take no offence! Actually, I say thank God they have problems this summer, otherwise who knows when I could have seen the girls."

Ina, seated in front of the aunt, did not dare raise her eyes. The aunt was right. Her mother never came to visit this sister-in-law and, when she mentioned her in front of her husband, it was mostly to criticize her. She had been here only once, six years ago, as her parents were busy moving into a new flat. This summer because of the flat restoration they couldn't go on holidays, so her mother had decided to send her here. At least the air is good, she had conceded, though she feared Aunt Violet's bad influence on her daughter.

Her cousin Carmen had no sense of guilt: ever since her parents divorced, she had got used to spend weeks with others. She was nervously swinging a leg. Her empty gaze was hiding her discontent: her mother was at the seaside with her new boyfriend and had abandoned her in this small provincial town with this annoying old aunt.

Aunt Violet had finished her cigarette and was now cleaning the silver cigarette holder. The girls had seen objects like this only in old films. Carmen asked: "Where did you get this cigarette holder from?"

"Well," the aunt replied with a sly smile, "this is a present from a lover! Today nobody uses fine objects like this." Then she raised her eyes. The ripe cherries were cropping up through the thick foliage. She said joyfully: "Look at my cherries. This year they are really fine. In a few days we'll pick them and do a good fruit preserve."

Ina liked the idea. Climbing the tree, filling her basket with the fruit, making herself earrings of twin cherries. Checking the preserve syrup the color of garnet, as her mother had taught her. Carmen's face distorted in a grimace. She had other expectations from these holidays. Making cherry jam, what a bore!

Carmen found everything here boring. The evening before she had warned her cousin: "If there's no fun, I'll leave."

And she really meant it. She had received money from her father and could travel alone now, as she was 14 and had an identity card. She could go to the seaside to look for her mother. Or go to her father and ask him to buy her a cassette player. Recently she felt disgruntled and restless. And she had a great need to receive presents.

"Before long you'll enter life," the aunt said.

Her vivid eyes, circled by black eye rings, were expertly scrutinizing them. There was something solemn in those words, which struck Ina. Lately she had begun to understand that she was bearing inside a great expectation as if for the moment she was walking in the entrance hall, waiting for life – the great ballroom – to open for her. She took a quick glance at her cousin: they did not see much of each other; she did not know her really. When Carmen was mentioned in her family, Ina's mother would add "that poor wretch." Seeing Carmen so self-confident, Ina could not understand why her mother felt compassion for her. On the contrary, Carmen looked very pretty with her slim legs and her long hair and more fortunate: though they were the same age, Carmen's breasts had already formed, while hers were only now giving signs of growing. Taking all her disadvantages into account, Ina bit her lip with a discouraged air.

Uncle Honoriu came out of the kitchen, his belly bulging between his suspenders and a good-natured smile over his grey goatee. He placed a little basket full of raspberries on the table. Carmen could barely withhold an ironic grimace. Her mother said sometimes: "I can't understand how my sister, who had great lovers, ended up with this knucklehead."

The uncle pointed to the garden and asked Ina, "Do you remember the time you spent with us when you were little?"

Ina nodded with a good girl smile and looked around. She had a nice memory of that garden, where she had played a lot when she came here. At that time the garden was for her a green castle full of secret

corridors formed by the raspberry bushes and the tall trees that looked like huge towers. She recognized in a corner the walnut tree where the uncle had hung a swing for her and glimpsed through the thick grass the path that led to a gate and from there to the riverbank. She stood up and walked a few steps away to get a better view of the hills on the other side of the river. When she had come here the first time, she had stood with her nose attached to the window, watching the clouds run over the top of the hills. Now she discovered that the wavy line of the hill tops was interrupted by a tall grey building that was not there in the past. Uncle Honoriu explained: "This is the new hospital your aunt dislikes so much. Don't you, Violeta?"

The aunt pouted her lips in disgust: "That's true. Every morning when I look towards the hills, this ugly thing reminds me that we are getting old and the only things in store for us are pills and poultices."

Uncle Honoriu laughed: "Yes, but you see I am glad that young doctors do not leave our town anymore. They work in the hospital and do a good job. Useless to grumble about it, I have always told you. I am happy to have a good hospital close by, precisely because we are getting old."

"Cut it," frowned the aunt, "don't stay there and talk about old age, go and make us a coffee!"

Honoriu left swaying his plump body.

Violet started unstitching a dress: "Life is worthwhile only if you live it fully. Can you see this dress? I am modifying it for a woman who worked for thirty years in the post office, she brought up three sons and is now bringing up her grandchildren. A life of hard labor and savings. She never had any entertainment, that's why she's aging badly. I feel sick looking at her, she's sour like a wine gone bad."

Carmen had the chills at the idea that her years could pass like that, only in hard work; she was looking forward to being eighteen, finishing school, finding a light job, living on her own and doing whatever crossed her mind. Her future had to be a juicy fruit and her eyes betrayed her impatience to take a bite of it. Ina thought of her mother, when, in the evening weary from work, she grumbled, "I never have fun like my sisters-in-law." Ina decided she would know how to live well, like her aunts, whom she secretly admired in spite of her mother's criticisms.

Aunt Violet lit up another cigarette. Her dark lips puckered voluptuously around the silver holder. She blew the smoke away and went on: "I was fortunate, I was beautiful. In the morning I worked as a seamstress in the atelier and posed for a fashion journal. In the evening I served in the restaurant of the rich. I encountered important people."

The previous evening the cousins had perused magazines in which their aunt appeared as a model. She was so beautiful! Ina found it heartbreaking that there was no miracle to preserve beauty. Carmen instead was wondering how, in spite of that fabulous past, her mother often mentioned, Aunt Violet had finished in this small town, working as a seamstress for her neighbors.

"I tell you I was a beauty. My body was so fresh and the skin so fine, that a scratch was enough to let blood spurt. So full of life was I."

The girls were hanging on her every word.

"Many men lost their minds for me! There was the owner of a factory who was ready to divorce for me, then an officer, poor man, he almost went insane! In order to conquer me he tried to make money gambling and he ruined himself. He then went to a foreign country, and I heard he died in an epidemic... Then the lawyer from this town, he died two years ago. When she sees me, his wife still changes direction as if I were a jinx. Do you know why? He fell in love with me, as soon as I came here, just married. He was walking with his future wife once, he turned his head to look at me, and he hit his face against a streetlamp. He bore a mark on his cheek from that all his life.

The girls were listening with wide open eyes, as if they were trying to see better in their imagination the things recounted by the aunt.

"All my life I have done whatever I wanted to. I have no regret. Well, we women have a lot of power. Even the most intelligent men get lost in front of a pair of beautiful legs."

She puffed at her cigarette with closed eyes and went on: "It's an impulse they can't control. It comes from their blood, not from the brain. You have to learn to use your power over them. Once you have struck them, they are ready to ruin themselves for a kiss," Aunt Violet added breaking into a shrill mocking laughter.

Ina was upset. Her mother too had started to talk to her about men, but her views were different: for her men took advantage of your virginity and, if they married you, they took advantage of your entire life. Both her mother and Aunt Violet saw men as adverse creatures. In her

still uncertain fantasies, Ina was making place more often to Him, the young man to whom she would abandon herself without hate or remorse, without any battle or the fear of error.

Carmen had an air of strange arrogance, as if she were surrounded by men apologizing humbly for having unnerved her. Yet inwardly Ina's cousin was anxious: she had started feeling men's strong magnetism, she watched them with curiosity, but she did not understand the mystery behind choices. Why did her mother marry her father, a man she was not happy with and she divorced in the end?

She asked the aunt: "How did you come to marry Uncle Honoriu?"

"The story is long. The war broke out, the Russians occupied us. No more rich people to marry. The military were different. Then a communist fell in love with me. Today he is an important figure. But I did not like him: he was unpolished."

Carmen knew that story. Any time that character was on TV, her mother would say, "My sister is really dumb! She could have been a grand lady today." Carmen was wondering why the aunt had rejected that fabulous chance. Above all, why she had no regret?

Aunt Violet went on: "Then I met Honoriu: good, mild, an orphan, his parents had died during the war. He was very handsome, but unaware of it. Don't look at him now. Aging he turned fat, he loves sweets. Back then he was slim. I understood quickly that he would give me all his soul. He was still a child. I taught him how to make love. It was the first time that a man belonged only to me... And then I longed for a calm life, I just wanted to cook and go to the cinema with my husband. He came here for his work at the railway. And we decided to stay. I like the hills around."

Carmen nodded, as if to say, "Mom is right, Auntie, you're rather slow."

Ina, who was eating raspberries from the basket, was baffled by the aunt's words. "Then," she thought, "if you also desired love, why did you take pleasure in making men suffer?" Her perplexity melted together with the fragrant raspberry she was putting in her mouth as Uncle Honoriu placed the coffee pot right in front of her.

Two days later, the coffee ritual had become a habit for the girls too. Uncle Honoriu was preparing it in the kitchen and took it out, playing the waiter: “The lady and her nieces are served.”

Aunt Violet poured half a cup for each girl. When she received it the first time, Ina blushed. Her mother would not have allowed her to drink coffee. The aunt guessed it all: “Don’t worry! I won’t tell your mother, and you don’t tell her either, otherwise she will get mad at me. Take a sip. It won’t harm you. You are no longer a little child, you have to start tasting the pleasures of life, do you agree Honoriu?”

The uncle nodded and started filling his pipe.

As they were drinking their coffee, Carmen examined the clumsy behavior of her cousin with amusement: she was ridiculous, licking her lips after every sip and putting the cup back on the table so awkwardly, as she if she had a broken wrist. “This one here knows only the taste of milk,” thought Carmen. She used to drink coffee with a classmate, when their mothers were not at home. It was not so much the pleasure of coffee, as the voluptuousness of smoking in the closet, with an open window. And then all the chatter about their classmates and the brief love stories born at the swimming pool.

In the next yard the naked suntanned torso of a young man appeared. The aunt noticed him and called: “Ehi, Victor, why don’t you come to meet my nieces from Bucharest?”

Then she explained quickly in a low voice: “My neighbors’ son. He has just been released from his military service. In these two years he’s become a little wild.”

A minute later the young man entered through the gate. He had put on a light blue shirt which contrasted with his suntanned skin. He was tall and strong, and Ina was paralyzed at the sight of that imposing figure with a smooth face and big black eyes. Aunt Violet introduced her nieces to him. He wanted to show these girls coming from the capital city that he had manners, so he bowed and kissed their hands. Carmen understood his intention on the spot, so she extended her hand in a complacent way, throwing her long hair behind her shoulders with the other hand in a secure gesture. Ina was hesitant, then she reached out a shaking hand and, when he was ready to kiss it, she withdrew her hand in fear. The touch

of his lips seemed unbearable to her. He was in his early twenties, and no young man had ever touched her hand with his lips before. Victor was at a loss, and, as he knew everybody was watching him, he passed his fingers through his hair, annoyed that it was still too short. Then he lifted his gaze towards the cherries popping up through the thick foliage.

Aunt Violet winked and asked Victor, "Tell me, Victor, how do you find my nieces? In a short time, they'll be ripe like these cherries!"

The aunt's thick laughter was interrupted by uncle Honoriu's reprimand: "Violeta, what do you mean? How can you say so?"

"What do I mean? I mean that our girls are blooming, and they know it. Ina, can you bring a bowl from the kitchen? We should taste the cherries."

Ina ran to the kitchen in one breath. She felt a strong new emotion. When she returned, she saw her cousin was helping Victor to bend the branches and it seemed that the two had already become friends. She was angry with Carmen and with herself because she was not as clever and pretty as her cousin. She wished she could run away on her own towards the back of the garden and from there to the river to let off those emotions, but, with burning cheeks, she handed the bowl to Victor. When they sat down to taste the cherries, Ina had already forgotten her rancor and was examining the young man's suntanned face: he had thick eyebrows, a straight nose and full lips. She noticed curiously how he put every fruit between his teeth and heard how that fruit suffered his bite with a little moan.

Carmen was scrutinizing him too: she liked his strong muscular legs. They seemed to have a secret life and resembled the legs of her mother's boyfriend; she often saw him at home going around in shorts. She perceived an irritating challenge in those legs she would have been ready to scratch with her nails.

Aunt Violet tasted a cherry and said, "Hey, Victor, yesterday we heard you play the harmonica."

Victor was ashamed in front of these girls, who must have heard better music. He muttered: "Yes, when one is in the army, there are moments you have to fill up with something."

Ina mustered the courage to ask: "And now after the military service what are you going to do?"

“I will work as an electrician,” he answered. His eyes betrayed his shyness. He knew that the girls would continue their studies and get more important jobs.

Carmen noticed that he was disheartened and asked with an arrogant air, “How can one have fun in this place?” Above all the word “place” was pronounced in contempt.

“One can do things. There’s the stadium, one can play ping-pong or basketball in the high school yard on the next street, one can go to the cinema and Saturday evening there’s a disco in the old ballroom.

Through the smoke of her cigarette, Aunt Violet noticed that her nieces were not listening to Victor. Both of them were staring at him with a dreamy forgetful air. The old woman guessed, with an understanding smile, that the girls were being carried away by his warm voice and that deep down they intensely desired to be melted by that warmth.

After supper, as Uncle Honoriu was watching the TV news, the girls cleared the table under Violet’s sharp gaze. She went on instructing them: “You should learn how to cook well but show it only to the man you want to keep for yourselves. It’s the ace up the sleeve to get married. Don’t tire yourselves out cooking for all the men you meet, otherwise they will stick around.”

As she was talking, Violet crossed Ina’s intense gaze. She scolded her: “I saw today how scared you were when Victor wanted to kiss your hand. My dear child, if men realize you fear them, they’ll eat you up like a little mouse. This is a struggle!”

Ina was baffled by those strange words. She could not understand. Why fight with the men? She was not interested in men in general, she was only waiting for the one who would come up as soon as her bones had elongated and her breasts grown. Today, when she saw Victor coming into the yard, she quivered while a question was forming in her mind, “Is that you?”

In the evening Ina sat on her bed in her flowery pajamas, her knees under her chin and her arms around her bent legs. She watched her cousin turning around in front of the long mirror in a short lacy night gown she had taken from her mother, which slipped down from her shoulders. Carmen was well aware of her cousin’s curiosity and knew very well she was stirring her envy with her beautiful body and carefree movements. That’s why she lingered in front of the mirror. Ina was avidly absorbing the lines of her cousin’s body as if she wished to imprint

them on her own. When she thought she had humiliated her cousin enough, Carmen turned off the light with a sudden gesture.

In the dark both of them felt a strange tension. Ina asked with a wavering voice: "Do you have a boyfriend?"

The other replied in a studied casual tone: "Yes, but we broke up before I came here. I'm not going to call him up or send him a card. I want to punish him."

It was all invented, but Carmen enjoyed her cousin's silence. After a while Ina asked with the same wavering voice, "Which actors do you like?"

The real question, hidden beneath this infantile one, was "Do you like Victor?"

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The following days Victor came often to keep them company. They discovered that he was on his own, as his parents were at the baths with his younger brother, and that he had another free month before starting work. He did not have many friends to pass his time with. His ex-schoolmates either worked or were students and now were on holidays. Passing his time with Ina and Carmen kept him busy. First, they took their coffee with the uncle and aunt, then they played volleyball or cards, and once the girls convinced him to bring his harmonica and play for them.

Victor's presence changed the girls' mood. Carmen turned more vivacious, tense and impatient, and at the same time she felt that a sweet inebriating lymph was running in her veins and melted her gestures. Ina was pale, with dry lips and a deep gloomy gaze, that betrayed her suffering. Every day her cousin became more familiar with Victor, she was joking with him, she gave him a push when they played volleyball and once Ina noticed with envy and disgust that Carmen tried to play his harmonica.

One afternoon Carmen asked Victor in a familiar tone, as if they were a couple, "Do we go for a dance this Saturday?"

He answered, "If your aunt approves."

Aunt Violet got angry: "Listen, it's better if they don't go around too much. It's too much responsibility for me. Why don't you bring your cassette player here and dance as much as you want?"

Carmen thought angrily: “How boring!” and spent the rest of the day in a sulky mood. In the evening Aunt Violet addressed her severely: “Listen, Carmen, you have hot blood and think you are a grown up. You should not chase men.”

“Come on, Auntie, he is a coarse guy.”

“This coarse guy has everything other men have. I don’t want to send you back with a gift in your belly!”

Carmen was feeling her blood boil. The aunt was so annoying! Violet was determined to say it all: “She calls him a coarse guy, and she’s ready to jump on him! You don’t encourage even the man you want to marry.”

When they were preparing to go to bed, Ina asked her cousin: “Aren’t you going to leave for the seaside?”

Carmen replied with a harsh tone: “What do you care what I am going to do? Do you want to have him all for yourself? Forget it, you have no chance!”

Ina was ready to cry, but she did not want Carmen to see. Her head on the pillow, she let her tears silently flow on her cheeks. The two girls ceased taking.

Carmen tossed nervously in her bed, thinking that she would like to spend her time with Victor alone without this silly cousin who was ruining her holidays.

As she wept silently, Ina decided to call up her parents and tell them she wanted to go home. How could she explain this decision? Simply, she did not get on well with her cousin who was too free for a good girl like her. She knew her mother would be worried and would come immediately to take her home. But how would she explain it to Aunt Violet? She had no answer. From the other room she could hear Honoriu’s gentle snoring. She decided to wait for another day. Maybe Victor would grasp her feelings for him when he met her again and would realize what type of girl Carmen was. Then she closed her eyes and started imagining things. She and Victor found themselves alone in a distant wood where nobody could reach them, she touched his short straight hair and caressed his suntanned face, while he was touching her lips with kisses as light as butterflies. Late that night, after having seen that scene dozens of times in her fantasy she let out a sigh of relief and abandoned herself to sleep.

Next morning Aunt Violet woke them up early: “We are going to pick the cherries today! They are ripe to perfection!”

Carmen jumped out of the bed, put on her shorts and bound her hair in a ponytail: she was imagining Victor’s smile, half shy, half wily, as he helped her clutch a branch. She would touch his hands among the thick foliage. Ina too put her shorts on and stayed behind to have a look at herself in the mirror.

Uncle Honoriu pulled out a tall ladder and two small wicker baskets and a big one.

“Mind the frail branches,” he advised them, but they stood there motionless. Both of them were in expectation. Carmen asked, “Auntie, why don’t you call Victor? He could lend us a hand!”

“Yes, he could,” Violet agreed. She called him various times, but nobody answered. The girls were waiting with an anxious look. Where could he have gone? The windows and doors of his house were shut.

“He may still be sleeping,” said Ina and, for the first time since they were there, her cousin found her almost smart.

“He may have gone to the baths to see his parents,” said Uncle Honoriu, and both girls were seized with panic.

There was nothing else to do but start working. Uncle Honoriu waited for them to fill the little baskets, emptied them into the big basket and returned them to the girls, without daring to look up, where the girls’ legs intertwined with the strong tree branches. They worked in silence and every now and then launched a gaze towards Victor’s house. Victor did not come in the afternoon, nor in the evening. At dinner, weary and with faces sharpened by the expectation and the disappointment, the two cousins ate fresh bread, butter and cherry preserve with irrepressible appetite. The aunt warned them: “Go slow, oh my, you might get nausea!”

The girls wouldn’t take the advice. They were chewing avidly in rhythm, while their gazes met in the same revelation: the male, this strange creature, had his own territory that could not be trespassed upon as easily as the aunt’s stories had suggested.

Next day Victor appeared again with a joyful sporty air. Carmen asked, "Where were you yesterday? We picked the cherries!"

"I was at the seaside with a friend. His father let him use the car."

Going to the seaside, ignoring their feelings! Carmen was mad: "We won't let you taste the cherry preserve! You don't deserve it!"

Victor smiled and swayed his head. He had understood that he had become important for those girls, but he had his life. Aunt Violet had an idea that cheered the girls up: she wanted to take them to the biggest shop in town. It was her ambition to make them dresses, and they had to choose the fabrics.

"The dresses will be a reminder of these holidays. And then your mothers can see how much I care for my nieces."

She pulled out of the wardrobe a green dress, put on face powder and a dark lipstick, and arranged her hair, worn-out by perms, with a ribbon. Then she went to check if the girls were ready. Carmen whistled like a boy in admiration. The aunt retorted promptly: "Listen, you don't have to give in, not even at my age!"

After launching a critical gaze at Ina, Violet blurted: "Change your clothes, please! I am well known in town. I am sure you have something nicer. Your mother takes care of these things." It was true that she had in her suitcase the Sunday dress, with a bow and embroidered daisies on the hem, but she found it too childlike. She went out of the room and changed without enthusiasm.

The aunt scrutinized Carmen: "And you? A short skirt with sports shoes? Men like to see the girls' feet. What, are you a boy? How these American films are ruining you! And then you are continually chewing gum, which deforms your face! Which young man will have the patience to guess the shape of your lips behind all these grimaces?"

Carmen blushed and ran to the kitchen to throw away the gum. Then she put her sandals on, upset. She did not like to be scolded by this old aunt; her mother did not care how she dressed.

They took the main street. The aunt was very excited, and, as soon as she met an acquaintance, she hurried to introduce the girls: "Look what pretty young ladies from Bucharest are keeping me company! Ina is my brother's daughter and Carmen my sister's."

There were few people in the shop that warm summer afternoon. The shop assistants were dozing behind the desks. With an energetic gesture Aunt Violet summoned a young salesgirl that was idling about. She addressed her emphatically: "My dear, come here please. I want to make two summer dresses for my nieces. Let me see the best fabrics."

The salesgirl started moving reluctantly. She found no pleasure in serving that whimsical and overbearing old woman she knew very well. When she came near, she cast a curious gaze at the girls. They were examining her too. They noticed her disheveled badly colored hair, a sort of orange, and her chipped nail polish. The salesgirl started pulling fabrics off the shelves with fatigue. The aunt took the fabric rolls one by one to the changing room and wrapped the girls in them. Her firm hand made them turn in front of the mirror to find the contours of their shoulders and of their waists, while she kept explaining: "You know Ina, this green is too pale, you need a stronger color, you have your mother's skin. Good that you have our big almond shaped eyes. When you grow up, you'll have to make up a little, take care of your hair style and mind you do not put too much weight on the hips."

Ina was blushing: the aunt's voice sounded loud in the shop's silence. She knew her own face; recently she had started studying it with interest in the mirror, but this time it seemed the aunt was drawing decisively her features: this is you, your looks have a name, a history. It depends on you to give them a value.

"You see Carmen," said the aunt, "you are beautiful, your mother dresses well but doesn't teach you anything!"

Carmen shrugged her shoulders. She had never asked herself what her mother's plans for her were. On the contrary she was happy when she was free and could do what she liked. The aunt was sticking her nose too much in her life. And she had such obsolete taste! Her school friends, all dressed in jeans, would have laughed at her if they could see her now.

In the end they decided on a blue fabric and a purple one.

"Here we are," said the aunt. "Now you can learn how to make the most of yourselves. It is very important for a woman to feel herself beautiful."

Even if they were not so enthusiastic about the fabrics, the girls felt very well, more beautiful and more important than the salesgirl they could glimpse in the mirror, ugly and lost, with a poor unfortunate air.

One week later, after many fittings, the dresses inspired by foreign fashion magazines of the previous years were ready. Even the skeptic Carmen was conquered by Aunt Violet's mastery. Both girls were impatient to show their new dresses to Victor. The aunt had thought of that, so she called him: "Listen, my girls want to throw a party. Bring your cassette recorder and a friend; I will prepare some snacks. You can dance here in the garden."

Uncle Honoriu painted light bulbs in green and red and hung them in the vine pergola, to reproduce what he thought a disco would look like. Then he took out of the cellar an elder juice for the girls and a bottle of wine for the young men. The girls put on their new dresses, the aunt opened a box full of lipsticks and put a shade of color on their lips, pointing out, "A little bit of color won't do any harm, even if you are pretty and fresh. Make up is like dew on the flower. It makes it more charming, more desirable. Don't tell your mothers I taught you to make up, above all you Ina."

Victor turned up in the evening smelling of lavender with a friend of his, tall and slim, smiley, whom he introduced as his former schoolmate Doru.

The young people ate the sandwiches and cakes with gusto, then they started dancing in a circle. At the first slow dance, Aunt Violet put out her cigarette, took her husband by hand and they danced a tango in the middle of the circle, accompanied by applause. With the slow music, the circle broke off. Victor chose Carmen as a partner and Ina had to accept the other man. Doru was aware Ina was uneasy and absent-minded, and he tried to cheer her up by telling jokes. But Ina could not follow his words, and his husky voice annoyed her. She was noticing with ever bigger eyes, how the other two were dancing tightly and were searching for the darker corners in the garden. Once she saw that Victor had buried his lips in Carmen's hair and was kissing her on the forehead.

The uncle and the aunt did not let them alone for one instant. After midnight the young men kissed the girls' hands, greeted everybody and left.

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Next morning Ina woke up before Carmen, put on her trousers and a T-shirt and went out. She had a heavy heart and wanted to talk to

the aunt. She couldn't find her anywhere, and the car was missing. She remembered her saying they would go to collect an eiderdown they had ordered some time ago. The tomcat was waiting in front of the kitchen. She took him in her arms and headed for the back of the garden. The sun had risen above the hills and was lighting up the new hospital. She walked around the garden with the cat in her arms, tormented by questions: why wasn't she able to cancel that obsessive thought of Victor? And why was thinking of him so sweet and painful? If this was love, why did he not grasp it? How could she acquire the power over men aunt Violet talked about? How simple and clear the life of adults was!

When she woke up, Carmen found out she was alone and thought the aunt and the uncle had taken Ina with them. Finally, she was alone, so she could go to Victor's house and let herself be kissed. She had tried a kiss with a boy only twice, once at a party with her classmates, and the second time when she came back from the skating rink with a friend. Victor was probably much more expert. She cleaned her teeth, put on a mini skirt and, in an instant, she was in front of the gate of Victor's house. She was going to call him, but she changed her mind. Better if she kept silent. She pushed the gate, stepped into the yard and went to knock on the front door. She went around the house and discovered the back door. It was locked. She called Victor but got no answer. She kept knocking on the door ever angrier and without any result. She turned back to the aunt's house dejected and slammed the gate with a nervous kick. Ina was coming from the back of the garden with a handful of raspberries.

"Where is Victor?" Carmen asked with a threatening gaze.

"I have no idea! Why do you ask me?"

Neither of them felt like having breakfast, even if the aunt had left a note with everything they could find in the fridge. They decided to sunbathe on the riverbank. They prepared in silence, then crossed the garden and reached the gate at the back.

"Today is going to be hotter than yesterday," Ina said, but Carmen did not care to answer. She pushed the gate with her shoulder and found herself on the gravel that extended towards the river. She was shuffling her feet with an insolent air, which was her way to show her discontent. Her mother had a great idea to send her here! She couldn't even find a decent place to sunbathe. The narrow river had lazy uninviting waters and the banks were covered by willow bushes, interrupted only by clearings of sand and white gravel.

They walked away, passed under the bridge and finally spotted a sheltered place surrounded by willow bushes that had only a narrow opening which allowed a glimpse of the other bank. They lay down on the blanket. Ina opened one of the books in her holiday reading list. Carmen never took books with her, but she had picked up one of the aunt's fashion magazines, which also contained sentimental counselling.

Listless and quiet they started reading. Ina looked around every so often, as she thought she should be on guard: her mother had warned against going with her cousin to deserted places. Yet she felt there was no danger in sight, they were hidden by the bushes, one could see the bridge crossed by cars and bikers. There were only swarms of gnats buzzing around here. She wondered what Carmen thought. She watched her: she was already suntanned, as she had already gone to the swimming pool in Bucharest, and her body was so slim. Ina suddenly felt ugly by comparison: her skin was too white and her hips too wide. How could she focus on reading with such worries?

Carmen perused the magazine to the end and started looking around. In the background she could see the hospital, then the bridge and right in front of them on the other bank there was a sandy clearing surrounded by bushes. If only they had been smart enough to find such a place, instead of sitting on these pointy stones. But now they had to stay here. There was no great difference and no fun in sight, neither here nor there. The gnats were haunting her. She tried to chase them away without success. "What hysterical insects!" she said in anger and threw herself face down on the blanket covering her head with the open magazine.

Several minutes later they heard voices on the other bank. They raised their heads and could glimpse a young man and a girl in the clearing. The couple sat down at the margin of the water. To their surprise it was Victor with the salesgirl who had served them in the shop. He was holding her tight and was whispering something in her ear, which made her burst out laughing. Then he started to throw pebbles on the water surface. She took off her sandals and dipped her feet into the water, dangling her legs and laughing in a silly high-pitched voice.

In a tacit agreement the two girls decided to hide behind the bushes and watch the clearing. With a quick gesture, Victor pulled the girl towards him and started to kiss her neck. She was trying to push him away among laughter and excited little screams. He blocked her hands behind her back and with the other hand started to touch her breasts. Ina

shut her eyes terrorized that she could see so close in full sunlight an embrace between a man and a woman. Carmen instead wanted to see it all and, biting her lip till she felt the salty taste of blood, gazed for long minutes at the love play of those two bodies, till they decided to stand up and vanished behind the tall bushes. Ina opened her eyes only when she heard her cousin's disappointed comment: "Nothing big happened. They went behind the bushes."

Soon afterwards, the two cousins dressed and turned back home in silence. Aunt Violet noticed immediately that they were troubled. Ina was speechless, with a fixed gaze, while Carmen could not keep in check her agitation and anger. She told the aunt what they had seen on the riverbank. Violet started laughing: "What's the big fuss? He's a grown man who needs a woman."

Ina opened her mouth for the first time, blushing: "Yes, but did he have to pick just that girl?"

The aunt protested: "Who do you think Victor is? An angel fallen from the sky? That girl is the perfect match for him."

In the evening, after having turned off the light in their room, Ina and Carmen talked seriously about men and decided they deserved only their contempt. As for Victor, they would not greet him anymore, they could not befriend a young man who dated that kind of girl. And then he was uncouth and arrogant. After closing their eyes, each of them imagined slapping that conceited boor. He would naturally ask forgiveness, they would make peace and everything would end in an embrace similar to the one they had seen that morning on the river bank. In the silence of the night, they felt their bodies restless: their breathing turned rapid, their breasts were warming up and their blood was chaotically running, impatient to find a rhythm.

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The day after, the heat became more oppressive. After lunch, Uncle Honoriu, dulled by the hot air, went to the bedroom to take a rest. The girls made the coffee together and took it out. Aunt Violet was waiting for them at the table under the pergola, fanning herself with an old black lace fan: "Take a look at the tomcat, he is worn out like Honoriu. These males can't take it!"

The cat was lying exhausted in the shade, indifferent to the sparrows that were hopping around him. The contours of the new hospital seemed to dissolve in the hot air. In that absolute calm, they could hear the harmonica in the neighbors' yard. The girls looked at each other, but neither of them turned towards Victor's house. Only the aunt wondered: "How can he have breath on such a day!"

Something of the consuming heat could be perceived in that slow senseless melody, an improvisation maybe, an impersonal call in the desert. The girls endured that obsessive sound in silence; it vanished as idly as it had begun. Shortly afterwards the inert atmosphere was shaken by a scream: a sharp scream that echoed in the valley. The scream was followed by another. Aunt Violet lit up a cigarette, took a puff, and motioned in the direction of the hospital: "Another wretch is giving birth! In summer they keep the windows of the delivery room open. I hear them scream their lives out. Poor women, how much pain!"

Another scream followed, stronger, more acute, a dagger stuck in the boiling air. Rigid on their chairs, the girls looked at each other: their eyes betrayed anxiety, as if both of them knew that scream had remained suspended in the air waiting for them.

Beyond the fence, the harmonica resumed unperturbed its solitary music.

Scarred

Isn't it a good thing to lie in the shade, arms under your head, eyes gazing upwards at the leaves and the entire body slack, giving way to rest! Whenever he tries to steal a nap at home, all kinds of things set upon his brain: the family accounts, his office mates' remarks, his wife's nagging... He tussles with all these until his exhausted mind is overwhelmed by sleep, yet most of the times they keep on chasing him in his dreams and he wakes up haggard and slow, as after hours of hard work.

But here he is at peace and may think of anything he chooses, even of the tree crown hanging above him. It seems ready to fall upon him any minute and crush him under its weight. What if he took off his glasses? No, with or without glasses, the green cover makes him feel equally humble. Except that this humiliation is tender. Well, nature is our salvation, as one of the chaps in his office would put it, as for man... And isn't the fellow right? Where else is he as free as here? He moves his toes with delight, rotates his ankles, stretches his arms, touches his joints. Sometimes you feel good in your own skin!

And see, this is something everybody can afford! Not far from the city, in the margins of Bucharest, no admission fee, just take yourself a blanket, some food and the Sunday is yours! You can have a swim if you like, although the water in this puddle is turbid and there's slippery mud on its bottom.

But it's convenient, anyway. First of all, it's a wide place. Nobody will tread on your blanket. You can relax. If you go to the swimming pool or to one of the lakes, let's say Floreasca or Tei, there's always something to do: go with the child and buy him an ice cream or a juice, stand in a queue to fetch your wife a beer, rent a boat and do a good stretch of rowing to entertain your family.

Now his wife and his son are on the lake border and he will take a nap here, on the fringe of the forest. It's quite cool in the shade and the place is peaceful. Well, frankly speaking, not so peaceful as to let you fall asleep at once. A woman is calling her children in a hoarse voice, a man is racing his engine and some youngsters are jumping into the lake from a sort of promontory into water. He can hear them shouting and splashing. Yes, all right, but what can you do? Just close your eyes and

keep your mind on your own business. Sleep is coming... gently... gently... If only these flies would stop pestering him! Where did they come from? Nature again, as that office mate would reply. He tries to drive them away with his hand. Useless! They keep on buzzing in his ear and stick to his skin again. If only he had a towel, a cover, anything... Well, he'll pull the corner of the blanket over his feet and it'll be all right. Just enough to let him fall asleep.

Oh, no! It can't be! Right now, when his body has grown heavy with the coming sleep and he's got used to the flies, his son comes and sits down by his side. And he keeps fidgeting about, he puts his finger on his father's neck, on his ear, then tries to take off his glasses. Box his ear and send him to play, that's what he should do, but he's too lazy. He merely grumbles: "Hey, why don't you take a little nap yourself?"

The boy shakes his head. He won't.

"Then why don't you go and play with other children?"

He shrugs his shoulders: "I'd rather stay with you!"

"Why not with your mother?"

"She's asked me to let her tan her skin!"

The boy sits on the edge of the blanket, looking downwards, and pulls at a tuft of grass. Other children run and shout, dive into the water, play hide-and-seek in the forest. He clings to his parents. Only child! Never lets them breathe a little. Just look what a long face he's putting on! As if he has guessed his father's thoughts. The father gives in: "All right, I'll let you sit by my side, but don't disturb my sleep!"

The boy rises to his feet gaily: "You know what? You sleep and I'll brush the flies away!"

The father watches him running towards a torn branch, abandoned in the weeds. The boy strains his entire body to lift it and comes back trailing it proudly through the grass. He lets it fall near the blanket, sets a foot on it and tears a twig loaded with withered leaves. Then he raises the twig in the air and starts fluttering it over his father's body. Try and sleep if you can with these dry leaves rustling in your ear! Still the father closes his eyes to make the boy happy. What's up now? The child has already got bored with waving the branch about and is sitting down to examine his father. He leans forward above the man's body and puts a finger on his chest. That's too much to bear: "Didn't I tell you to let me sleep?"

"What's here, Daddy?"

His thin little finger follows the scar line.

"It's a mark left by an old wound."

The boy stares at him. Curiosity and fear glow at once over his face: "How did you get wounded?"

"I dived into the sea from a pier and I scratched my chest against a pointed rock. I was competing with a friend for the best dive. When we go to the seaside, I'll show you the place."

"And how did you come to make such a bet? Are you going to tell me how? Please, Daddy, tell me how it happened!"

The admiration in the boy's eyes is flattering, but he doesn't feel at all like starting the old story again: "That'll do! You'll hear the rest of it some other time!" To this he adds, raising his voice: "Why don't you go and play and leave me alone!"

The boy stands up reluctantly, pouting his lips and goes away trailing the twig full of dry withered leaves.

Now the father feels sorry for having sent him away. His sleep has passed and, in the end, he'll have to tell his son the whole story. At least the boy won't doubt it, as the others did. His sister, for instance, tried to ridicule him: "Were you able to do such a thing? Don't let mother find out, she might have a stroke!"

His wife made no comments when she heard it, but the stupid amazement which broadened on her face got on his nerves.

The story and his student years! He and his fellow students were spending their holidays at the seaside. They used to stay at the far end of a pier to isolate themselves from the crowded beach. They joked, played cards, listened to music with a nice feeling of being a party. That day they were in a betting mood and every word turned into a betting pretext. That guy the girls were crazy about, because he looked like a famous French actor, was stirred by someone. He rose to his feet and in only two strides he found himself on the edge of the pier. He waved to the girls, rose in the air and dived into the sea. When he turned up on the pier again, he had a slit on his chest. Blood was leaking from it. The girls started screaming and clustered around him. One of them burst into tears. They accompanied him to the first-aid station in a noisy procession, directing everybody's attention to them.

He remained alone on the pier to guard their clothes. And he was glad to do it, in a way, as he did not want to give satisfaction to the hero of the day, who had always tried to make him the laughing stock of the

others. He sat there alone for almost an hour and listened in frustration to the growing waves. Why had such extraordinary things never happened to him? He couldn't help admiring that fellow, as everybody did, but his admiration turned gradually to bitter envy which gnawed at him through his student years. Even now he can't accept the idea that you always bump into one of these outstanding guys who get everything in life. He's stolen the fellow's story out of revenge... So what? Hasn't he got a right to trim his past a little? He's not the only one who does it.

He rolls onto his stomach and sets his hands under his chin. The strong smell of dry earth and parched grass penetrates his nostrils. What the hell does he need all these past things for? Right now, when he is determined to relax. Stop it! The past is dead. Mm, yes, how many times has he tried to convince himself of it, but the past seems to die only in the calendar. How can you account for the fact that exactly the things you want to forget lie in ambush and rush at you when you least expect them? Whenever someone sets eyes on this wretched scar, the event that produced it rises to the surface from some troubled depths, together with the moldy smell that used to welcome him when he reached the garret.

How ashamed he was of that little room! He couldn't invite anybody there! The shaky bed leaned against a trunk which also served as a table. The room had a small dormer window he had to open and shut with a ruler. There were several nails hammered into the door to hang his clothes on and his kitchen was all on a chair: an old gas cooker, one spoon and a tin cup. This was the setting he entered after groping along the dark corridor, where nobody replaced the burnt socket, as they did not care: these rooms served as deposits for old objects and only the owner of his room decided to make some money of it, renting it to a student coming from the province like himself. And then in front of his room there was that recess, full of dusty rubbish, where a tap was dripping night and day. Near the entrance to this recess somebody had propped an old, frameless mirror against the wall. A few steps to the left a box stood under a narrow window. He used to kneel on that box and look out, until his knees started aching, for hours on end, at the other wing of their block of flats. Every evening his eyes were fixed on a window of the fifth floor, a screen where the same mute film was running: the professor's daughter was reading at her desk, sunk in a high-backed chair, while the dog slept on the carpet, its head on its front paws. Now and then the girl stood up to take a book from a shelf or pull some papers out of a drawer. Sometimes she had to

open the door for the dog or she left the room herself, only to return with a cup and a saucer in her hands. Quite often her parents came in, acted a pantomime and left.

Sometimes he went back to keep on watching, until the light was put off, and it must have been around midnight. He got down from the box, with sharply aching knees but a happy smile on his lips. Back in his little room again, he boiled himself a cup of tea, dropped rum into it and opened his notebook. But instead of learning economics he scribbled the girl's name on every blank piece of paper and fell asleep transported by the same fantasy: he and the professor's daughter walked hand in hand in the park and watched in absolute delight the dog gamboling around.

Ants, hundreds of them are running through the grass, minding their own business. They've no idea what a man can experience! Oh, yes, he did care for the professor's daughter; he can admit it in front of the ants. She was so different from the girls in his classes: many of them came like him from small towns or from the countryside. Actually, he smiles at the ants, remembering how he used to leave his little room in the morning. He stepped out of the corridor, looked left and right, though there was nobody there at that early hour, then leaned to examine the crease of his trousers in the blurred mirror. He had no iron, so he stretched his trousers carefully under the mattress before going to bed and took them out in the morning. In the end he bowed from the waist to take a close look at this shirt collar. He locked the door, and instead of walking to the right and down the stairs to the elevator, he set out to the left and reached the terrace. There he stopped, struck by the light. In a few seconds he got used to it and started breathing the fresh air to get some strength and relax. Afterwards he crossed the terrace and entered the other wing of the block. He took the lift to the fifth floor and there he stood before the massive door with the little golden plate on which the professor's name stood proudly engraved. He lingered for a while, holding his breath to catch a noise, a voice, some steps. When the dog happened to bark behind the door, he started and sneaked downstairs looking back after every step.

The sun is already shining on the blanket. It's too warm. He pulls the blanket back in the shade. All right, now it's cool again. Mm, Rex barking! The mere thought of it still gives him the shudders! On that particular day he was on his way back home, huddling himself from the cold and all of a sudden, that sonorous bark froze him and pushed him

against a wall. The dog jumped with its paws on his overcoat. A lively voice helped him come to his senses: “Don’t be afraid! He doesn’t bite! He’s just playing!”

The professor’s daughter herself stood at two steps’ distance, her hair bound in a ponytail and her small ears red with cold. These are the only precise details he’s ever recalled of her appearance. He did not dare to look her in the face. They walked home together, and he stared at the dog and at his hands, trying to explain to her in a very twisted style that they were neighbors.

She interrupted him joyfully: “I know! You’re living in the garret!”

She knew it! Had she noticed him spying on her every evening? He hunched at the thought, as if he had been carrying his little room, snail-like, on his back.

The girl told him something about school and laughed a lot. He couldn’t follow; his ears were buzzing. Only once did he pluck up the courage to ask her the dog’s name. Then he called Rex and gave him a pretzel bit he had in his pocket. The girl who had seemed so inaccessible let herself be accompanied right to her apartment door and introduced him to her mother who welcomed her on the threshold. He bowed to kiss the lady’s hand with such uncontrolled emotion that he almost lost his balance. That was unexpected luck! When the door shut before his eyes he rushed upstairs to the terrace and bounded about like a child, until his glasses fell off. Then he went up to his room and paced it distractedly till late in the night. The next time he would invite the girl to the cinema, and after the show he’d offer her some pastry and a juice at the little pub where he used to drink a beer now and then. On their second date he’d take her for a walk in the park and hold her by the hand and on the third he’d try to give her a kiss.

Rubbish!... Still, who knows what have happened, if he had met her again? Women have quite surprising reactions, as the chap in the office says. But the girl was very busy. She wanted to study medicine, and the entrance test was one of the trickiest. That’s what he found out from her mother, whom he often met in the street. He always greeted her with clumsy gestures and offered to carry her bags. A kind-hearted woman, the type you could really talk to. The only thing he disliked was the wry smile she put on when she thanked him for the help. It was like an excuse. He noticed that smile for the first time when they almost

bumped into the professor at the entrance door. The lady introduced him hastily, that particular smile cutting across her face:

“Dear, an amiable young man and a neighbor of ours!”

The professor looked him up and down and didn’t say a word. Just lifted an eyebrow. His arrogant air annoys him even now, after so many years! He sits up and leans his back against the rough tree bark. In this posture he feels more prepared to settle his accounts with the old man. Where might he be now? He must have turned into a senile pensioner! How he used to glare at him like a police inspector, when he came so politely to take Rex out or bring him back home. He pities himself now, when he remembers how he used to run after the huge beast till he lost his breath, and when he stopped that stupid animal jumped on him for joy, pawing his only winter coat, bought from his parents’ savings.

He was a silly ass! Instead of studying he played the gentleman to spare the girl the effort of walking Rex.

An ant is tenaciously climbing up his leg. He lets it touch his knee, then gives it a fillip. Mind your direction, insect, climbing is not for you! What a pity you’ve wasted your energy! If you had known before... Well, how could you, poor thing, know what to do, when man himself has to guess his way in the dark. That’s a sentence he heard from the same office mate he admires. A fine chap who reads a lot.

Didn’t he act at that time just like this poor ant? He had flunked an exam, and, instead of sitting in his room to study for the next, there he was before the massive door, to take the dog out again. And if he hadn’t hesitated so long before ringing, he wouldn’t have given the professor time to utter loudly in the entrance hall, so loud, as if he was shouting in his ear: “Listen, I will not see that fellow at my door, is it clear?”

His wife’s voice: “But he’s gentle. And he doesn’t ask for anything by taking the dog out!”

“Don’t tell me he’s walking the cur for your sake! This little guy, coming from nowhere, is pushy, you know. Whenever he comes, he tries to keep your daughter talking and forgets to say good-bye. Pah! Judging by his mean appearance I bet he’s got clammy hands!”

He took every single word in, without a blink. His hands were clammy. For some seconds he stood nailed in front of the door, then he ran upstairs. When he opened the door to the terrace he was panting heavily. He went out and looked around. A sharp fear was taking hold of

him. The place was too exposed to light. He strode across it, pulling the wings of his overcoat, as if he had been naked underneath. The corridor was as dark as always. In the recess the tap was dripping with cold, clock-like indifference. For a moment he was convinced he would never be able to get out of that obscure, airless tunnel, because that was to be the shell of his life. He groped in the dark, stumbled over something and collapsed over the mirror. When the noise of broken glass had dissipated, the professor's words echoed in his mind as in a cave: "This little guy! Clammy hands! He is pushy." He strained his ears expecting somebody to come and punish him for the broken mirror. He was so confused and scared that it took him some time before he became aware of the pain burning in his chest.

And here's the mark he'll never get rid of and which he continuously has to account for. He touches it with his fingertips. Whenever he becomes aware of the scar, a dim memory of the past runs like a thrill along its line. After the incident he lay in bed with high fever for more than a week. But it was not the slit on his chest that hurt. Figures haunted his wandering mind. Quite often he imagined himself taking the professor by the collar and asking him: "How dare you say all these things about me? Have I ever done you any harm? You arrogant Bucharesters, you think you own the world, eh?"

Then, in his agony, he imagined taking revenge by eloping with the girl. How it pleased him to imagine the professor as a humiliated father. Then a fat aunt chased him in his delirium and repeated the words she once told him in his childhood: "Go and fetch me a chair, you little ugly thing!" Other times he seemed to hear a classmate dubbing him "Goggling rabbit!" And the rest of the school calling him so for years: "Goggling rabbit! Goggling rabbit!" He was getting even with everybody, including the girls who had mocked him and the fellow who had dived into the sea from the pier. He shouted at them voicelessly: "Why don't you leave me alone? Do you have any idea what it is like when you wish to be different and you cannot do anything about it?" He realized he would live forever in the shadow of others. He knew his actions were always determined and never fruits of his own thoughts. But why did they have to hurt him all the time for being what he was?

He hated the snippy professor for years on end. Then his life took a different course, he made his little way too, and began to forget the whole story. He got a job in the planning office of a cloth factory, his

Bucharest ID card, now he has a family, is paying a loan for their flat, and has even bought a Trabant car.

He rubs his wrist. It aches. Is it going to rain? The sky is white, dazzlingly white. He may have just leaned too much on his wrist. Well, see how the world goes! One day he may come to forgive the man. If he gives it a second thought, he should be grateful to him. He spared him the dreams beyond his reach. It's not a healthy habit. Now he doesn't dream anymore. He only makes plans for a day or two, at most a week. And he finds it much better.

Isn't it warm? Quite stuffy, in fact. Sweat leaks in thin rivulets down his neck and torso. He should wash his body in the lake. He's sticky, dirty, tired ... He rises to his feet cautiously like a man who wakes up after a long sleep and walks slowly to the lake. A little farther his wife is fumbling in her bag. The boy stands in front of her with an outstretched hand. She's giving him chocolate again! Then she'll wonder why he never eats anything at lunch. A smell of fried fish comes from somewhere. Ah, there's the fire! Two fleshy women and a man are bustling about it... all the people here do their best to eat well and enjoy themselves. It's better like that, bringing your food from home, than being served who knows what in a restaurant. He and his wife will also have their picnic when he comes out of the water. He turns his head backwards to mention the food but gives it up when he sees her oiling her skin so dutifully. Poor woman! He lied to her so many times to impress her! But only because he wanted to be admired ... isn't it natural? She, at least, never puts on airs, as these two down here probably do! Just look how impudently they sprawl their bodies in his way, as if the entire place were theirs.

He lingers for a few minutes on the lake edge with shoulders hunched, arms akimbo and his belly swelling forward. His mother, poor creature, used to scold him every day: "Stand straight! Don't hunch your shoulders!" But if that's how he feels...

He dips his toes into the water. It feels cold! Slowly he gets used to it and his feet sink in the soft mud. The water has reached above his waist. He should let himself float a little, to get rid of the mud. But he forgot to leave his glasses on the shore. Never mind, he'll be careful about his movements, the water is turbid anyway. He swims some meters to the middle of the lake, then looks back at the shore: his son amuses himself twisting a stick in a puddle. His legs are so thin and his bathing

suit is hanging so clumsily! No clothes fit him properly! He's very shy and feeble ... an ugly little thing. He, as a father, should warn him not to expect great things... or perhaps better not... why should he be the one to cut his son's wings? One day he'll come across one of those guys who push the others aside ... or, who knows, his son may be luckier... times change.

Now he is swimming again towards the middle of the lake. On the other shore, a goat tied to a tether is grazing quietly. A lilo is floating nearby. A young man lies idly on it, hiding his face from the sun under a newspaper. That's why he loves coming here: everything is so peaceful! And how pleasant the encounter with this magnanimous water, which makes no assumptions or reproaches, but welcomes him fairly like everybody else!

The Daughter

The bitter-sweet colors of the late roses came out as light absorbing, hesitant grays, anxiously framing the contour of the bench: an empty bench, in a park, in autumn, pervaded by that sense of abandonment that only objects destined to accompany human stories can communicate.

The second picture shows ash-trees on each side of a large alley in the early afternoon light: their dark trunks, uniform and robust, stood calmly, their branches graciously meshed without affront. Trees don't fear solitude, do they? Nor do they challenge each other, rooted as they are in their self-sufficiency.

It was my idea to meet in the park, a neutral place, I thought, after he insisted so much on that encounter. He was showing serious intent, I should have been reassured and serene. And yet, the closer I got to that day, the more I doubted myself. What I used to see as the solid texture of my life was fraying apart, and I felt cornered by his confidence that we were a couple meant to last and my relatives' anxiety that single women have a hard time in old age. My short, unsuccessful marriage when I was a student had taught me a bitter lesson, so I became single by choice, passing every now and then through a brief adventure, as if taking a short bath in a river and coming back safely on the bank to continue my life: going to the office, decorating my little apartment, making car journeys, taking photographs and developing them in the darkness of my pantry. That week my colleagues noticed my nervousness, and this only intensified it: thoughts lost order and clarity, gestures became exaggerated, anxiety put me out of tune. Most than anything else, it undermined my sense of time and made me check my wristwatch every few minutes. The day of the encounter, a Sunday, when I usually idle in bed till late, I woke up very early, and spent the morning preparing. I tried various hair styles and ended up with a bun twisted on the nape, but the most difficult was deciding what to wear. I was alarmed to see that everything I tried on seemed to make me look ridiculous. In the end, I abandoned the search and put on the simplest things I had, a blouse, a pair of trousers, the leather jacket and a silk scarf. Then I decided to drive to the park, even if I could have simply walked, as he admired me for

being one of the rare women drivers in Bucharest at that time, and I took my black-and-white camera, the only one I had, because he liked my hobby and was intrigued by my idea that black-and-white pictures show things as they are without the disguise of color.

After I had parked the car not far from the Triumph Arch entry, I realized I was an hour early. The meeting point was on the main road, more or less in front of the playground. Instead of calming down or taking it with a sense of humor, I felt lost. I got out of the car and started walking along the alleys flanked by late autumn roses trying to give myself a purpose: taking pictures, as if I had come there to capture landscapes and would meet them by pure chance. I started devising scenarios in my mind, even imagined them finding me graciously pacing the alley in search of a good angle or the right light. A stupid useless game, as time passed, and they still did not show up. Then I devised another lie: I walked all the way back to the car, got inside, grasped the steering wheel and tried to find a posture that would make it seem as though I had arrived a second before. I looked at myself in the rear-mirror: pale, deep eye-rings, wild gaze: a woman in her early forties on the brink of panic. Nothing of what I liked to see as my settled expression in public, self-contained, benevolent and slightly ironic, suggesting who I thought I was: independent, open-minded, balanced. It was stifling inside, and I felt estranged from everything, as if my own car was rejecting me. The folded umbrella on the passenger seat, the camera, the sunglasses I had taken off had lost their meaning and seemed to lie there as if they had ceased to belong to me. Even the doll I had so carefully laid on the rear seat looked as if placed there by somebody else. For a second, I even felt the strong impulse to press the gas pedal: drive away, anywhere to avoid that encounter, disappear, exiting from the present, had it only been possible. Then with an effort of will I decided to contain my anxiety. I got out of the car, arranged my water-green silk scarf with a slow, calculated gesture, meant to give me composure and dignity, put on my sunglasses and turned back to the park, convinced that I looked like a person in full control of herself. As soon as I looked at my watch and saw they should have come a quarter of an hour back, questions started crossing my mind like piercing arrows: what if his plan had met resistance on the other side, and everything were to finish absurdly with my solitary walk in the park? I closed my eyes to avoid seeing myself caught in that emptiness.

When I opened them again, they were heading towards me, lightly, as in a dance. He looked taller and stouter than usual, and the girl, dressed in a blue wool jacket over a fuchsia velvet dress, was hanging on his arm like a blossom on the trunk of a tree. The mild October light filtered through the leaves and rested on their heads, a beautiful image, but for me unbearable. In defense, I brought the camera to my eyes and shot. I didn't have time to fix it properly, so the photo is strange: their contours appear subtler, like uncertain shades, interrupted by irregular light spots.

When I lowered the camera, they were right in front of me: he with a large smile, the girl close beside him, trying to fix her fringe.

I put my sunglasses on again to mask my emotion. He stooped to her and uttered in a delicate voice: "So then, she is..."

He must have added something to my name, but I didn't catch it; I could hear only my heartbeat. The girl stood there, fixing her blond hair, carefully combed down to her shoulders with a thin blue velvet headband pressed on her fringe. She lifted her eyes and studied me in silence. I felt my cheeks burning and took my right hand instinctively to my neck, as if I had a secret wound to cover. I was feeling the reassuring touch of the silk scarf with my fingers, when his confident, calm voice brought me back to reality: "Aren't the two of you going to greet each other?"

The girl hesitated, then she put out a small soft hand, but as soon as I touched it, she drew it back. Her father smiled and addressed me: "She's shy, be patient."

I was quite surprised by the tender way he was patting her blonde hair, as he talked. Then he added with a warm, deep tone: "All I've got is the two of you."

I should have exulted for joy, and yet I felt emptied of any feeling, as if my energy had unexpectedly drained into the alley below my feet. My reply sounded fake: "Let's have a walk, it's such a nice day!"

We moved along in silence. I felt withdrawn in myself: my eyes were gazing downwards to the leaves we occasionally treaded on, my ears capturing their dry lamenting rustle. I think he was the first to speak that time: "I'm sorry we're late! It took so long to get her ready... you know how mothers are..."

Their late arrival betrayed the same uneasiness and apprehension that had made me come too early. We were even. I should have been

glad, but instead I lied in a colorless voice: “Don’t worry. I was late myself. I arrived just a few minutes before you!”

No answer. He was bending toward his daughter, anxious to ask her: “Dana, would you take both of us by the hand?”

I paused, pressing the camera strap with nervous fingers. The girl seemed to weigh the possibility carefully, then finally let me take her hand without resistance. I sighed with relief: I had passed a test.

This photo is taken later, close to the flower pavilion. The girl is smiling, a bunch of maple leaves in her hand. In the next image, she is running towards her father, barely touching the ground, as if she were flying. Her blond hair is a nucleus of light; the background elements arrange themselves around it in mute obedience.

His idea of taking a picture of me and the girl in front of Brancusi’s statue irritated me. Not so much because of its lack of originality, but because I felt under scrutiny. He wanted to compare us, see if we could stand next to each other. No wonder I look so tense! I bent towards Dana in search of the best pose, but meanwhile I was examining her features, asking myself if my feelings for her father could include her. With a light tremor I discovered him in that creature, hidden in the deep arches of those fine nostrils, in the eyebrows, in the shape of those small fingers. The cypher of his body appeared in the daughter fastened to the traces of another being I instinctively perceived as alien. I got close to him, eager to meet his eyes, in need of support at this upsetting discovery. And yet, what is more common and reasonable than a child taking after her parents? Unaware of my distress, he was caught by the girl’s play around the statue, and stopped only to ask me proudly: “Well, how do you find her? Isn’t she pretty?”

“Oh, she’s very pretty... She’s taken after you... But not only you...”

“You’re right! The eyes and the chin are her mother’s. The hair too, if it stays blond.”

His words oddly hurt me. Strange, isn’t it? And yet as mature persons we had often spoken in a free and relaxed way about his ex-wife. I knew the whole story of their relationship and their separation. With a daughter in common, it was natural for them to be in contact. I knew this

and had accepted it from the beginning, and yet in that instant I feared that woman and doubted his actual separation from her.

This image is over-exposed but is still graphic: held by the two adults, the girl raises her feet in the air. The man looks contented, the woman slightly bewildered.

We had asked a young man passing by to take some pictures of us. One can see he was not familiar with cameras. The others are better. In those moments I was experiencing a new sensation. The girl's body, stretched between us like a bow, bound us with its warmth. For a second, I wished intensely the girl were mine. Mine and his. And immediately the thought of the other woman returned painfully. I could see limpidly that his and that woman's beings were joined in their daughter forever, even if they had ceased to love each other. Their union was there, alive, and I couldn't do anything about it. I wished to ask him what he felt for that woman when the three of them were together. I was ready for an answer that would make me suffer, while mutely facing that woman in my mind, encrypted in the girl's features as a powerful, tough, obstinate rival. Thus, when we reached the seesaw and the swing, I didn't feel like playing with them. I sat down on the bench instead and started taking pictures.

Here the girl and her father are on the seesaw: his feet lie firmly on the sand; she is up, slightly bent forwards. Their symmetrical faces, in profile and against the light, give the impression that each of them is the other's projection through a lens.

All the way to the pier, crossing the Island of the Roses, I had a sharp frustrating feeling of being out of place. They were so happy to chat ignoring me. I was trying to convince myself that intimacy between father and daughter was normal, recalling how my own complicity with my father had made my mother jealous. And yet what mattered in those moments was my perception that he did not belong to me, which was hard to bear. I was trying to suppress that awful feeling, my touchiness, and withdraw within a safe inner corner. This state of surrender alternated with a rising anger over the fact that a six-year-old was able to shatter my life so completely.

Another photo with the father and the daughter, this time at the pier on the lake shore. The girl rests her feet on the bar of the railing, one arm around her father's neck. She points to the center of the lake. Her fine hair spreads in the air and covers her father's face like a veil.

The cruising ship that toured the lake had just sailed off, and its propeller twirled the water and made the air into a gust. I had proposed taking the ship, to circle the lake, but my suggestion was ignored. Dana preferred to see the little island in the middle that could only be reached by boat as it had no proper pier, just a few wooden planks spread over four cement pillars. He was busy renting the boat, while I stayed back with the girl, in silence, telling myself: "Let's take it this way - I am here to pass a pleasant afternoon. In truth nothing serious has happened. And it is a splendid October day." It took some effort to consider him and his daughter as just two nice leisure time companions, but I did well, so when he seized my hand to help me get on the boat, I responded with the affable but distant smile of somebody ready to enter a game without consequences.

The ride started well: a mild sun lit the water. Seated next to me, Dana clapped her hands and shouted for joy when her father rowed past another boat; with every oscillation, her body touched mine. He was rowing tense with effort, the shirt sleeves reversed up to his elbows, the sweater on his back, its sleeves bound around his neck. In his eyes there was a winning light, as if he were saying, "See how happy she is with us? You have won her over!" Yes, of course, how could I have forgotten? The two of us were a couple supposed to allow that little girl in our world every now and then. Suddenly I relaxed, ceased to feel like an intruder, and regained my composure. I bent towards Dana and tried to hug her. To my surprise, she briskly pushed me back: "Ahi! Don't hold me so tight! It hurts!"

I was desolate. I had attempted to bring her closer to me, literally, but I did not know how to take her. Half turned, he was busy steering the boat towards the improvised small pier of the island: he looked magnificent, with his strong arms tight on the oars and his neck arched with the effort. I took that image avidly in and realized in a flash how much I needed him: the self-assurance I had built through the years dissipated in a second, leaving me in need of protection, just like the little

girl next to me. Suddenly there was meaning in my mother's warning that my nice independence could wither away into arid solitude. That moment I knew one thing for sure: I did not want to lose him; the rest didn't matter. That clarity gave me a sort of enthusiasm. I had to keep the image of that good-looking man, expertly handling the oars by the light of an October sunset. I prepared the camera and focused, but a harsh thud of an oar blade on the wood of the boat stopped me from shooting. It still resounds in my ears. It really does. Just as I can still hear his voice, suddenly turned wild, ominous: "What the hell are you doing?"

In that very second, he jumped from his seat, grabbed the girl in his arms and sat down again, holding her tightly. She started crying. I was startled. The boat was violently swaying, almost ready to overturn. Was that man who was piercing me unflinchingly, the same one I loved? Was that rasping voice his? "What is on your mind? Why don't you take care of the child?"

It took me some time to understand from his angry words what had happened: while I was fixing my camera, his daughter had bent over to touch the water, just as he was pushing the boat close to the pier... if he hadn't seen it in time, so he said, she would have hit her head against the cement pillar. I had a confusing feeling of guilt and an overwhelming mental void. The dark water around us made me dizzy and my mind was fixed on a stupid question: what am I doing here, with this man and his daughter?

I did not dare to look up, but when I met his gaze, I felt tears rolling down my cheeks, and onto the sunglasses hanging on the chain around my neck. My lacerated voice, in wild confusion, was imploring: "Forgive me! Please, forgive me!"

I have no idea whether he responded. There's a blank in my memory. All I can remember is the determination with which he started rowing back towards the main pier, speechless, closed in himself, keeping his daughter tightly between his legs, and explaining excitedly to her it was not worth while visiting that small island. Seated in front of them, alone and lost, I was trying to find support in evasive images: the last sunrays, the island we did not land on, swallowed by the late afternoon shadows, the trail of the boat in the water like a snake behind us.

After he returned the boat, we sat down on a bench. Dana was palpitating in her father's arms, not yet freed from the fear he had

wrapped her in. Embarrassed, he was fixing a distant point on the lake and said: "I hope she won't say anything to her mother. I can't even imagine her reaction!"

His profile had turned more severe, and the voice had changed again: bland, alien, as if he were not talking to me, but recounting an upsetting event to a person that happened to be seated on the same bench. My first impulse was to stand up and leave them there, turn back home, take a hot shower, listen to music, drink a glass of wine and enjoy my peace. But I was unable to move or speak. Then the little girl, unexpectedly, reached out and touched my arm: "Will you buy me cotton candy?"

A cotton candy machine I had not given attention to was right in front of us. This sudden purpose shook me from my torpor. I took her by the hand, and we headed towards the place, where a stout woman dressed in white was twisting the white sugar filaments, as if they were life threads that a spinning energy was grappling together in an intricate, hardly comprehensible design. I couldn't help thinking that those tangled threads would soon melt in the mouth like nothing. As the child was enjoying her cotton candy, she took me by the hand again and led me back to the bench where her father was seated. I was overtaken by a calm emotion that put order into things and found myself suddenly wiser and sad with resignation.

When we started to walk towards the exit, the darkness had already permeated most shapes around us. I felt his strong arm around my shoulders and his lips touching my temple in a strange kiss, half-hearted, hesitant and dry. Then he said: "Forgive me! I know you didn't want something like that to happen, but I was terrified! Do you understand? She's all I have ..."

Something in him had changed too. I was no longer as precious to him as his daughter. I should have felt hurt, but unexpectedly I took those words in calmly and gravely, protecting the girl's image in my mind, with a strange mixture of detachment and closeness. We were heading towards the exit, in silence, unassertive and docile, solitary and yet together, like trees that grow next to each other.

And yet, when we stopped in front of my car and I discovered the doll left on the rear seat, I did not hand it to the little girl with the generosity that should accompany offering a gift, but with a rigid and

forced gesture, as if I was unwillingly giving away something that belonged to myself.

Another photo from the series shot by the young man. The three of them are seated on the bench: the man in the middle, with crossed legs is looking straight at the camera with a gratified expression. His arms, stretched sideways like an accolade, encompass the woman on the right and the girl on the left. Inexplicably, the two resemble each other: maybe because they have the same, slightly questioning smile.

This image causes me a sort of perplexity. I wonder if we could ever invent an X-ray-like system that reveals feelings, enabling us to distinguish in someone the zones of love, of indifference, of doubt. Maybe only then would I finally be able to discover which part of him encloses only me. But it may very well be that borders are continuously blurred, and areas change color and outline, overlapping and separating again, in an endless dance.

Beach Party

The alarm clock pulled Silvia out of a strange dream: she was in the pantry, the only place where she felt safe when a dizziness fit seized her. After closing the door and planting her feet on the floor, she usually clutched a shelf with each hand, closed her eyes, and tried to make her way through that wooziness that took possession of her mind and made her heart beat madly. It took her a while to recover, and sometimes she prolonged her stay, because it felt good inside that protective shell. If she tried to walk out before she had recovered, panic returned with the sensation that all that space around was invading her being, reclaiming bits of her. Her greatest fear was that she might pass out, hit her head and leave her daughter motherless. In this dream, she was standing in her pantry, but the walls and the ceiling had vanished altogether, and she was surrounded by clean air, which made her feel invigorated but lost. When the alarm went off, she was struggling between the temptation to step out into that indefinite brightness and the reassuring possibility of lying down and curling up on the floor.

The room was stuffy; her body felt sticky, so she rushed to open the balcony door. She would rather have slept with that door open, but like all personnel she had her room on the ground floor, and somebody ill-intentioned could have easily jumped over the balustrade and sneaked into her room at night. The pungent smell of the sea came in through the open door. Silvia had been in Eforie Nord on the Black Sea coast for about two weeks, but she still could not get used to this air, so different from the fresh mountain air of Brasov, her hometown in the Carpathians.

She started her day by putting her thoughts in order. The simplest practice was to remember what she had to do: make the bed, take a shower, put on the uniform, comb her hair. Focusing on these things, she did not let fear or depression seep in again. That ritual included thinking of her doctor, who had written a long list of pills to take, and when she looked incredulous at the prescription he said: "Either these, or take yourself a lover."

Like every morning, she felt thankful to her cousin Ana, who had found her this job for the summer and had bought her a jeans shirt and a pair of red sandals to prompt her into her new life.

She took in a deep breath and tried to convince herself that she was finally free, and her life would be much better from now on. The amplifying joy ebbed back in a second. Could she really call herself free? When she had changed trains in Bucharest, she met briefly their daughter Lavinia, who studied pharmacy. Lavinia had refused to hug her and attacked her angrily: "I will never forgive you for what you did. Has it ever crossed your mind it might hurt me? I am now the child of a divorced couple!"

Silvia had no time to answer. Her daughter scrutinized her from top to toe and blurted: "Why are you dressed like that? You're ridiculous!"

Silvia tried to excuse her daughter's abruptness, putting the blame on the stress of exams. But, no, Lavinia was selfish like her father and like him she looked down on her. For twenty years that man had done nothing else but inculcate in Silvia, methodically, day by day, the conviction that she never understood anything, she could not express one single concept clearly, she wasn't able to educate her daughter, and barely knew how to cook.

As she sat on the bed, tears came out, burning her cheeks. Fixing her eyes on the wall in front, she rehearsed in a whisper a speech meant for Lavinia: "The misery of my marriage with your father... I was only eighteen, I had barely finished high school. My parents decided I needed a solid husband to drive the fumes out of my head. He was a colleague of my father's, twenty years older than me. I did not like him at all, but I had no courage to oppose their decision or run away. I hadn't even had time to realize I was married when I got pregnant. You know my life with him was hell, you heard him insulting me every day, but maybe you thought this is how things should be. I did not ask for a divorce earlier because of you. I wanted you to grow up with a mother and a father. Was that all in vain?"

Her whole body was trembling, her fists closed on her temples, as if to stop her brain from blowing up. That terrible sensation was familiar, and she knew very well that when it pervaded her the turbid idea of killing herself slithered into her mind.

She recalled her attempt to leave her husband, and her mother's reaction: "You cannot leave him. You have to endure everything for your daughter. We women are not destined for happiness. Do you think I've had an easy life?"

Silvia thought back to that woman she surprised with her husband in their bedroom. No matter how embittered and humiliated she had felt, she should be grateful to her. In spite of herself, that woman had been Silvia's liberator.

Voices on the corridor turned her self-aware again. She wiped her tears with the back of her hand, rushed to the bathroom and took a calming pill, drinking the tap water avidly, from her palms. Under the shower she rubbed her skin assiduously, determined to wipe away her past as a married woman, which she still felt on her skin, like a sticky film. She came out purified, dressed and started making up in front of the mirror, something she had never been allowed to do before. Young women around her were lining their eyes and eyebrows, putting color on their lips, she was forbidden by her husband to do anything of the kind. The only thing he accepted was transparent lacquer on her nails, cut short, never to suggest she could be an easy woman. Now she examined the woman in the mirror: short, rebellious chestnut hair, blue eyes and sun-tanned skin. This new woman was looking at her from the mirror with a promising gaze. She liked her new face, but all of a sudden her eyes filled up with anger, and then she left the bathroom and started addressing the air in front of her, where her fantasy imagined her husband like an enemy to strike down and crush under the heels of her sandals: "Would you still have the courage to tell me I could not dress like a young girl, as you did for twenty years! I couldn't choose one piece of clothing on my own. You were afraid I would be out of place, dressed like a scarecrow, you said once, according to you I needed to be reminded I was a married woman, just in case I forgot. And deep down I never felt married, just kept prisoner and abused, marriage should be something else."

A cruel smile emerged on her lips, her eyes blazed with anger: "I wish your sour sisters could see me now, I would like to march in front of them with the mini-skirt of my uniform and my red sandals."

She stretched her arm and gazed gleefully at her ring finger: the trace of her wedding ring had been almost covered by tan.

As soon as she took her turn at the reception, Silvia had to unlock the heavy glass door. From outside, her young friends, the students who had arrived on Friday night from Bucharest, were waving at her. They were on a tour of the coast and had come casually to the hotel to ask if there were any free rooms for a few days. They studied economics and

were two years older than Lavinia. They had arrived late, and they had been hungry, so Silvia had gone to the hotel restaurant that was closing and brought them some food. Afterwards they deemed her a friend and called her by name. They had invited her to play cards with them in the hall the previous evening.

She let them in, pointing to her wristwatch. It was six thirty. The other hotel clients were still sleeping. They took the keys of their rooms with thin faces and slow steps and headed towards the stairs. Alex, the blond young man in the group, fell into one of the armchairs in front of the reception and waved the others away. Alina, the dark-haired girl turned back, slightly irritated: "Aren't you coming? What's up?"

Silvia looked at her with a questioning smile, to hide her antipathy. She did not like that girl. The evening before, when Silvia had joined their card game in the hall, she had scrutinized her discretely. A very pretty girl, tall and slim, but impertinent.

One of the boys turned around and motioned to Alex: "Silvia, send him to his room, otherwise he'll fall asleep in the armchair."

Alex waved them away again and asked Silvia: "How was your night?"

Silvia smiled back, in surprise: "My night? I went to bed early, I had to wake up at 6.00."

"We passed part of the night in the disco. Then we went on the beach and took a bath in the sea. Naked, of course. Do you know what the water is like with a full moon?"

Silvia did not, but the idea sounded very exciting, "So, what is it like?"

"Soft, smooth, caressing. Then under the moonlight it turns into a strange silver mass. You have to try it!"

Silvia smiled. "I will," she replied, wondering if she would ever embark on such a daring experience.

The young man continued to tell the story of the night: lying on the wet sand, walking on the dam. Silvia listened to him with an absorbed look, her chin leaning on her fist. She liked this young man and was disturbed by it. Last night, when they were playing cards, he had touched her elbow by chance, and she had perceived a stream running up her arm and warming her neck and her cheeks. None of her young friends knew she had a daughter about their age. She did not tell them anything about herself; they did not ask either.

Alex's voice, sleepy now, was describing the sunrise: "That is the whole experience: facing the sea in the dark and staying till the first sunrays."

Silvia nodded, following his story with a marveling expression. She had never seen the sun rise from the sea.

Alex closed his eyes and breathed in, deeply: "You understand why ancient peoples revered the sun. You can imagine yourself as a Greek from Tomis, over 2000 years ago scrutinizing the horizon every morning, to be sure the wheel of the sun would keep turning."

Silvia seemed to listen to him, absorbed and serious, but she perceived his words as the music of a poem, recited in an unknown enchanting language with an obscure meaning. "How wonderful!" she said in a dreamy voice.

The young man came closer, leaned on the reception desk and whispered: "You have to see this! Will you come with us?"

Silvia nodded automatically, regretting it immediately. She wished he had said: "Will you come with me?" She was trying hard to control a desire to stretch her arm and caress his soft, blond curls, then she felt ashamed of this impulse, turned sad and tried to look away.

Alex touched her hand: "Will you come?"

She answered like a young girl on which a promise is forced: "Yes, yes, I will."

She let him squeeze her fingers. His hand was so warm, almost feverish. Then she seemed to wake up and added in a maternal tone: "Go and take a rest now."

She watched him walk towards the staircase, his rucksack on his shoulders, and heard a voice in her mind: "God, he is so young!" She instinctively touched her cheeks and felt the soft skin, but those young girls were so confident and fresh. Silvia didn't have that nonchalance. She had felt lost, old and out of place last night in front of the girls, seated on the men's knees, smoking carelessly and their legs so cheekily exposed! For their generation, sex was something easy, and useful to keep oneself in good shape, like swimming or biking. Twenty years ago, none of her high-school friends would have had that familiarity with the boys. They were shy and dreamy. For a second, she remembered the only boy who had kissed her in high school at a birthday party. How embarrassing! After the marriage, she had no contact with men her age

anymore: only her husband's friends, old bachelors who greeted her with avid looks and insolent jokes.

The hotel manager came downstairs with her self-confident, energetic gait. That woman never wavered: she always knew what she had to do. There she was, the travel bag on her shoulder, tall, suntanned, determined. Silvia stood up and waited. The manager looked at her wristwatch with a busy air, then passed behind the reception desk and started writing in the hotel notebook.

“Silvia, call me a taxi for the airport please!” She would be away for a week, she wanted to stay with her son during his entrance test at the Faculty of Medicine in Bucharest.

Silvia dialed the number as under command. Each of her gestures was aimed to show the manager her devotion. She had given her this job without any reference and any inquiry, just because she knew her cousin and needed a receptionist who could speak German. During the interview, she simply scrutinized Silvia for an instant, then shook hands with her. From that moment on, Silvia decided she would never deceive her. The taxi would be here in ten minutes. The manager wrote down the things to be done in her absence. Silvia kept thinking of this woman's accomplished life. Every part seemed to be working well: her marriage, the relationship with her son, her career. Silvia would like to become her friend, but she had never found the proper time to get closer to her. There was always a working issue, and then the manager seemed to be unapproachable, too professional, too authoritarian. The hotel personnel call her The General.

Silvia accompanied the manager outside when the taxi arrived, sending best wishes to her son. Before getting into the taxi, the manager gave a few last instructions: “The front door, please, Dina has to clean it today. I say Dina, nobody else, she's the best... and the plumber comes at 10.00, there's a problem on the second floor, I put it down in the notebook.”

Silvia watched the taxi driving away and came back to the reception desk, glancing distractedly through the notes left by the manager. The power she felt she could connect to when she talked to The General vanished in a second when she realized the distance between them.

Dina appeared punctually, as she did every morning, tottering on her bike, her short legs barely reached the pedals. Silvia changed her

mood. This woman turned the hotel into a funny stage. How was she able to leave all her troubles behind, find the others laughable and have a good time mocking them? Short, stubby and cross-eyed, Dina came in swinging her purse: “Has the General already left? Bye-bye, my love! She's not a bad woman, but she's too strong! Can you imagine her in front of her naked husband...?”

Silvia burst out laughing. What a fancy! Dina made her saucy comments knitting her brows, as if she were wondering about her own thoughts. Then she winked, and without waiting for Silvia's reaction she broke into a sonorous fit of laughter.

“Dina, the manager has written here that you are to clean the glass of the front door.”

“Just me, alone?”

“I'm afraid so, she says you're the only one who makes it shine!”

“I see, the better ones work more and are paid the same!”

“Come on, don't spoil your day!” Silvia pleaded with her, pulling out a chocolate box from under the desk. “Here, there's something for your sons.”

Dina hesitated. Then she came closer and unexpectedly kissed Silvia's wrist.

“Hey, what are you doing”, Silvia protested, “are you crazy?”

“I normally kiss only the icons, but when someone has a heart...”

Silvia felt an unexpected warmth. She did not understand if it came from her embarrassment, from surprise or the affection for this little woman, brutalized by too much work and the rough family life. “How are things going, Dina? How is your man?”

“Do you call that a man? He has drunk his brain to the last drop. Like a medicine. Luckily, he falls asleep and doesn't bother the boys!”

Silvia regretted having asked this question. Dina had suddenly turned serious, and her deep wrinkles trapped her face in a net. Then she added with a sigh, “That's my fate. I can't leave him. He'd end on the street. I'm a Christian. I feed him and wash his shirts. Even if he is brainless, he's still the father of my sons.”

Silvia changed the subject. She feared Dina might ask about her own life. Maybe she would be able to tell her story to this woman. Or maybe not. Deep down she feared her judgment as much as she feared anybody else's.

At 7.30 when the bar opened, Dina was already cleaning the glass door up on a ladder, in blue overalls, with a red headkerchief covering her hair, humming an Italian song by Gianni Morandi.

Silvia waved to Tudi, the barman, and watched him as he started the coffee machine, brought in the juices, and cleaned the desk. He opened the bar punctually every morning. The other two barmen, younger than him, came later, eyes swollen from sleep and little enthusiasm for work. Tudi was tall and dark skinned, the growing beard showed bluish on his face. He was very meticulous in his job. Now came Rica, the cashier and his lover. Tudi made her a coffee. She was on the same side of the desk with him, writing down things, stopping to take a sip of coffee, gesticulating. Silvia wondered what they might be talking about. Rica seemed to be counting things.

Dina had to interrupt her work. The stray cats had gathered on the other side of the front door. They mewed looking up to her, rubbing their soft fur on the glass. Every morning she picked up the leftovers from the restaurant and fed them. Dina talked to them through the glass, moving her hands in hope of making herself understood: "All right, all right, you'll have something under your teeth, lest you eat your tails!" Then she climbed down from the ladder fixing the headkerchief on the top of her head.

Leaning against the reception desk, Silvia fixed her eyes on the bar. Dina did not miss anything. Passing by she whispered to Silvia: "You're looking at that tall boy? This shrew is sucking his blood every night. What do you expect? She has squeezed her husband till he's got no marrow left. He is bland like a piece of gauze, but that thing between her legs is not a wound!" Then she swayed her head and added: "Eh, eh, there's nothing like hunger!"

Dina went away. Silvia could not take her eyes off the bar. Even if she made an effort to look up the names of the newly arrived tourists in the register book, she was always aware of the two figures talking in a quiet voice. She felt attracted by their bold and mysterious bond. By looking at them one wouldn't say they were made for each other, and yet they lived everything so naturally, in the daylight, even if she was married and mother of two. Could she find a lover too? Her mind returned for a second to the young student, but a love affair with him was impossible. What about the cook, Tudi's friend, who paid her a compliment every now and then? Ah, no, not that one: he was obnoxious!

Rica was heading to the reception desk with a coffee cup on a little tray. She was walking lazily, and from the slow movement of her thighs and her contented gaze, Silvia thought she perceived a sort of inner fullness in front of which she felt deficient and empty. Rica laid the tray on the desk in front of Silvia. Her wrist was loaded with gold bracelets, presents from a husband who adored her, as she said. She was a married woman with a lover and girlfriends in the shops and neighboring hotels, whom she invited here to the bar to gossip. Silvia thanked her for the coffee, and Rica asked: "Has the General left this morning?"

"Yes, at 6.30."

"Very good. Then tonight we'll have a party for Tudi's birthday. Tomorrow my boys are here with my sister. You're coming, aren't you?"

"Yes, certainly. Thank you."

"It's at the Old Fisherman on the beach, at 8.00. Good fish, good wine, and a birthday cake..." She paused, kissed the point of her little finger and uttered in a high voice: "super-special!" Then she added: "If you want to bring somebody, feel free to do so!"

Silvia did not know what to answer. Rica was staring at her. "I've got it that you are divorced, but don't you really have anybody?"

Silvia answered with a melancholy air: "I haven't found him yet!"

Rica turned back to the bar, flaunting her round hips as in defiance. What a difference between her and Dina, small, wrinkled and sharp, who was crossing the hall with a tray full of leftovers from the restaurant. Rica, called her: "Dina, are you coming for a coffee?"

"I am, madam, a coffee can pump me up. I have to finish the glass door."

In saying so Dina raised her voice, turning towards the other two cleaning women, who were moving around calmly in the lobby with the vacuum cleaner and brushes.

"I don't know why I'm the only one who can do the glass door here!"

The tourists started coming down. Silvia took their keys with ready gestures. She felt useful and free. One of them joked with her, seized her hand and did not let it go. It was the single man who had arrived the other day with the new group of tourists. A trivial, clammy type with a heavy gold chain around his neck. He whispered his words and looked her straight in the eyes, as if he were trying to hypnotize her.

Silvia pulled her hand back. She was acutely aware of her ineptitude, a woman who did not know how to deal with men. He was excited by her clumsiness and insisted.

Dina had given the cats all the food, then she went to clean up the leftovers and returned, cast a glance at the man at the reception desk, gave a short whistle and came closer. When the man finally decided to leave the hotel following a red-haired flamboyant woman, Dina commented in a singing style: "Ciao, ciao bambina, you stay here I go to China! Go, man, go, this one won't say no!"

*

"Long live Tudi!"

Tudi smiled, one of his rare smiles, which seemed to stretch his bland dark face. He had his lover's presents on: white silk shirt, dark-red bow tie, and a gold bracelet. "Champagne: dry and sweet!"

Rica ordered the two waitresses to bring in the birthday cake, presenting it: "Just look at it! A masterpiece! The only one able to do such a thing is the pastry chef at the Albatross Hotel! No way to get the recipe from him, not even under torture! The only thing he let out is that there are 80 egg-whites in it!" Exclamations of wonder. Silvia took a sip from her champagne. She felt uneasy. The place was on the beach, the sea was palpitating in the dark, and she heard the waves slapping the shore incessantly. They sounded as irritated as herself. She felt as if she were on a stranded ship, prisoner of a sly, vulgar pirate. She did not know why the clammy single man was invited, nor who had had the idea to place her next to him, but from the beginning of the dinner he kept annoying her, touching her leg, cracking indecent jokes, and staring at her with half closed eyes, as if trying to weigh a piece of merchandise. And yet, seated in front of him Lili, Rica's friend who worked in a dollar shop, smiled at him with brilliant, inviting eyes. But he seemed to ignore her.

They sang "Happy Birthday" with their glasses filled with champagne. The cake was really extraordinary. The guests manifested their pleasure unanimously. Spying the single man seated next to Silvia with the corner of her eye, Lili said: "I'll order one myself, just for me and for whoever wishes to keep me company!"

Silvia looked around the table: there she saw Maria, one of her colleagues from reception, with her fiancé; one of the boys who worked at their bar; Tudi's friend the cook; and some of Rica's friends with their companions. After the cake, other desserts and peanuts were placed on the table. The group of students who lived in their hotel came from nowhere to wish Tudi "Happy birthday!" Silvia had no idea how they knew about the party but was pleased that they had come. They even brought an after-shave as a present. Rica ordered a table to be attached to theirs, asked the restaurant manager to bring some food, and offered them the remaining birthday cake and champagne. Silvia could not help peeking at them. Alex was seated between Alina, the tall dark-haired girl, and another one with chestnut hair. She felt bad. She would like to stand up and move to their table. Her gaze met Alex's for an instant. He smiled, keeping an arm around Alina's shoulders, or talking absorbed to the chestnut-haired one. Silvia had not yet understood if one of the girls was Alex's partner or not, and this ambiguity made her tense. She was oppressed by boredom and distress, but her senses were sharp, and her mind worked intensely, so she seemed to understand in a flash why they had placed her near the single man. Rica was trying to help her find a partner. Yet she was offended by Rica's choice. The man was voracious and shameless. She felt almost as if she were suffocating. Her head was throbbing.

"Long live Tudi! A Kiss!"

Rica had to get up on the tips of her toes to be able to put her plump arms around his neck. He kissed her with ostentatious ardor, disarraying her curls. Just like in a film. Everybody knew that she was married and tomorrow her sons would arrive. And everybody applauded.

Lili, the shop-assistant, talked to a friend seated next to her: "I'm free on Saturday and Sunday, so I'm leaving!"

Silvia was curious: "Where are you going?"

"On a trip to Istanbul. It's expensive, but who cares! Ten years from now, we may not be here anymore!"

Yes, we may not be anymore, Silvia thought, even in a minute we might cease to be... But she hadn't even lived her life; at least that woman had experienced something.

Lili stood up, the glass in her hand, winking at the single man, and said: "Let's go and kiss the man we celebrate!"

Good idea, Silvia thought. Better to do something rather than sit there devoured by her fears and phantasms. All the guests stood up with the glasses in their hands. Alina hugged Tudi and kissed him on his cheeks. She was as tall as he. For a second Silvia thought they could make a nice couple. Alex came close, touched her elbow and toasted: “Enjoy the feast! Who has placed you there, among those old battleships?”

Silvia’s face turned bright. She smiled at him, an exaggerated smile, she was so happy he too found her misplaced there.

“Ok, I’ll come and sit next to you and your friends!” she said caught by enthusiasm.

There was a lot of turmoil. He might not have heard her.

“Hurrah! Let’s throw him into the sea!” two of Alex’s friends shouted, lifting Tudi from the ground. One held him by his ankles, the other by his arms, and they started carrying him towards the water.

Suddenly they heard a sonorous laughter coming from the dark side and their “Hurrah” emphatically parroted. The young men stopped. One could distinguish two blond heads. Two women, German tourists. Placed back with his feet on the ground, Tudi gestured to them to join the party, and poured champagne in two glasses with professional flourish. Tudi’s friend, the cook, came forward:

“Ja, ja, come, come! You’re so very welcome! Look here what we’ve got: two blond dolls!”

The presence of the German women caused a certain agitation. Silvia noticed that Alex examined them with interest, like everybody else, and she drew herself apart, even though she was the only one who could speak German. Until then the music had been soft in the background. Somebody raised the volume, and one heard excited voices: “Let’s dance! Come on!”

Lili, the shop-assistant, jumped to her feet, took off her sandals and started wiggling her hips in the cha-cha-cha rhythm, dragging everybody else to the part of the beach where they could dance. Alex was talking to the newly arrived guests in English. Silvia stared at him. That was the way Bucharesters behaved, they made friends with everybody, they were so free in their manners. The single man grabbed her by the arm: “Hey beauty! Don’t just sit there! Everything must flow! Like the champagne!”

Silvia jolted up. Yes, dancing was a good idea, even if this man annoyed her. He was right. She tried to feel free but was rigid; her limbs were numb. Better not look at the others, to avoid anxiety and inferiority complexes. The cook opened another bottle of champagne and offered it to one of the two German women as if it were a bottle of beer. She put it to her mouth, took a sip, passed it to her friend and started dancing, shaking her blond mane as if she were electrified.

Silvia barely moved; she seemed to stand still. Her dancing partner was trying to show style, he turned around, raised his arms, waved his hands in a sort of personal adaptation of a Spanish dance. She was unaware of the rhythm and unable to follow him in those movements that looked ridiculous. Now she was looking at the German women. They had to be more or less her age. They were dressed in a very youthful style, and they danced in a free uninhibited way. The plump cook moved from one to the other gesticulating. The Germans laughed – a strong, almost masculine laughter – and made him turn around like a spinning top. This made him sweat so heavily he had to mop his forehead and his nape with his handkerchief continuously.

Unexpectedly, Silvia's dancing partner pulled her towards the center of the dancing space and tried to make her turn round. She did not understand, and he got nervous: "What's up? You're so damn rigid! Let yourself go," and in saying so he slapped her thigh, as one does with a horse to make it move.

"Put your hands down!" she angrily defended herself.

The man came very close to her, emanating a nauseating smell of cheap perfume and alcohol: "Really? What do you want? What are all of you doing here? You're all in search of And then you're being fussy, huh?"

Silvia's face turned red; she felt tears surging in her eyes. She freed her arm from his grip and ran away. She felt bad. Very very bad. She turned back for a second, looking for Alex, ready to ask protection from him. But she could not see him. Her eyes were foggy. The pill! She needed to take her pill! Behind her, the guests were wildly dancing, no one noticed her distress. Nobody would have cared anyway. The only ones still seated at the table were Rica and Tudi. Rica was leaning her head on her lover's shoulder, her legs up on a chair, she was admiring her bare toes. She looked so silly, Silvia thought, a goose, but a goose who made love to that young man every night. Silvia shook at the thought

of that passion that excited her fantasy and gnawed at her, morbidly. Curiosity and envy. Tudi was smoking calmly. He looked detached as he examined the gold bracelet by the sparse flame of his cigarette lighter. Love is worth gold. What about Alex? He was dancing with his friends, joking, laughing, they were making a conga line now. The music went on. People were having fun. It was Tudi's party.

Silvia grabbed the purse from the back of her chair and walked away. She stopped when she felt covered by darkness at the back of the restaurant and started fumbling nervously in her purse, until she felt her pills, took one and broke it with her teeth, tasting its bitterness with raving voluptuousness. Breathing hard, she leaned against the wall and listened to the sea. She moved to the side of the restaurant. From there she could look back at the dancers. The single man was jumping an invisible rope between the two German women. Nobody asked about her, nobody missed her. She had no friend, no lover. She was lonely. Lavinia would have despised her in that moment. So would her husband. She was shivering. It would have been good to disappear: nobody would have noticed her absence. Everything around closed so tightly on her, making her feel so bad, that she would have rather drowned the misery of her soul in those dark, troubled waters calling to her with the smell of algae and salt.

Somebody came towards her from the darkness. She was terrified. A lighter was lighting her face. It was Alex. "What are you doing here? What's happened?"

A tear was rolling down her cheek. He kept on examining her in the flame of his cigarette lighter. She endured his look, her eyes fixed on the darkness. He noticed the white traces of the calming pill on her lips. He touched them with the tip of his index finger with a questioning look.

She explained: "It's a calming pill."

Alex smiled with a comprehensive air, took her by the hand and pulled her towards the dark shore. "Come, let's have a walk. You have problems, haven't you?"

She took off her sandals and stepped barefoot on the sand. The party was somewhere behind them. The soft breeze carried away broken words and music. Silvia felt that this young man might understand her. He put his arm around her shoulders, as if he were her partner or an old friend. The touch of his warm body was so reassuring, it made her almost feel dizzy.

“Why don’t you talk about yourself? I’d like to know you better!” His voice was calm, as he walked in step with her. “Want to tell me about your worries? I’m a good listener.”

She would actually like to tell him everything in one go: her childhood, her parents, the marriage, the daughter, her decision to run away, the divorce. Her past life weighing inside like lead. But she was so afraid of ruining this moment, of making him go away with one word. So she kept quiet for long minutes, turning towards the sea. Somewhere in the distance there was a light, gliding in a straight line. Maybe a little ship. Silvia breathed in powerfully and plucked up the courage to say: “I’m divorced ... “

He lit a cigarette. She caught his handsome features in the short flame flicker. He looked calm. “My parents are divorced too,” he added casually, to present this as a simple fact rather than a confession. She was glad the dark hid her inquiring expression. Had he put her on the same level with his parents? This made her shrink into herself again.

She felt him in the dark – calm, mild, comprehending, a good man. He could be a friend or a brother she had never had. She should no longer think of bad things happening to her but simply accept this bounty, coming to her like a balm, without hesitation. Her body followed her thoughts, and she rested her head on his shoulder, looking for a consolation that nobody had ever given her. “The sea is so nice at this hour!” She spoke with a new clear voice.

The small waves rushed towards the shore and withdrew rapidly. They heard their noise and sometimes saw the whiteness of the foam gleam in the moonlight. The waves seemed to address her, repeating with every come and go motion: “take this chance, take it, otherwise it will go, take it...don’t let it go...”

Silvia closed her eyes and let herself be carried away by the fluid warmth that was binding their bodies. Right then she trusted him blindly. How stupid of her to take the calming pill. She imagined that, if he were to kiss her now, he would taste the bitterness on her lips. He did not move, though. He only held her tight and said: “The sea is not so quiet tonight. I wouldn’t swim in it.”

The waves’ motion, that hidden dance, the secret life of the depth. Here on the sand, a soft silence, closing on them, isolating them from the world. Silvia thought for the first time in her adult life that this was happiness and would have liked to keep it like that forever.

But that impression was really short. From behind them they heard young voices coming closer. Somebody was laughing. She startled, afraid of being discovered by the group together with this young man. For a second, the light of a cigarette in the dark took her breath away. She couldn't help feeling spied on, hunted. She freed herself from him and started walking away. What if her husband had sent people to follow her, so he could counteract the divorce trial? What if the hotel manager found out? Shame and fear invaded her.

"I have to go away! Sorry!", she whispered in agony.

He murmured into her ear: "Where are you running? We can find a place to be on our own. I want to feel your body."

Silvia was happy that this young man desired her, but disappointed at his being as direct as the hateful single man. He only used nicer words.

She left him behind and hurried towards the stairs that led to the promenade. She put on her sandals and sped up her pace without looking back. She gasped while climbing the stairs and reached the promenade almost breathless. She suddenly felt the coolness of the night and rubbed her arms to warm up. When she was on the beach with Alex, she had felt a new free being, ideally ready to run away with him to the end of the world. Here, on the promenade, with people passing by, she fell back into her old anxious self. Hurrying her steps, Silvia headed towards the hotel. As she got closer, she came upon Alex's friends, seated on two benches on the promenade and passing around a bottle of liquor.

One young man asked: "Hey, Silvia, where did you disappear?"

"I know who she was with!" said Alina aggressively. She had had too much to drink.

Silvia flinched. Her heartbeat accelerated. Instinctively, she put her hand in her bag ready to take a pill.

"She was with Alex. Come on, tell us how it was."

Silvia turned around with a curt reply: "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Yes, you do, old slut!" retorted Alina with a thick and angry voice. The others protested.

Silvia scurried away, shocked, wondering why she had so much desired freedom. Would people ever let her live her life? Freedom seemed to be just a new trap. She pressed her palms on her ears; she did not want to hear the noises of the world anymore.

As soon as she entered the hotel lobby, she felt safe. Her colleague on duty was seated at the low table in front of the reception desk, a tray full of goodies from Tudi's party in front of him. Silvia asked him: "How was the shift?"

"Normal. I only had trouble with a guy who wanted to take two drunken women to his room. They were Dutch or German, I think."

Silvia took her key and almost ran to her room. She opened it with nervous hands and shut herself inside. It was so good to be safe, protected by walls. Without turning on the light she opened the balcony door, to let some fresh air in. She feared so much that girl would shout in the hotel what she said to her on the promenade. She spent long minutes under the shower, as if the water pouring on top of her head was meant to seep inside her mind and clean it of unhappy thoughts. Then she came out wrapped in the towel.

As soon as she was out of the bathroom she froze: the curtain was moving. She was considering what to do, scream or just run out of the room, when she heard a familiar voice: "It's me, Alex!"

He had jumped on the balcony over the balustrade. Now he closed the balcony door, came straight to her and took her in his arms. She abandoned herself to his embrace, enthralled by the soft touch of his blond curls. Then unexpectedly he opened her tight lips with an invading, wild, furious kiss, as if he wanted to break the woman he had in front of him to find another one beneath.

He suffocated her, did not let her take her breath. He had a devastating desire to make love. On the beach he was friendly and respectful, now he seemed to be possessed, as if she were a mere occasion to actuate a secret vision. Silvia wanted to defend herself – everything seemed wrong – but then she was carried away by his impetus, infected by his frenzy, and she started reacting by instinct, an instinct she never knew she had. Her skin woke up, she discovered her hands audacious. So that is what she had missed for 20 years. Suddenly all her anxieties vanished, there was something strong and new that sucked them away, leaving her like an empty crater, in which, from an unknown depth, lava erupted. Incandescent.

Later he cuddled her in his arms, and she felt they were sewn together by a thin thread of perspiration, which smelled sweet to her. Impossible to stop the recollection of her husband's acid sweat, his hairs on the pillow. Her own rigid body, like a statue corroded by his touch.

This night she discovered that sex could be different from the horror she had experienced as a wife. She smiled in the dark, a knowing smile, now she felt level with Rica and other women. Her doctor was right. A lover could remove the heavy past, dissolve it, turn it innocuous.

Listening to Alex's quiet breath her distress resurfaced. How was she going to face him when he woke up? His friends? What if somebody saw him going out of her room? How was she going to behave for the next two days, until he and his group left?

She spent the rest of the night agonizing about the possible scenarios.

When the sun rose, she could see Alex sleeping, his blond curls on her pillow. There was something frail about his shoulders, acute like a baby's moaning. The white bedsheet spread under his arm, could have been an open wing.

She got up from bed and opened the balcony door. The morning breeze moved the blue curtains: through the half-open door she heard the cleaning women start the water sprinklers on the meadow behind the hotel.

She recognized Dina's voice: "There's a man's belt here! They're losing everything, these devils, not only their minds! They're lucky their privates are firmly attached, otherwise who knows what we could find here in the morning!"

The other women laughed, a thick laughter that mixed with the calm and thin murmur of the water sprinklers open on the meadow.

Dina's voice again: "That's all because of this salty sea..."

"How come?"

"You're kidding!"

She continued sagaciously: "In the countryside they give salt to cattle to spur them to mate."

Silvia started to reason quickly: she would dress and go out, leaving the balcony door ajar and the room door unlocked, so Alex could leave. Then she would spend all her day out; she was supposed to work only in the evening. She had time to think over how to behave when she met him and his friends again.

Dina started singing comical rhymes. Outside the women laughed, excited by Dina's obscene allusions, unaware that, hidden in her room behind the curtains, Silvia walked on the tips of her toes in search of her clothes, with a newly acquired confidence, feeling good in her

skin, free of bonds, like never before, and yet dreading every move, as if stepping on insubstantial empty air.

The Smile

For M.D. and her son H.

The night before he had read the reviews of his exhibition, on top of the bed, one arm around Sanda's waist, a glass of vodka in her left hand, from which both sipped in turns. He had made it! His art was finally acclaimed as the event of the year. "Andrei Bratu is taking our national art into a new direction" was one of the titles. Only he knew how much hard work was behind that success; how many efforts to free himself from the socialist realism he was taught in the art institute. His master was a celebrated sculptor of monuments dedicated to soldiers, peasants and workers, all with a petrified expression on their faces, a sort of abstract look into an indefinite future. It was because of their lack of life that he rejected them and tried to do something else. Following Brancusi's example, he wanted to capture in stone, the most compact and heaviest matter, the rhythm and fluidity of things, the dance of fire, the inner tremor of things. His works turned abstract, and he had a sense of accomplishment, of having succeeded to grasp the vibrations of the world engine. As he read the conventional formulas of praise, he was thinking how much he owed to his friend Florin, the poet, who convinced him to change the titles of his works. When he saw the draft of the catalogue, Florin exclaimed: "Where do you think you are exhibiting? In Plato's Academy? Hear, hear: Form 1, Form 2, Form 3... This will be classified as bourgeois reactionary art, and you'll get into trouble." The poet looked at the shapes and renamed them in socialist style: Gate into the Future, Accolade of Hope, Summer Crop, Flame, Victory.

The satisfaction of his success remained inside during the sleep, running through his veins like a benefic sap, and when he woke up, he let it out in a self-complacent yawn. The newspapers and the art magazine were scattered on the floor next to the empty bottle and the rests of the improvised dinner. He remembered Sanda had to leave early, but couldn't help bursting out: "Damn, woman, you could have tidied up a bit! That's me: always coupling with sloppy women indifferent to my art!" Next to the bed leg he caught a glimpse of her metal bracelets.

He frowned in front of the stylized torso inspired by her in which he had tried to capture the restlessness of her flesh, concealed as a latent threat in the compact matter of her lazy curves. "Really, Sanda there's lots of substance in your prosperous rump!" he addressed the torso and, changing his mood, he smiled at the recollection of her lush black hair, that left in his palm the same rough sensation of rugged stones. He bent to gather the newspapers from the floor and while he was trying to order them on a shelf the bell rang. "There she is," he thought, "she can't live without her bracelets!"

He prepared for a sharp rebuke and opened the door with a sudden gesture. In front of him was an unknown woman dressed in black. He was shirtless, with his hair in disorder and the sleep still hanging from his lids. When he finally understood that the unknown woman wanted to commission him a work, he put on a welcoming smile inviting her inside. She did not respond to his smile. Her face was frozen in a vacant expression. The artist disappeared in the bathroom to wash his face, give a brush to his hair, put his dressing gown on and wrap a scarf around his neck to cover Sanda's love bites. Then he spied the woman through the half open door: she was standing, motionless, backlit. Quiet and patient she was looking around, moving slowly her head. She had a peculiar style of dressing: a black velvet cloak, a hat made from the same fabric, black stockings, black shoes. He came out and grabbed the clothes heaped on a chair to make space and offered her the seat: "I'm sorry, my study is not apt to receive guests and I'm a bit wild."

The woman replied in a bland voice: "I prefer to stand, thank you, I won't keep you long."

The sculptor let the heap of clothes fall back on the chair and stood in front of it, trying to hide the sight. But the woman was not looking at anything in particular. Her pale face looked indefinite, and her blue eyes did not seem to reflect the world around. Her straight gray hair emphasized the severe expression of her classical lineaments. She spoke:

"Maestro, two years have passed now since our son left us."

The artist said in a low voice: "I'm sorry."

"I would like to order you a life size statue of him!"

The sculptor was stupefied: "Madam, I am an artist, and they say a pretty good one too, but I do not make funerary monuments."

“I know very well you are an artist. That’s why I’ve come to you, I think you are able to return my son to life. I miss him enormously. Life is just an illusion anyway. Why not try to recreate it?”

Andrei examined her concentrated: was she insane?

“My son is the young pianist who died prematurely, you may have heard about him...”

The artist felt a shudder crossing his body and lowered his gaze. He had never attended a live concert of the young man, but he heard something on the radio, in a commemorative program, and knew everybody considered him an unusually great talent. What a terrible fate! And now his mother was standing firmly in front of him expecting an answer.

“Madam, you know, I make modern things, mostly abstract, or half-abstract if you like. I am not a figurative artist. But if you find something you like among the works on display now in the central gallery, I’ll be happy to give it to you as an homage for your son. Actually, honored.”

The woman made a vague gesture that betrayed her disappointment: “I know your works. I was at the inauguration last night. I’m here because my son saw two of your pieces once, when we visited a group exhibition, and he said that he liked them, because they were musical... I do not know what he meant by that, but I think you do not catch shapes of nature, but their soul... what is more dead than a stone, and yet you make it move, flow, fly.”

The artist was caught by confusing emotions. He was flattered that the young musician and his mother liked his art. He replied: “I thank you, you are kind, but I do not feel like changing style right now. Can you understand? For years I have strived to create my own style and have it accepted in my environment. I think you know what I mean. Because I wanted to be free, as free as one can be here. Now I accept commissions, but in my style!”

Ignoring his words, the woman turned in a profile and motioned to an imaginary interlocutor: “Women and artists are the only ones who give shape to life in our mortal world. I am asking you to give my son a body, that’s what I miss, for the rest he’s alive!”

The sculptor was examining her with great interest. Her direct, yet very polite way of saying such things made him timorous.

The woman came closer with that strange, illegible look on her face:

“You think I’m mad, don’t you? It happens quite often now. I’ve got used to it. After I lost my son, my life is very different, I’ve lost any interest in the usual ordinary things. I live for the dreams where my son appears and tells me things. My husband would have talked to you differently. He’s pragmatic, so he would have told you immediately how much we can spend for this work. We have prepared a good sum, so if you prefer...”

The artist leaned against an empty pedestal and interrupted her: “Listen, I can’t say money hurts me, but I... you are asking me a very peculiar thing. I am grateful for your appreciation, but I’m not able to accept this type of commission.”

The guest kept silent, her eyes wandering distractedly versus a corner of the study. Then suddenly she turned her back on him and moved toward the door with little steps. On the threshold she turned back and said hastily: “Truth is, such a thing is accepted on the spot, or not at all.”

The artist remained staring at the empty doorway. But in an instant, he ran down the stairs. The woman was already crossing the inner yard with decided steps, when he caught up with her and asked:

“Please, come back, with some photographs, perhaps.”

In the following days, the sculptor was very busy. Every evening he stayed in the gallery after the closing time, to talk to journalists or people who just admired his works. A commune on the Black Sea Coast commissioned him a monument for peace, inspired by one sculpture entitled *Waves*. All this made him feel exhilarated. It was as drinking champagne: turned him aloof and excited at the same time. A reward after so many years of solitary, obstinate work. In this euphoric state he went out to celebrate with Sanda and his friends. Often, he and Sanda turned tipsy to his studio, with some bottle under their arms, “to sip the dawn,” as Florin, the poet, would have decreed.

One evening he had a dinner with characters from the artistic milieu. He did not feel at ease among all those people who had power in the artists’ union. They were complimenting him. An art critic, with smoke-blackened teeth, congratulated him and added: “I was the first to recognize your talent, do you remember?”

Oh, yes, he did remember. Years back, when he was a beginner, he had exhibited together with a group of debutants, and the critic, a man of power then, a man of power now, patted him on the shoulder encouragingly and whispered in his ear. "You're promising you know! If you come to me, I'll teach you some tricks to get better!" He never did go to him, and he instantly felt a sense of disgust for that man who wasn't able to make a toy with modeling dough! And now he was sticking to him! After the toast he even held a speech repeating several times that he was the only one who believed in his talent, from the very beginning. The artist's gaze was captured by Sanda who let the hands of an old architect with a showy dark red bowtie under his grey face, run his fingers along her back.

This made the sculptor nervous, and he drank too much. It was almost 4 o'clock in the morning, when they got off a taxi in front of the studio. As they were climbing the stairs, Sanda, very excited, was leaning against him with her heavy body and tried jokingly to make him a Salvador Dali moustache with her black hair. He was pushing her apart, slowly, tired and disgusted by the whole evening. When they were inside, the woman started liberating her feet from the narrow shoes, while speaking in a decided voice: "Now that you have started to be successful, you could buy a house. I hope you're not going to pass all your life in this studio!"

There, she too wanted to take possession of his success, to take care of him, organize his life. He grabbed the first empty bottle within reach and thrust on the ground howling: "And for who am I supposed to buy this house? For one like you who lets herself touch by the first old billy goat she comes upon?"

They quarreled as never before. Mad with fury, Sanda slipped her feet into her shoes and stormed out shouting back as she was going down the stairs:

"You're a beast! That's what you are!"

He heard the heavy entrance door slammed and the sharp sound of her heels on the desert street. Maybe she was right. All those years of solitude may have turned him wild. But, now that he was out in the light, everybody wanted to put him in a cage and show him as a prize. What a bitter thought! His talent finally recognized in exchange for his freedom. No! Never! He'll pull their legs, have fun in being an important figure, but he'll go on working as he had always done, for that was his strength.

He wanted to start immediately. And while the dawn was consuming the diluting darkness, he made himself a strong tea and started to order the studio. He gathered the empty bottles in a corner, opened the large window and even watered the two plants abandoned on a granite cube. He was moving determined in the space where he had passed so many years, turning happy around a work he thought good or destroying disappointed many other unfinished ones, often disgruntled and depressed, sometimes without enough coins in his pocket to buy a newspaper or a packet of cigarettes. The first sun rays brought him an unexpected joy: "I'll go out for breakfast! World, I'm challenging you: today I, an artist playing with abstractions he entitles as the communists wish, I'll play the bourgeois!"

He went to a cafeteria and walked back with several journals rolled under his arm, smiling at the hasty pedestrians, full of an infantile, irresponsible joy. In the yard, a few steps from the entrance door, the woman in black was waiting for him. He had forgotten her in the confusion of that week. He invited her inside and looked around to find a chair. He took the most decent chair he had, an imitation of a Florentine original, a gift from a fascinating actress, 15 years older than himself, he had loved in his youth.

His guest sat down with a natural grace that embarrassed him. Many women had come here, to his reign, beautiful or just attractive, stupid, interesting, intelligent or just shrewd, almost all of them hunting for his virility or attracted by his unusual lifestyle; yet none had succeeded to breach his confidence and made him hesitant.

The woman took off her thin gloves and posed them on her knees. She smiled, a faded smile, that was not destined to him, but to something indefinite inside her. The artist found it disquieting that, apart from her icy face, he could not find in her the apparent signs of pain. He was used to faces corroded by suffering, broken gestures, altered voices. This woman who had been traversed by death had a smooth face and a clear voice.

With a graceful gesture she handed him a big envelope with photographs: "There are photos from every age. He was never the same in pictures. It may be difficult for you to capture an expression that is typically his. I do not think I had one son, but various ones: one for every age. He used to say when he grew up, that we are musical phenomena, in

continuous transformation. In music every moment is unique, even when the sounds repeat themselves.”

The artist raised his gaze and said: “What a pity I could not hear him playing live!”

“He did not have time to perform much. But we have some recordings,” she added pulling other pictures out of her bag. “These are the last ones: the New Year’s Eve. He was already sick, but we had no idea yet, how serious it was. Just a year before this, everything was perfect: he made progress with his art, had a beautiful girlfriend and many future projects.”

The sculptor took in attentively the young man’s tired face, and he saw that the picture had caught how life was already leaving him.

“Who is the girl resting on his shoulder?”

“An old childhood friend. They talked, debated and quarreled over many things. She is a very intelligent girl and curious like my son. He had many friends, he was affectionate and extrovert,” she continued with a touch of pride her soft voice could barely disguise. “His friends continue to visit me, as if nothing had changed, we talk about him, as if he were in next room. It does me good... I find bits of him in any of them.”

The artist was listening in a respectful silence. Through the wide glass of his studio the spring sun touched the bloodless hand of the woman caressing discretely the photographs. She went on, as if talking to herself: “Sometimes I think that my son was not born for this world... and that he knew it; he knew he was just passing by...”

Distraught, the artist attempted to comfort her:

“Oh, madam, but one understands that he loved life...”

The woman stood up and took a few steps toward the window. The black of her dress was absorbing the light, avid and implacable. She stopped in front of him and asked motioning to the photos:

“What do you think? Could you capture his essence?”

“It’s hard... I need to examine them longer ...”

“Oh, yes, I see”, she added, and without any ceremony, greeted him with a light wave, moved towards the door and left.

After her departure, the studio looked strange, as if the woman’s words and evasive gestures had pervaded the air. That atmosphere distressed him, he would have liked to dissipate it with something alive, a group of noisy friends or Sanda’s silly but reassuring chatter. After their

fight, she had disappeared. He was ready to go and look for her, but he gave up and went to his exhibition, where he stayed till the closing time.

The next day Sanda came to the gallery. She was the same as usual. In her lazy style she let herself fall in an armchair, lit a cigarette and between one smoke ring and another, asked him if he was still angry with her. At the beginning he treated her with a certain indifference, but then an irresistible desire of warm, normal life pushed him again towards her. Late in the night they made love in his studio. Sanda recovered her self-confidence and started to think he could not live without her, while he was simply clutching to her shapely, statuesque body, as he thought its concreteness was banishing his anxiety, his fear of the unknown.

Dawdling naked in the studio, Sanda noticed the pictures of the young pianist on the drawing table. He told her about the encounter with the woman in black.

“Are you going to do this statue?”

He looked at her thoughtful.

“I don’t know if I am able. Just the idea blocks me. This woman wants a life size reproduction of her son, maybe seated at his piano. It is a crazy thing! And then my milieu... making fun of me: the funerary monuments sculptor...”

“But since you are known and the young pianist is known, maybe they’ll put your work in a public garden or a piazza?”

“This is a private commission,” he thought, but did not bother to answer. He was doubting he would ever be able to give the young musician his body, as the mother wished, but he did not have the courage to deny it to her.

For a while the pianist’s mother did not show up. Meantime he was absorbed by many commitments. His exhibition was transferred in July to Constanta, on the Black Sea coast, so he was busy with packing and supervising the shipping. Then he prepared with a photographer the images for a monograph on his works, edited by Virginia Ioan, a young journalist he liked. Every now and then, seeing a woman dressed in black reminded him of the pianist’s mother and he felt guilty. The idea that he could come across her turned him anxious. He had moments when he would have liked to withdraw his promise and send her to his old master, who did figurative sculpture and was more apt than himself for this work. But he also feared to delude her and this fear, thin and insidious, stayed with him.

One morning she rang his bell. She greeted him first, fixing him with her blue eyes, and as soon as she got in, she said:

“I don’t want to disturb you. I just wanted to greet you. With you I can talk. And then I found this old photograph I think very important. I had mislaid it. It’s from the time when I was telling him fairytales.”

The photo showed a frail young child, his face tenderly attached to his mother’s cheek. The woman was beautiful, with long hair, in wavy curls, according to the fashion of the fifties, and bright, joyful eyes. The artist looked up from the picture. His guest looked absent. The delicate features of her face could barely be read behind that pale masque. Only her voice got some color as she spoke:

“At that age he was asking a lot of questions. I was taking him to the Herastrau Park on the island of the roses, and there, seated on his favorite bench in front of Mozart’s bust, I was telling him fairytales. Once I told him the story of the prince turned into stone by a witch, and he asked me, pointing to the bust: “Was he turned into stone too? Do you know the magic words to bring him back to life?”

The woman stood quiet for a moment, put on a feeble smile at that memory, then went on: “I often wonder why he has been taken away from me? Maybe his only guilt was his perfection... A creature like this ruins the balance of the world...”

The sculptor was listening quietly. A tear was slowly gliding on the woman’s smooth cheek like a raindrop fallen there by accident. And if now her suffering would melt into weeping? Nothing happened though. The woman passed her handkerchief on her cheek and unexpectedly got animated, as if a secret source had given her energy. She said: “I am convinced that you with your sensitivity will be able to catch my son’s music, I mean the music he had inside, able to express the matter’s secret life. There’s an echo of this music in me... I’m going to help you... we’ll make it, won’t we?” she asked looking up towards the artist.

The sculptor was watching her, moved, and thought: “What a bet with death. God, can you hear her?” How could he say he wouldn’t be able to represent her son? He got closer and said:

“I’d like to hear some of his recordings. My reel-to-reel tape deck is not so good, but maybe it can help me have an idea. Will you bring them to me?”

She did not need coaxing. Two days later she was back in the studio. She handed him the tapes, wandered for a while among the objects scattered around, stopped in front of a work called *Fountain*, that figured a stylized female body, with liquid contours and liquid hair and said: "I've had this thought: Adam was modeled from clay. God is a sculptor. They say in these stories it's the symbol that matters. I think we are literally made of this substance..."

She took off a necklace of small blue stones, she was wearing around her neck, and handed it to him: "My son made this present to me, when he was probably ten years old, together with a note in which he wrote: I want you to stay always beautiful and never die!" I've worn it ever since. Last night I took it off after so many years and I discovered the dust gathered between the stones. Look at it: this dust is my perspiration, the salts of my body, it's part of me..."

With her fingertips she separated two stones to show him what she meant, and the artist found it so strange, that this woman, so frail and reserved, made of air, so to say, even if the air she was made of was dense and tenacious, had left those dark, dirty traces between the little stones. She went on: "You see, we consume ourselves, I mean we always lose little by little this matter that forms us... we turn into dust everyday... like a statue eroded by the wind."

The artist was afraid to follow her in these digressions, he wanted to rest with his feet on the ground. Discretely he took two glasses, opened a bottle of wine and offered his guest. She took the glass with great simplicity, took a sip and went on: "I don't know if whatever I'm telling you can be of any help. But maybe as an artist, you can comprehend my son better than me. We used to have coffee, the two of us, in our small kitchen, and he was telling me incomprehensible things, for instance once he talked to me about the musical time as a form of getting out of the present, things like that. When he finished playing a piece, he stayed for a second immobile, with a bright light on his face... How he experienced that musical time, I cannot even imagine: maybe he just got into another dimension..."

Here she stopped fixing a point in the air, and clutching her small white fists: "I was so ingenuous, I felt happy if he was going out of our heavy present, I imagined he was gaining life, time; the other time sucked him out, instead, do you understand?"

The artist was playing distractedly with a chisel. He did not understand her, but he was moved by the effort of this little woman to try and find an explanation for her son's death, be it even in that bizarre arrangement of ideas. This made her appear to him more tragic than a mother who expressed her pain moaning and screaming. Lucky Sanda, interested only to find out if the men she passed by were excited by the dance of her hips.

He put a jacket on and offered to accompany her back home. She thanked, but immediately turned rigid and left in a hurry, leaving him disappointed.

The figure of this woman started to present itself to his mind more and more often. The mute features of her face and the pitiless black of her dress, made him anxious, but her soul was limpid, a crystal through which her son's persona appeared. Her brief visits awakened in him intense states of mind and lots of thoughts. He would have liked to talk to a musician and try to comprehend this fluidity of music, the way musicians tried to catch forms and dissolve them in the flow. It appeared to him that he was so different, as he tried to give material, solid and enduring shape to his states of mind. He tried to fix time, to block its passage: how could they feel attached to life, when everything in their soul and their art was fleeting?

Sanda took immediate notice of his distracted air. She was used to the artists' whims, but this time she felt in Andrei a rising resistance to herself that irritated her.

"What's wrong? Why are you always pissed off? Right now, when everything is going well for you?"

Sanda's bickering only added to his nervousness. He no longer found her interesting, actually she appeared suddenly flat and boring. He started to find excuses in order not to go out with her or take her with him when he met his friends. She would not surrender, but kept coming to his studio, sometimes she popped in late at night. He had become sullen, they often quarreled. Every so often the desire to own that lascivious stout body assailed him, but afterwards he ceased to experience that feeling of fullness, his union with her used to give him. He was changing and he realized this with a sort of restlessness, of subtle inner apprehension that was so distant from Sanda's carnal aplomb. Because of that he ruined their encounters and experienced a sort of cruel satisfaction when everything degenerated into the grotesque.

One morning, after a tense episode with Sanda, he felt angry with himself, degraded, wasted. He took a train and went to the mountains where he spent a week in an isolated cabin for climbers. It did him good to leave Bucharest for a while. When the weather was fine, he walked through the woods, stopping in front of some rock that seemed to have captured who knows what ancient motion, gesture or grimace of the earth. He passed hours watching the clouds and the rough mountain sides, fascinated by the contrast between the rocky abysses and the imponderable air. As a worker with matter, he had not much considered air, for him just emptiness, the lack of form. Now he realized that it acquired an undeniable concreteness. The entire alchemy of rain, fog, wind, was hidden in that air. The key to movement and life was encapsulated in it.

For two days there was bad weather, so he spent his time in the cabin with the manager, a rough mountain man, closed in himself, of scarce words, indifferent to anything that happened beyond the forest. He tried to feel what the man felt, now that he was far away from his exhibition, his friends, the women who stepped into his studio. Suddenly he felt more accomplished here in the full quietness than in the city.

Then one day the pianist's mother turned back to his mind. That woman lived on the edge of the unknown and felt so natural about it. She had also opened some secret improbable gates for him. The intuition of that realm made him lose his balance, but it also attracted him irresistibly. He had passed his life to study the fullness of shapes, and his work was the result of his stubborn observing, researching, and combining what he could absorb from the visible world with his senses avid of concreteness. Would he be able to recreate the young man from the vagueness of his mother's feelings? But that vagueness was so intense, like the strong air of the mountain, that he felt compelled to give it a try.

He returned to Bucharest one Saturday evening, serene, loaded with energy and with a new thought that had never bothered him before: maybe the human beings exist only if loved, as the colors exist because of the light. He had left his studio only a week ago, but he found it hard to readjust to its shades and objects. He found the tapes with the young pianist's recital. He put it on his reel-to-reel tape deck, opened a bottle of wine, snuggled up on bed, his back leaning against the wall, and in the dark slowly drank the entire bottle listening again and again to those musical notes. He was not sensitive to classical music and had no musical

education, but he perceived a force in that recording, similar to that of the clouds changing shape over the mountains he had recently seen. He turned restless. The figure of the young man started to take shape in his imagination, only to vanish immediately. He turned on the light and tried to sketch on a paper what passed through his mind. The sign on the paper was rigid and lifeless. After a few more attempts his hand started involuntarily to trace with quick nervous touches the face of the pianist's mother. What came out was her face as a young woman, a reproduction of her happy time when she used to tell her young son fairy tales. He filled various sheets with her portrait, scattering them around the studio. With every new drawing the portrait became livelier, her expression focused in her smile, a meek and ardent smile at the same time, a tight knot of emotional intensity and peaceful acceptance to life. He smoked his last cigarette illuminated by that smile, then he threw himself on the bed and fell asleep.

He woke up late that morning and went out to make some phone calls. He did not have a landline in his studio, as he did not want to be interrupted when he worked. He fixed an appointment and turned back to the studio to change. The door was half open. "What the devil!" He stepped in angry with himself slamming the door. The drawings made during the night were no longer around. An unknown dog came to greet him and started sniffing his shoes. After a second of stupefaction, he heard the voice of the pianist's mother coming from the large window.

"I apologize, I took out the dog and as we passed by your building he escaped from the leash and entered the yard, I followed, and he ran up the first flight of stairs and pushed the slightly open door with his snout. I am sorry... But I think he sensed that his young master's traces led to this place."

"No problem, my studio is always open," replied the artist a bit tense, when he realized she was holding the drawings done during the night in her hand. The dog walked around the studio, sniffing in the surroundings, then came close to the women's feet and lay down, his head on his front paws with a downcast air. The woman looked down at the dog and said, "I believe in the myth of Orpheus who tamed animals and moved trees with his music. When my son was studying, the dog lay down enchanted under the piano, and never moved from there, not even if a stranger entered the house he usually reacted to. Now when I listen to one of our son's recorded concerts, he goes under the piano and does

not move till the end of the music. He turns around the piano, he's waiting for him, ... the music binds souls, if they be human, or animal, and I think plants too."

The sculptor was slightly embarrassed, besides he had to leave soon.

"Madam, if you don't mind..."

The woman stood up keeping the drawings tightly in her arms. Her eyes had a vague trace of light and there was a touch of blush on her faded cheeks.

"Excuse me for daring to gather them... I have understood that you are searching for my son through me, you are a very subtle artist. However, since he's no longer here, I cannot bear to see my face in a mirror... it's not just that I should be still here..."

She placed the drawings on a small table turning her back on him. The artist was surprised by his guest's change. She was embarrassed, hesitant, did not know what to do. Then, she abruptly walked towards the large window and stopped in front of the two flowerpots, with the plants almost withered, abandoned on the granite block. She took a gaze at them, then opened the curtains completely and commented with a trace of disappointment in her voice:

"There is so much dust in here, the plants do not breathe...and something else: I am sure you do not care about them."

The sculptor nodded, trying to align his ruffled hair with his palm. It was true, he did not care about those plants. One of his flirts had brought them some time ago.

He asked her:

"Madam, why do you think plants perceive our feeling, or lack of?"

"I am convinced they sense everything; some research has proved it. Everything that surrounds us has a soul, including these stones, you know better than me that stones have a soul."

Then the woman walked towards the darkest corner of the studio, where a few empty bottles had been crammed. She bowed, took one and handed it to the sculptor:

"Will you please rinse it and fill it with fresh water?"

When he came back with the bottle, she started to water the plants accurately.

That evening Sanda, he hadn't seen for a while, dropped in with one of her friends, a lean young woman with short hair and an expression of wonder on her face. At one point, when the conversation was stagnant, Sanda stood up taken by melancholy and walked towards the window. Distracted as usual, she hit one of the flower vases, making it almost fall. Andrei flinched at the sight:

“Beware! That plant has a soul...”

She replied sarcastically:

“Since when have you grown an interest in the soul of plants? Soul, heh?... Dear, they are made of flesh, like us.”

“Yes, dear,” he replied, “you’re right. Like us they are made of flesh. Of corruptible flesh...”

Sanda beckoned to her friend who was inspecting the objects in the studio, grabbed her purse, and lashed back through tight teeth:

“I can’t stand jerks!”

He heard her outside the door telling her friend:

“He must have found himself a botanical slut who talks him into souls.”

With Sanda’s departure he felt relieved. Two weeks later he saw her in a restaurant with the decrepit architect who was kissing the tips of her fingers one by one. That was good theatre, he started laughing and understood that one part of him had departed.

Andrei Bratu passed July and August at the Black Sea coast, as he had opened an exhibition with a selection of his most recent works in Constanta. In a few months without realizing it, he had become a fashionable character. He had longed to be accepted and admired for so many years, yet now he felt somehow detached from the public and would rather stay on his own. He went to a lonely deserted beach with the young journalist Virginia Ioan, who had decided to publish an album with his life and works.

When he returned to Bucharest, he was ready to shatter “the excesses of the swirling summer” as his friend the poet put it. He had a new habit: going to various markets talking to the peasants who were selling their produce, then came home with mushrooms, watermelons, peppers, honey, he ordered nicely around the studio, as if he wanted to paint them. Just looking at that fruit of the earth he felt empowered and loaded with energy.

One late afternoon he was walking absent-mindedly, enjoying the sweet light of the summer end, when his attention was drawn by two figures walking on the other side of the street: a man and a woman. She was the pianist's mother, he recognized her immediately. The man must have been the father. In full light the woman appeared smaller and thinner, lost in her black dress. Her husband, much taller than her, with a curved back, was struggling to go on, as if he had walked against the wind. They did not talk and look to each other, but simply marched side by side, as two strangers overwhelmed by a burden that had turned the spontaneous flow of life into repeated mechanics.

They were not aware he had stopped on the other pavement and was turning to watch them walk by. What struck him was the figure of the father, clinging to his wife to help him go on. He was obviously a finished man; the principle of his life was broken. The artist was more impressed by the man than by his little wife. He seemed to feel his tragedy deep inside, and he decided on the spot he would try and sculpt the young musician, life size, to give him the likeness of his lost son, as something to lean on.

He turned back to his studio with a mixture of incertitude and anger inside. All those years trying to make stones dance, fly and flow, appeared as an estrangement from what was near him: the life of humans, and their struggle to keep their lives meaningful. "God! If art is not love, if it is not a bet with death, it is a waste!" He took out the photos of the young pianist and placed them feverishly around the studio: against some statue, on the shelf, leaning against empty bottles on the low chest-of-drawers, or fixed to the huge curtains with clothes pegs. He played the tapes at high volume and started doing sketches with the charcoal that was running madly on the cardboard. A splendid sunset invaded the studio, but he paid no attention to it. The artist then started modelling with the clay. He was totally focused on his work, he interrupted only to smoke a cigarette. He barely noticed when the night fell. But he continued to work, exulting at the sight of a city that was going to bed: "Go to bed, ignorant mass, lull yourselves into sleep. What do you know about life and death?"

At about 3 in the morning, the clay bust of the young musician had already taken shape. The artist found it a good beginning. When he went to bed, he had a quick thought for the mother of the musician. Would she return to visit him? He had no way of finding her. She hadn't

given him any phone number or address. But maybe her sharp sense of things would tell her that he had started to work.

It was not long before the pianist's mother came. She was different. The summer seemed to have consumed her. She had black eye-rings and her face was deeply marked by wrinkles. He wondered whether it had been him who did not notice them before. Their conversation was slow to start. The woman was looking around lost, and she saw everywhere pictures of her son.

The artist realized the tape player was gyring in vain and he stopped it. Then he led his guest to the corner of the studio where he was working on the clay bust. He pulled the curtains to allow more light to come in, and waited for her judgment nervous, as when he was a student and waited for the master to judge his work.

The woman fixed the bust in silence, turned around it and said with her weak voice: "Thank you for having started the work. But he still resists, he doesn't reveal himself yet. He had soft hair that would slide on his forehead while he was playing..."

Her comment made the artist feel bad. He knew well that this was a clay model, and the sculpture would have been different, and he found this visit intrusive. "Madam," his voice sounded irritated, "I cannot re-make him as God made him with your collaboration. I am simply trying to give shape to something very vague you are describing, so I will go on by trials. In the end, whatever comes out is not going to be your son, but mine."

She closed her eyes, embarrassed: "I do not understand the work of an artist. Please forgive me."

The artist turned his back on her looking for a cigarette on a shelf. He thought he had been too harsh on the poor woman. He turned towards her to apologize, but she was no longer in the studio. He ran to the window but saw only the black dress vanishing behind the gate. He was annoyed by the whole scene, so he took a jacket and threw it over the bust.

A few days later, he woke up with the sound of an engine. He looked out of the window and saw a lorry that had parked backwards in the yard. Four men were studying how to carry the marble block in the lorry inside the studio. The pianist's mother was pointing to the large windows. The sculptor felt vexed. How did this mad woman bring him a marble block without warning him or asking him an opinion? And then

she was giving instructions to the workmen as if that were her place. He did not know what to do. It was crazy, unbelievable. But then he burst into laughter: after all he liked this madness. He put on some decent clothes and went down to the yard. He greeted the woman bewildered and pointed to the block as if saying, "It's enormous!"

The woman explained: "We thought that it would make no sense to represent my son without his piano."

The artist was in better spirits now. Of course, how could one sculpt a musician without his instrument? Suddenly he was seized by the fever of sculpting. He went back to his studio, climbing two steps at a time, and opened widely the huge windows. He and the four men had to move some heavy objects to make space. It was not easy to move the marble block. They used an inclined plane and thick twisted ropes. In the last strain to push it inside the two plants were swept away.

When the lorry drove away, the woman left too. The artist was by himself. The silent block was taking much of the space. He had never worked such a massive piece of marble before. Actually, only once did he work marble. He was turning around the block intimidated, but also with the excitement of a child who had always desired the toy that was now right in front of him. When the marble became more familiar, he patted it: "Stony friend, how do you feel here?"

For several days he kept on studying the marble from all sides. It was white with some pink strikes. He was measuring it, marking some points with a pencil. Every so often he sipped a little beer directly from the bottle, without losing his focus on the block and enjoying its whitish stillness. His mind was pervaded by that dense and formless matter. Gradually, the marble started warming under his gaze, ready to let itself mold, until one afternoon when he touched it, he seemed to feel under his palm the round shape of a shoulder. He took chisel and hammer and uttered: "Young friend I know you are here: come out please!"

He marked the point with a cross and started to chisel. This was the beginning of one of the most thrilling periods in his life. He was working with an intensity and a concentration he rarely had before. The figure of the young man started to emerge. He was touching the bust's back, and thought, "Michelangelo was right. Everything is inside the stone. It is enough to pull it out."

He had cancelled any appointment and refused to see anyone. He went out only to buy something to eat and some drinks. Sometimes a

friend would drop in, but he sent them all away. Even his closest friend, the poet Florin who protested: “Come, Andrei, let us have a drink. If you don’t give some liquid to this stone, it will stay thirsty.”

One day the young journalist Virginia Ioan came to the studio to discuss about the album of his works and his biography. He had forgotten about this appointment he had fixed with her in August. The young woman, well-dressed, sun-tanned and fresh, stepped in relaxed, determined to cast a good impression on him. She looked around the studio, and then with a calculated gesture she took out her notebook and started to ask him questions. The artist was seated in front of her with a distracted air and an indifferent look. In the end, he gave up answering her questions and told her: “Miss Virginia, I give you free hand. Write whatever you like, as you would do about a dead artist. I cannot concentrate, I have to finish a piece of work.”

The only person he accepted around was the pianist’s mother. She used to come quite often, slipping inside like a shadow, she spent some time watching him at work, without asking anything or getting closer to him. Before going away she usually left him something to eat. One day she even brought him two plants in two small pots.

They barely spoke, they understood each other with half gestures. Her calm presence was mitigating the harassing hammer strokes and the black of her dress was a counterpoint to the pinkish white of the marble he was working daily.

So passed the autumn and the winter. At the beginning of spring, he was ready to finish his work. He put down his chisel and hammer and started to polish the marble with tender and slow touches. He was almost displeased he had to separate from his work. The last day he was so absorbed by his work, that he did not even go out to buy something to eat. He fed on some pears and walnuts, covered in dust, forgotten on a shelf. His eyes were burning, he felt the salted sweat on his back, and his feet were so swollen that he had to take off his shoes. Yet he continued to work during the night, tenaciously, obsessed to finish, in a tremendous effort. In the morning he finished. It was the first time one of his works emerged like that, almost of its own.

He smiled and sighed exhausted, shaking his head, as if doubting that what he had experienced was true. He needed a cigarette and found a butt left on a drafting table. He lit it with shaking hands then he went to the corner where he gathered the empty bottles, in search of some drop

left on the bottom. He sipped a sour rest of altered wine, but it tasted so good to him. Then he plopped on the bed. He was exhausted, he felt pains in his bones, muscles, even the root of his hair, but he was happy.

At the center of his studio was his completed work, the piano partly embedded in the rough marble, while the musician was seated in front of the piano, as at the end of a concert, the right hand lifted in the air, the left still resting on the keys, that were white with some strikes of pink. Pure, smooth, a certain lightness in the body, the eyes shut and an ecstatic smile on his face, an expression of accomplishment. He wondered if he had succeeded to render the entrance of that musician into the musical time the mother talked about.

Peace returned in the studio, but this time it was not the dumbness of the rough marble block, it was the silence fallen at the end of a concert, when the sound storm melts into calmness and the air is loaded with emotions, vibrations, dreams, life. He slept for two days, as after a great fight. When he woke up, he took a shower to wash off the marble dust, then he started to clean the studio. He was waiting for the pianist's mother. He wanted her to be the first to see his finished work. Only then did he realize she had not come for some time. He was seized by anxiety: what if something had happened to her? He was trying to find her address consulting a telephone book. Next morning, she rang the bell. She was pale and had lost more weight. She said in a worried voice: "My husband is not well. He is in hospital."

The artist sketched a greeting. Then impatient, he took her by an arm and led her to the sculpture. She obeyed, and the artist was shocked to realize how light she was, a leaf in the wind, without lymph and will. The artist pulled the curtains with an energetic, almost angry, motion. The woman stood motionless in the full midday light, then she got closer to the sculpture and touched her son's marble elbow with a finger. She was quiet. She stretched a hesitant arm and passed her palm on the young man's arm. With the other hand she caressed the hair, the face and the shoulders of the statue. She was behaving like the blind men who force themselves to make sense of shapes they feel with their hands. Then her hands became more secure, they turned alive, and started touching avidly the marble. Her body was acquiring substance, and, loaded with an unexpected energy, she got closer to her son to communicate her warmth.

When the woman realized she was not alone, she made a step back, and turned towards the artist. Her face had changed, her cheeks

were red, the eyes were wet with shining tears, and on her white lips a smile appeared, a pale glimmer, a thin troubled hope, as a snowdrop springing up with fatigue from under the icy snow. The smile lasted an instant, then the woman turned towards the marble again. She was eager to stay with her son on her own.

The artist lit a cigarette and went discretely out of the studio. It was a beautiful day. The fresh spring air struck him. He breathed it deeply in, straightened his shoulders and hurried up. Only now did he realize how much he wanted to go out and have a drink with his friends.

Wild Rose

During the first interval of Chekhov's *The Seagull*, my friend Marcel, the scenographer, who had offered us the tickets, came to greet us. My wife and my daughter praised his original scenography with vocal enthusiasm, but he wanted to hear my opinion, so he advanced a provocation: "What about this live theatre, dear dig site chief, instead of the rotten smell of your Neolithic tombs!"

My first impulse was to be polemic and say something like: tombs resist time, performances don't, or to explain to him that archeology has nothing to do with the morbid bent for cemeteries. Yet, instead of launching into a *pro domo* speech, since it was his day, I played the card of diplomacy: "When art is powerful, it makes life worth living, and you are quite good at that!"

He called me a shameless flatterer, but deep-down was pleased. Then he answered my daughter's question about the choice of that huge movable veil in the background. As he started to explain it was meant to suggest the elusiveness of feelings and their metamorphic character, I heard a familiar voice a few steps away and turned in that direction. Yes, there she was, Mira N. the actor's daughter, one of the most desired, envied and gossiped about girls of my generation.

It was more than 20 years since I had last seen her. Meanwhile she had become an established theatre critic. Every so often I read her reviews: the author, very self-confident, made drastic comments in a style of elegant irony. Then, by and by, I could detect her father's bitter sneer, maliciously hidden behind the lines. Sometimes I even spotted some of the old man's catchphrases, and I couldn't help smiling at the thought that she had nothing personal to say but was merely voicing her father's rancor over the theatre world.

Seeing Mira again after so many years troubled me. She passed by our group, accompanied by a young, elegant man, who listened to her with reverence. They stopped to greet a lady and started talking animatedly. I knew her father had died years before, and Marcel had told me in a casual conversation she had never married and had only passing flirtations, mostly with men who were younger than herself. For a second, a sort of free space formed around her, and so I could take a better look at her: she had hardly changed at all; she was tall and slender,

with the same white face and black hair, the same straight fringe. In her black dress adorned with heavy silver chains, she looked like a pagan priestess. For a second, I thought I had captured a sort of void in her expression, disguised in polite greetings, and I heard her uttering a sentence on the first act, with the same, unchanged deep voice and her precious pronunciation marked by a French “r.”

After twenty years, beardless and grey-haired as I am now, I knew she wouldn't recognize me. Still, when she seemed to direct her look to our group, I lowered my gaze and turned slightly away. Eager to recover the past in my profession, I am still convinced that, in one's personal life, certain things must stay buried in the past.

Today I can't explain that moment of sudden inspiration when, after two years of studying electronics, I decided one day that my vocation was archeology. I prepared the entrance test in secret and, after passing it with a surprisingly a high grade, I headed home to let my parents know about it. My poor parents were shocked. Electronics had a bright future, archeology sounded to them of little utility. They thought they could stop me by denying me any support. Their decision had a contrary effect: it pushed me to try and succeed no matter what, in order to prove that it was not a whim.

First, I packed up my things and moved in with a friend, sharing a little rented room, which deeply hurt my mother. Then I let my beard grow, as I knew it would irritate my father. This attitude gave me the energy to do everything I could to support myself: I gave private lessons in math, physics and history, and I even copied architecture projects for lazy students, as I have always had a good hand at drawing. Saturday afternoons I used to go to the atelier of a ceramist: I lent him a hand with his works which served me to understand how vases were made in archaic times. We became friends, and I stayed on in the evenings, when nice girls in search of interesting artists would drop in. He was the one who chose, but even I, as an apprentice, had my experiences. In that sort of continuous excitement, willing to embrace life in all its forms, I started to attend a poetry circle at the Faculty of French. I went there the first time with a fellow student who had tried his hand at writing verse. Next to the French literature professor, short-sighted and wrapped in a large shawl, sat a student who caught everybody's eyes: black hair and dark eyes, a pale face and a deep voice. Her harsh criticisms of young poets

were accepted with respect by the public. My colleague whispered to me at one point: "Look at her! She's a queen!"

I took a longer look at her and nodded.

"You know, she has already published theatre reviews in a few journals, she's the daughter of the actor N."

That was an important detail: being the daughter of a popular actor meant being a sort of princess in the Bucharest of the time. From the excitement in his voice, I understood that he had a crush on her. At the end of the session my colleague went straight to her and started asking questions all red in the face, with a sheet of paper in his trembling hand, on which he had taken notes. He tried to court her so ridiculously that I felt bad for him, while she froze him with a contemptuous reply. As we were heading to the trolley-bus station, I tried to dissuade him from a frustrating passion for the wrong object: "It's not difficult to be charmed by her. She is beautiful, clever, highly cultivated, the daughter of the actor we all admire, definitely she embodies an ideal. Then her way of keeping people at a distance is a way of making herself even more desirable, she cultivates consciously the charm of unattainable things. I think she stirs in you a sort of destructive void passion. I wonder if she could be really interested in us, maybe she has people from her father's environment that court her."

As I tried to save him from a misplaced passion, the same desire to court her was rising in me. I was convinced I had more chances than him: I did not write poetry, but I was taller and more imposing with my beard, and I boasted a certain experience with women my ceramist friend had contributed to. Next time at the poetry circle my friend introduced me to her. She scrutinized me with her deep eyes, in which there was a sort of shameless call she immediately converted into ice-cold irony as soon as she saw I was responding. I attended the rest of the session getting ever more irritated at her acid comments about the young poets. At the end of the session, she came directly to me, and, ignoring my poor friend who was red with emotion, she asked with a subtle smile: "Well, what do you think about our circle?"

I knew very well I was not supposed to manifest admiration. In a deep voice and with the tone of a connoisseur, I replied: "Interesting, but at the circle kept by the critic S, one hears better poetry." I had been only once per chance at the other circle.

She took this in, a little hesitant, then grabbed my arm, as if we had been close friends and lowered her voice almost into a whisper: “If you are trustworthy and you understand poetry, come to my private soirées. Here, with all these people around, we cannot speak freely.”

This is how I joined the group that met every Monday evening in her father’s house, to participate in their “jour fix,” she specified with a coquettish smile, suggesting she was imitating the high society ladies of before the war, who were imitating French ladies.

They lived in the center, on one of those streets that preserved the quietness of old times, concealed behind the tall blocks that flanked the boulevard and away from the rush of buses and cars. The flat was on the ground floor of a villa built in the thirties in quite a fancy style. I was particularly struck by the marble stairs flanked by two columns of about one meter and a half. On top of the columns two hemispheres of the same marble stood out like two enigmatic breasts placed at the entrance to a classical temple.

For almost three months I climbed those marble steps every Monday afternoon with a bottle of wine or a box of chocolates in my hand: Mira welcomed me with an ambiguous smile, something between open friendship and convention, and invited me into the book-lined living room, where I almost always met the same fellow students of Mira: three plain girls and two thin young men with narrow shoulders. Every now and then new characters turned up: theatre students who were in the class of Mira’s father at the Theatre Institute. At the beginning I did not join their conversation, as I was not updated on the gossip regarding our writers, or the most recent publications in France. At that time, I was reading mostly ancient literature, as it served my studies, and I had a secret desire to make a discovery inspired by poets, as Schliemann did, taking Homer as a guide.

I listened to their comments, distracted by the image of Mira, who presided over the evening seated in a large armchair. Her splendid legs could be seen through the slit of her long black skirt. As soon as I understood that, in order to draw her attention, I needed to cut a figure in the field of French culture, I started reading all the publications my artist friend received from his uncle who had emigrated to Paris, including those of the philosophers in fashion at the time.

I really hit the mark with that, for Mira was immediately warmer to me, and this made me lose my head. I started imagining the reaction

of my ceramist if I showed up with her at the opening of his next exhibition in May. Meanwhile I continued going every Monday to Mira's and doing my homework; I started citing Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Bachelard. The whole experience was stimulating. I was discovering new authors, and I liked how they picked some idea and starting from it they engaged in long speculations. I interpreted it as a form of cultural dissidence, a way to take a distance from the official culture imposed on the masses.

The evenings at Mira's place took place according to the same ritual: we warmed up under Mira's intelligent and ironical smile, then some ideas were repeated with more emphasis in front of her father, who always appeared later to increase our sense of expectation.

Mira's father was still a very handsome man, imposing and attractive (she resembled him very much) with a bitter, disdainful smile on lips darkened by age and make up. He was very well known; he often recited poetry on the TV or radio, in particular classical authors. I found out that he himself had published two volumes of sonnets, a few of which everybody in that room knew by heart. The scenario was the same: one of the guests asked him to recite one of his sonnets, and he accepted after insisting they were not masterpieces, better if he recited Shakespeare instead, but in the end, he gave in. I have to admit that he created a powerful atmosphere: even if his sonnets sounded like variations on classical themes, he knew how to capture his audience.

The poetry recital ended with our applause and his moved bow in front of us, thereafter he played a classical music disk, and he dropped a comment like, "Music, as Greek philosophers used to think, shapes our souls and calms the beast in us," which sounded so powerful.

After the musical intermezzo, Mira reappeared with snacks and cakes and we begged her father to tell us spicy episodes of his actor life or talk about the great actors he had known in the past, at the beginning of his career, and whom we had only heard of. He was very entertaining; he knew his job, so we listened to him completely absorbed.

As we were paying compliments to Mira for the snacks, the atmosphere changed, became more profane and her father passed to contemporary theatrical life, and could not help criticizing actors and stage directors. Maybe one of his regrets was that he hadn't done enough films, but then he somehow classified many of them vulgar, provincial, unaccomplished.

As he was entertaining us, Mira, seated in the armchair with crossed legs, was launching a proud gaze, meaning *Have you seen how great my father is? Which of you will ever equal him?* None of us could, of course. And yet, each of the males there hoped secretly to be chosen by her, and even the girls competed for her friendship.

The more I saw her next to her father, emphatically repeating his comments, the more I understood that he was the one rival I had to fear, not that entire court of admirers. The two of them dominated the house. I saw her mother very few times, in the corridor passing between the living room and the bathroom, like a shadow, and she looked sick. Somebody told me that she had studied the piano before marrying the actor, and in fact sometimes we could hear some melancholy piano pieces played in a distant room.

I continued to attend their soirées with a stubborn hope of conquering Mira. But she knew how to manipulate her admirers, showing each of us a gesture, a sign of particular attention, only to deny it soon after, with a cold look, as if to suggest: *Don't dare!* Only once did I have the chance to converse longer with her, and I dropped in this comment: "You are so much a creation of your father!"

She was pleased with my remark and added: "Yes, he's my Pygmalion!"

Some Pygmalion, I thought rancorously on my way home that evening, *Pygmalion gave life to a marble girl, this father was a vampire sucking his daughter's soul. And turning her into a mirror of himself.* Once I understood this, Mira appeared suddenly charmless, and I ceased to desire her. Even those encounters became less exciting: the discussions turned around the same subjects, the poems the actor recited on call were more or less the same, as were his ironical comments on the world of the theatre. I put an end to those visits, as I also had to prepare my exams.

When the exams were over, I went to Predeal in the mountains to ski, and, on my return, I was invited by my friend the ceramist to the inauguration of an exhibition. Mira was there too, and she came straight to me with a reproachful look: "How come you stopped coming to us, without any warning? Shame on you! But I am ready to forgive you and I invite you to the carnival party Dad and I are organizing this Saturday. Obviously if this doesn't bother you, I wonder what important circles you

are seeing lately..." She then mentioned some of the guests, known figures of the intellectual milieu.

I thought that was an attractive idea, why not? I had to decide which part to dress, but then with my beard and a pair of jeans I thought it was easy to play the hippy, even if their fashion had arrived surreptitiously and vaguely in our country. I even added a piece of jewelry I found at my friend's studio, which one of his female visitors had left behind. My friend made me a round peace sign to attach to it. Mira was dressed unsurprisingly as Cleopatra with a beautiful costume her father must have borrowed from the theatre and two snake shaped bracelets on her arms. The surprise was that she wanted to dance with me, and I was inebriated by her strong perfume, trying to avoid her cold eyes that were studying me from the closest distance. Then with an insinuating smile she asked me in a whisper that softened her French: "Your faculty must be very interesting. Are you doing digs?"

"Yes, this summer we'll start a dig site following the project of one of our professors."

"What is it about?"

"He hypothesizes pre-Roman traces on a line that goes from the Danube to the Black Sea."

Her eyes were shining. My cold, scholarly tone excited her.

"It must be fascinating! When I think how much time we students of philology waste on turning pages, while you are doing something concrete!"

I was taken by a new illusion. This time her inviting smile did not turn into a cold, spiteful grimace. I was wrong. She danced with all the young men invited and conversed with them making the same gestures and gratifying them with the same smiles. She was obviously trying to make sure our admiration for her was unaltered. Deluded, I sat next to a young journalist I had met the previous summer in a student camp and started a conversation with him. He was very realistic, in my opinion sometimes cynical, and in fact he met with some success: today he is the chief editor of a newspaper and has an important role in the Journalists' Union.

The conversation topics were trivial and playful, fit for a carnival. At some point, after some good drinks, I asked him in a low voice: "How can one get a chance with this beautiful young woman, bypassing her father?"

He looked at me stupefied, then with a sapient and sly smile: “What?! Nobody is running after her. She picks someone up every now and then one from the public to fool around a bit, and that’s it. Then along comes the next!”

His comments sounded vulgar and not plausible. The following day I came upon the journalist not far from the University, very well dressed, perfumed, freshly shaved, with a bunch of flowers in his hand. He was heading towards the exhibition where I had met Mira the previous week. I stopped to greet him, but he was in a hurry: “If you don’t mind, I won’t stay with you. I have an important appointment. A lady is honoring me!”

I found his words so quaintly old-fashioned that I became curious. I crossed the street, entered a bar and sat next to the glass wall to be able to spy on him. A few moments later I saw him kissing Mira’s hand in a perfect courtly manner, offering her the flowers and leading her inside the exhibition hall. Once they were out of my visual field, I decided to forget about Mira.

I took my summer exams brilliantly, then I went to the dig in the Dobrugea with a group of students led by our professor and his lecturer. That was geologically a very old piece of earth. The landscape was monotonous, only flattened hills, large valleys with threads of water, almost dry from the summer draught. Those hills had been a mountain chain millions of years before. We students were taking them in without enthusiasm, they looked uninteresting, worn out. On the slopes the peasants had planted vineyards. The tops of the hills were bald. The professor observed these flat tops, and, breathing in deeply, he said happily, “Contemplate these hills. The verb is not “look,” it’s “contemplate.” The first secret of an archeologist is to know how to read the earth. These hill tops are weary, this is not only geological weariness, it is also historical weariness. One can see that right away. They are weary because they have nourished many lives. A piece of earth full of ancient life closes upon itself to let the dead rest. They do not welcome visitors, even the plants know that and cease to grow there, in order not to disturb the sleep of the earth with their rhythms. On the way up hill, very few plants grow, only some wild rose bushes. If the tenacious peasants had not planted vines, this place would have been arid.”

The village in the valley was fairly recent, it was barely a century old, which is a short lapse for an archeologist. The peasants did not have

a deep relationship with those hills. They told stories about the mountains their ancestors had come from after a war with the Turks, so their folklore was of no help.

We were accommodated in the village. In the morning, my host, a mature woman with a maternal bent, offered me fresh bread and milk, and wished me a fruitful day. I put on my knapsack and crossed her garden, paying attention to avoid being scratched by the wild rose bush on the other side of her fence; then I crossed a thin rivulet, walked by a maize field and from there climbed up the slope of the hill. It almost took us one hour every morning to get there. The professor was always there before us: "I need to be here, I have to study the place, to understand it better." When we students arrived, he had already made measurements and incised traces on the ground with the help of his lecturer.

We worked passionately right from the beginning, trying to ignore the scorching sun. We interrupted the work only to have lunch: bread, cheese, bacon and potatoes we roasted on the open fire.

For about a week our diggings revealed nothing. Then one day a girl came upon a fragment of ceramics. We shouted "Eureka!" and were very happy. The professor's hypothesis could be validated. From that moment on the discoveries followed. We were so eager to unearth as much as possible that we worked as long as there was still a bit of sunlight, covered in sweat and mud. There were novelties every day: after the fragments of ceramics that belonged to a vase, we found a pair of bronze earrings and a bracelet. Then came the skeleton of a woman.

Late in the evening, after having had dinner with our hosts, we joined our professor in the large yard of the peasant house he lived in. Seated on grass, with glasses of wine and dry and hard biscuits that someone passed around in a brown bag, we absorbed the professor's words: "Our main task is not to mark the breaches in time, the discontinuity. Beyond any historical fracture there is a continuity of human life on earth; if you don't have this sense of continuity, you are not suited to archeology."

His words resounded solemnly in the night. We listened to him in silence, between the sky crammed with stars and the crickets chirping, and we felt transported back in time, towards those distant ancestors whose objects we touched during the day, and who had seen the same stars and heard the crickets as we did.

“If you do not fill the ruins of the past with life, this profession has no meaning. You have to live the past as you live the present, with the same emotional intensity; the past is not so distant as you think, and it is not vague at all. All our affections and impulses are as old as humanity: its past is here!” and he pointed to his heart.

I was so inflamed by his words! I owe him all the passion I put in my work. What a pity that such a mentor had a sudden heart attack and passed away before he was fifty!

Slowly we touched with our hands our connection to that primitive world. And we grew convinced that we were actually very close to those distant ancestors. It sufficed to live outside the city comfort in simple conditions, and life was reduced to elementary things. Modern civilization dwindled away; it seemed a superficial layer very easy to remove. Everything turned natural. Including making love. One evening I left the group with one of my fellow students, a young woman with round breasts, short hair and glasses. As we passed by a maize field, she took me by the hand and led me to a hidden grassy place; then she put her arms around my neck and we made love without words, letting our bodies enter in communication spontaneously. We continued with our encounters at night in the open, and to me it was part of trying to live as naturally as those ancestors.

One day I was fortunate enough to find the handle of a bronze vase. The entire vase came out after the patient work of the whole group. Its handles were in the shape of snakes with human heads, which gave the professor the opportunity to speak about the cult of the snake in our folklore. It was the most important discovery of that digging session, and we had the satisfaction of seeing our names cited with the Professor's in a newspaper. Thanks to a coincidence, as we were talking about the symbolism of the snake, a car parked at the foot of the hill, and after half an hour the young journalist I had met at Mira's and a photographer materialized on our site. The journalist interviewed our professor, recording it in shorthand in a notebook. The photographer took some pictures of the site and the objects found. I greeted the journalist who recognized me, and when nobody was close to us, I asked: “How did it go with Mira that time? I saw you offering her flowers.”

He avoided my gaze: “You know, Mira likes to have admirers, but stays out of reach.” Then he walked away embarrassed to give one more hint to the photographer.

At the end of summer, we finished our work. It was time to close the site with a view to opening it again the following summer. We placed our discoveries under lock and key in the principal's office in the local elementary school. The professor decided our lecturer and I should come with a van to take the objects to the national history museum, where they had to be registered, cleaned and dated with Carbon 14.

I returned to Bucharest with everybody else. I had lost weight, was sun-tanned, had a wild beard. It was an effort to readapt to city life. In the center I met Mira, elegant and suntanned; she stopped in front of me with a brilliant smile. She had barely returned from the film festival in Costinesti, on the Black Sea Coast, from where she had sent film reviews for the newspaper the journalist worked for. I did not respond to her adoringly, which she may have expected. I was rather quiet. She went on: "I've read about your discoveries. Your name was mentioned in the paper."

I thought how generous our professor was to name us all. Then Mira faked a reproach, pouting her lips: "You're a bad boy. I told you I was interested in your site, and you never offered to take me see it."

I smiled, looked down at her elegant summer sandals: "I could not imagine you in that place where we ate unwashed fruit and took a rest lying on the earth."

"False idea! I adore the countryside!"

"Ok. You can still see the things we have found before we bring them to the museum. Will your father agree?"

She replied with a trace of embarrassment: "Dad will not know. He's on a trip to Budapest."

I thought: her interest in archeology was as fake as my beard was real. But then, I conceded: why not, she's eager to experience unusual things, let us give her a chance. Her father's absence made me accept the idea lightheartedly.

We travelled on a morning train in a full compartment, without much conversation. Seated by the window she admired the sunflower and corn fields in a pose of studied melancholy. I looked at her beautiful profile and wondered really what was genuine in this young woman, raised in the cult of her own beauty and intelligence. I wondered if she had had an affair with the journalist, but I decided that she had only flirted with him, to obtain the job as a newspaper correspondent to the film festival.

At the railway station, a peasant offered to give us a lift in his horse-drawn cart. When we arrived in the village, we went directly to the house where I had lived during the work at the site. When she saw Mira, the peasant woman who had hosted me exclaimed: “My God, what a beauty you are, my girl!”

The woman’s spontaneous admiration pleased Mira so much that she took out a shawl from her luggage and offered it to her. As we were dining, she talked mostly to our host, asking her ridiculous things about the life in the country, and almost ignored me. I was ever more convinced she had not come for me, but to add an “exotic” experience to her life. At the end she asked a room for herself. The woman was puzzled at first, but then she shrugged whatever questions she might have had off, and her gaze to me meant: *a beauty does as she wants*. I went to bed convinced that I was only her guide through this experience, abandoning any hope of an adventure.

Next morning, I found Mira in the kitchen, chatting joyfully with the woman; without makeup she looked fresher. The new environment had done that for her. I was curious at that point what kind of a person was hiding behind the character her father had molded. After breakfast we walked to the school where we had left the objects from the dig. She dressed for the occasion with a pair of shorts and tennis shoes.

It was late August, a beautiful day with a very clear sky, rust-colored earth and vines loaded with mature grapes. I told her briefly the history of the village and explained that the zone had long ago been inhabited by other people. She took me by the arm, and I hoped that gesture was her acceptance of a closer bond. The school was locked, and we had to find the janitor who opened the principal’s office where we had left the objects. I was not going to open all the cardboard boxes, but I showed her ceramics fragments, the bronze earrings and the bracelets. As she was looking at the objects, touching my hand when I was giving them to her, I started wondering again if she had come there merely out of cultural curiosity.

She was holding the jewels in her hands and whispered in a quivering voice, “Who knows what beauty may have worn them!”

It dawned on me she realized that, though the beauty had died, her accessories survived thousands of years. She was revealing her deep fears maybe. I started to speak in a pale imitation of my professor: “These relics you are impressed by are like seeds buried in the earth meant to

speaking to us about life, not death. Isn't it strange that lifeless objects are a testimony of life itself? Of course, we only guess the meanings those people attributed to each and every object, and why it was placed in that woman's tomb, but, beyond meanings, there is the pulsation of life they evoke."

She was listening mesmerized: I was able to say things her friends accustomed to literary criticism never thought about. Her disconcerting arrogance was dissipating. I had the impression for the first time that I could lead the game and the idea exalted me. I imagined myself attempting to cancel the bookish sophisticated Mira and pulling out her vital instinct instead. What a nice impact our professor had on me!

We had lunch with our host, and I was pleasantly surprised to see Mira eating fried chicken and polenta with her hands. In the afternoon she asked me to take her to the dig. We took the same path I had walked daily through the summer. As we were crossing the garden she asked, "Tell me, how do you imagine the world you are unearthing?"

I started to talk with passion: "It was a simple world; those people did not live very differently from the peasants who inhabit the valley today. They roasted their meat the same way and ate it with their hands, as you did today. Yet I think they were more in harmony with nature and the cosmos than we are."

"Can you imagine me in that world? Who could I have been?"

"You would have been the tribe chief's daughter, of course. The most beautiful and most desired. The one touched by the grace of gods."

At that point I was shamelessly courting her, but she liked it.

"These places," I went on, "were only a little wilder than they are now. They may not have had ordered gardens, like our peasant host, but I'm sure the hill slopes looked more or less the same. Unless the climate was different. And the wild rose bush you see there, may have grown out of roots that have existed since then."

"Was this the only rose they knew back then?"

"Yes, but it may have been important in their rituals. One could conjure up that its thorny twigs could have been used in initiation rites for the young boys, and the fruit placed on the women's womb for fertility purposes. And, yes, the older women decorated the hair of the tribe chief's daughter with its delicate flowers."

At that time of the year the flowers had turned into red fruits. Mira reached out to pick one of them; as if that wild bush had required a sacrifice, a lower branch scratched her above the right knee. Despair rose in her eyes at the sight of the blood line. I was quick to say: "As the tribe chief's daughter you cannot make a fuss about this little scar."

Then I knelt spontaneously, seized her leg and sucked the blood, cleaning the thin wound with the tongue, as animals do, the peasants' children when they get hurt, and those distant primitives did. Mira was very tense; she hadn't expected such a direct contact with me so soon.

We continued to climb the hill on the narrow path, I walked in front of her, she followed in silence. Close to the top I turned around and took her by the hand, to help her with the last strap. When we were on the dig site, I showed her where exactly we had found each object, I talked to her about the woman's skeleton, that was now well packed at the school: "This tomb must have belonged to an important woman of the tribe. She was buried with much care. She could have been the tribe chief, if they practiced matriarchy, or the priestess who directed all the rituals. She must have known a lot about life and death, about the spirits that kept nature alive." I was sure I was conquering her with my words. Her comment cut my enthusiasm short: "Why don't you write all these things? You could have many readers."

She had not been carried away at all, everything had to be turned into written fact, into a cultural expression to impress the others. No thought was allowed to get lost in the wind.

My answer betrayed my disappointment: "Listen, I just want to study archeology. If one day I write about my work, that will be fine. Till then, I'm practicing how to situate myself in time, read the messages of the past. I am not a showman. Not everything has to be published."

I was touching her sensitive points, she was hesitant for a second, then she sent me back a glint of anger, quickly turned into cold contempt, as if saying: *you do not grasp much, do you?*

"Listen," I added, "let us leave archeology, and take a walk through the vineyards to see if the grapes are ripe."

We walked on the slope in the burning sunset light; the scenery was absorbing, and she liked it. We found ripe grapes, I took a grape, broke it and said: "My granny told me that since she was a little girl she used to pass ripe grapes on her lips, so that her kiss would be sweet in the future."

This was true, I hadn't invented it. Mira liked that; she came closer with a provocative expression. I opened the grape and passed it slowly on her lips, she did not protest at all, and then we met in a timid and slow kiss. I had a moment of loss, I believed for an instant that she could hide a welcoming woman inside. She seemed to have forgotten her self-control. But I was wrong. She opened her eyes, detached herself from me and said in the indulgent tone of a school mistress, "Not bad! Not bad at all!"

"Never mind," I commented downcast. My romantic side reclaimed some emotions to be experienced together. I hated her being so detached. We walked downwards towards the valley in silence. I was cut off, she seemed to panic. Walking side by side with a man indifferent to her charm was the worst thing that could happen to her. She tried hard to start a conversation on primitive life. I answered her questions unwillingly.

"See, we are no longer able to live in a natural way like those ancestors. We are full of mental constructions, intellectual prejudices, we repress our instincts, we are not free, we apply our critical spirit to everything..."

Mira put her arms around my neck: "I would like to be lost in nature like them, to abandon all my cerebral constructions, to be spontaneous." She sounded sincere and this gave me an unexpected inspiration. What if I could help her free herself? I took her by the hand and when we reached the riverbank it was already dark. We picked some dry wood and I showed her how to start a fire with sticks, then we roasted some corn on the cob. She seemed more relaxed; she enjoyed those carefree moments. As the corn was roasting, I held her tightly in my arms, as if she were a small child. She seemed to abandon herself finally. I kept speaking, looking at the sparkles of the fire: "We have to discover what makes us feel close to those ancestors. We meet in the reverence of the sacred, in our feeling of fear, in love. In the ritual that has joined a man with a woman for millennia."

As I was speaking, I started caressing her arms. She let me do so, a little rigid, her eyes lost in the flames. I could not perceive any responsive resonance in her, she was just passive. I made love to her at first with tenderness and curiosity, then I became more and more obstinate and lonely. Her body was joined to mine, but I could not understand if she was minimally desiring me, while I was sure that her

mind was wandering away from there. At the end she turned perfectly lucid and cold.

"What is going on?" A cold shiver was running down my spine.

"Nothing, nothing at all!" she reassured me and pushed me away with disgust. "Truth is all this is absurd and it's better not to waste our time," she said while tidying her clothes and her hair with nervous gestures. We ceased to talk to each other. I put out the fire, and we returned to the peasant woman's house, crossing the dark fields, accompanied by the crickets' chirping. I walked in front of her, feeling bad, she followed quietly, withdrawn within herself. I tried to remember the entire afternoon and understand where I had gone wrong. I wanted to hold her by the hand, to help her walk in the dark, but she rejected me. When we were back at the peasant woman's house, I could see her in the light: she had an offended air, and I had an intuition: "You do not feel..."

She was deeply troubled by my words and blushed: "It's not true... actually you men lack the subtlety... you are not competent." She looked at me as if I were a disappointing object.

Then I understood it all: Mira had never loved anyone beside herself and her father. Maybe her father had planted deeply in her soul the contempt for all her possible admirers. She could not help feeling their touch as a profanation of her body, and her critical sense prevented her from letting herself go. If making love was not joining with a man in a rhythm, why was she doing it? Was it out of a sense of duty to her emancipation, or because she aspired blindly to feel the ecstasy of that union without ever reaching it? Poor Mira! She did not even guess that in love you have to offer yourself recklessly, otherwise you remain in the barren domain of death. I stayed awake till late with a sense that I was wrong: I was too presumptuous to think that I could change Mira. Then exhausted, I fell deeply asleep. When I woke up, the sun was already high in the sky. My host told me: "I tried to wake you up, but there was no way... The Miss left very early and did not want you to know, but I came in secret, I thought it was better if you were warned... the train left a while ago."

At that point I stayed on another few days, until our assistant lecturer came with the van to collect the objects. He was glad to find me there. We covered the site and checked the roof the carpenter of the village had built above the excavated part, as the rainy autumn was only weeks ahead. Then we went to the school, checked each object with the

list, packed them carefully and placed them in the van. In a corner we set our tools, mattocks, trowels, brushes and the two shovels.

The lecturer took a train to Constanta: he said he needed to visit some relatives. I was alone with the driver; I had the entire responsibility of taking the stuff safely to Bucharest. As the van was making its way on the country road, I noticed a wild rose bush on the roadside. I asked the driver to stop, put on a pair of dusty work gloves, picked up a shovel and ran towards that bush. With decided movements, I dug around it, until I was able to pull it out, with part of its roots. Then I placed it in the van over the cardboard boxes. The driver asked me: “What the hell are you doing with that piece of weed? Where are you going to plant it?”

Late at night, when we arrived in Bucharest, I asked the driver to take me first to Mira’s address, and once there, I pulled the wild rose bush out of the van and planted it on the stairs, between the two marble hemispheres, rigid and cold, meaningless as the breasts of a sterile goddess.

The Mother

It was an easy, tranquil flight from Cluj-Napoca to Bucharest, and he liked flying, but this time he felt uneasy in the small space of the Antonov plane that he and his colleagues used to call jokingly a flying scooter. Unable to read, make sketches or take notes for his work, as he used to do during his travels to make good use of his time, he was afflicted by the thought of being reduced to a simple suspended body, a prey for gravity. This sudden weakness embarrassed him as he liked to think of himself as Radu Petrescu, the well-established architect, close collaborator of Dan Vecerzan, the authority consulted by the head of state in architectural matters. He was used to being admired for his strong character, and now his image cracked by anxiety, by this cowardly surrender, was intolerable. With an effort of will, he took the notes out of the conference folder, gave them a quick glance, but put them immediately back and closed his eyes, as if the darkness behind his lids could be of any support. Only a week ago he had attended his mother's funeral. Even though his family had asked him to stay with his father for a while, he had preferred to run away and cling to his professional commitments.

Now he opened his eyes widely and decided to fix his gaze on the white clouds outside the plane window: how strange! During his flights, he used to follow the fluctuant lines of the clouds, dense, surprising, in movement. That was a game, gazing at the shapes and imagining them as sky architecture, with snow-soft corridors and bridges, bizarre roofs, and alleys metamorphosing, entire cities passing from one into another without building, demolition and rebuilding, just fluid forms in play. Now all these clouds were dispersed in the blue sky and looked like dormant figures, floating in the air, with their faces upwards and their backs turned on the world below. He wondered about this sudden shift of his imagination and his grandmother came to his mind, with her stories about the dead rising to heaven and continuing to live on the clouds. The dead! Could they all be here, invisible, spying on us from behind these strange shapes? Could his mother be out there too, ethereal, accompanying him on this flight as she had never done in her lifetime? Could the dead read his thoughts? The idea of having his mother close by, in a new dimension, unattainable, impossible to control,

gave him nausea and paralyzed him in his seat. He thought briefly of the people he had met at the conference; he had not told anybody that his mother had recently passed away. He did not want compassion.

When the plane started landing, he felt better at the sight of the geometrical outlines of streets and houses, palpable proofs of order, of the domain of reason. He recognized the first buildings in the city suburbs, disposed among trees, small from that height like the cubes in his architectural projects. This sight used to give him a sense of security and triumph, as it was in the suburbs that he had built his first works. Now his impatience to set foot on solid ground deprived him of any trace of joy.

Once in his flat he had a sort of strange feeling, as if something had changed in his absence, even though he knew nobody had been there. He looked at his face in the bathroom mirror and winced at the sight of his petrified expression and greyish color. *I must be very tired*, he thought. He went to pour himself a glass of brandy to change his mood. But – could that be a mere chance? – he opened by mistake the other cabinet door, where he used to keep, hidden from his visitors' eyes, the gifts his mother had heaped on him: an embroidered tablecloth, crocheted cotton flowers, various doilies and trinkets he had never liked but didn't have the courage to throw away. He took them out on one of the rare occasions when his parents visited him; and they made good use of them, as his mother never allowed him to take them out for dinner and insisted on cooking. He felt offended he could not offer them a dinner and his mother started one of her lessons on healthy life and her interminable allusions at his being single. Now he was looking at the open cabinet, revealing his mother's world, and the sight of these hidden objects stirred in him a bitter feeling of anger and regret that his mother had never really comprehended his aspiration of sobriety and rigor or appreciated him for what he had become. Sometimes he took his parents to the site of the new Civic Centre. His father was impressed by the machines and enormous labor force; his mother felt lost and did not seem to make sense of all those things. At the back of her mind, she had still hoped he would marry and have a family, she even somehow aspired to see him come back to their city. He often thought he was born in the wrong family: His mother a school mistress, his father taught fretwork and modelling in the same school. The only child of his family, he felt singled out in school, and as he grew up, an alien.

After drinking a tumbler of brandy, he made a first phone call to his mentor, Professor Vecerzan, and his wife Elvira. He owed everything to them. They had somehow adopted him twenty years before and formed him into a strong man. He told his mentor now about the conference talks and Elvira asked him, "How is your father?"

He took it as a suggestion: "I'm going to visit him tonight."

Then he called his love Adina. He had kept their relationship secret because, when they met, she had been married, and she had only recently decided to divorce.

"How was it at the funeral?"

"I felt so strange. And I couldn't cry."

"You couldn't cry for your mother's loss?"

"Are tears the only measure of pain?"

"Yes, they are. And they are liberating."

"I felt embarrassed by everyone watching me, and I felt dread in front of death. I could not conceive that the wax figure in the coffin was my mother. Do you know she had a queer smile on her face that seemed addressed to me?"

"What are you going to do now?"

"Driving home to see my father."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"It doesn't make sense. I have to understand things by myself. And then my father could be offended that you appear only now. You did not attend the funeral."

He put down the receiver, stuffed a razor and T-shirt in a bag and took the car out of the garage.

*

Driving to his hometown, flashes from the funeral assailed him. He could not expect so many people would be present. But then his mother, Emilia Petrescu, was a school mistress for thirty-five years. She had left a trace in each of her pupils who were crying, deeply moved. She had given them her energy and attention, and they recognized that by coming together to mourn her. He was the only one who had always diverged from them. He hated being in her class: to show that she was impartial she scolded him in front of everybody. Then she continued lecturing him at home: as he was her son, he had to be perfect. That was when he started resenting her attempts to control him.

Their lives became two corridors that did not communicate: she trying to design his life, he trying to resist. She was jealous of his mentor, she thought he had taken her son away, instead of being grateful for the support Vecerzan had given him to make an unexpected career. Her pride was hurt, she was humbled by the comparison. And yet it dawned on him now that he could have dampened that tension by telling her that, if his mentor had decided to support him, it was also her merit. But, at that time, he thought all his successes were in spite of his mother.

He had become more distant from his parents, and he was so busy and committed to his profession that he visited them very seldom. He had a full life, a creative life, he had friends, he had sentimental relations he preferred to be discrete about, as he had no intention of marrying. And he was happy this way and perceived his life as full and complete. His decision to keep his personal life secret brought his mother to despair: he had a mysterious side to him she knew nothing about.

Instead of coming more often to console her, he only visited them twice a year. The rare occasions when he returned home were unannounced. He went to the back of the yard, and from there directly into the kitchen. His mother was always there preparing dinner. She exulted at the sight of him, but immediately voiced her frustration: “You come so rarely and find me unprepared!”

He found this strange, he wanted to come home any time he would or could, and re-enter his family spontaneously, not as a stranger. Another reason he did not like to announce his visit was that his relatives would come to see him and assail him with questions. He was the only one in the family who travelled abroad. Yet, even without him announcing his visit, in a few minutes the neighbors who saw his car parked in front of the house came to greet him.

“What’s new in Bucharest?”

“Your mother told us you were in Italy recently: do Italians really eat frogs?”

“What language do they speak in Luxemburg?”

His mother offered coffee to the neighbors and started one of her quick cakes, casting a proud eye on the scene. He went on speaking patiently and politely to his mother’s friends, but, after a while of trying to understand their twisted sentences, the distance between him and them became tiring, almost unbearable. As soon as they had left, he reproached his mother, badly hiding his nervousness:

“As soon as these people come, I feel like an object in a shop window!”

The mother placed the cake in the oven and answered resentfully: “It is not my fault that you have become so important!”

No, it wasn’t her fault and not even her desire. But he could not help replying bitterly: “I have come for you and dad,” as if those people were troubling his intimacy with his parents. But when he was alone with them, it was precisely this intimacy that embarrassed him. His mother studied his body as he took off his shirt and put a T-Shirt, weighing his muscles and commenting: “You have lost weight! I’m afraid you do not eat enough.”

This remark irritated him because of the subtext. His mother wanted him married to a woman who could cook well. And she never lost the opportunity to allude to this: “Eating in public places is not healthy. You never know what they put on your plate. And do not forget that something cooked for you with love is tastier.”

She was never really interested in his projects, only in the essentials of survival, as if he had been still a little baby. Paris? “Was the hotel warm enough? Did you have proper clothes?”

This made him feel even more estranged and tense. She had been a school mistress all her life, so it was as if she had been trapped in that infantile world and had never really left.

All this disappeared when they sat down for dinner. His mother served him and his father: she was joyful and animated, she looked younger, and her cheeks were red with excitement. She took out one of her nicest tablecloths that she had embroidered herself together with the cutlery set she kept for special occasions and brought from her pantry some special thing she had put aside for him: his favorite quince marmalade, a bottle of good wine, the sour cherry syrup she made for him. He yielded to her attentions and realized that she knew very well how to keep him bound like this. He looked around sometimes: the dining room and the kitchen were full of trinkets, little vases with cotton flowers and bands of lace attached to the shelves of the cupboard, all of which she had crocheted herself. He wanted so much to build a villa for them, in a different taste, but she refused to accept it: “We are used to our little old house, what do we need a villa for? We have no grandsons to host, this house is enough for us,” his mother said, worried that he was trying to force them into a new house, while she preferred the old one, which

she had decorated according to her own taste. Back then he felt offended by her refusal. Now he seemed to accept her reasons. Her entire life was there even if he didn't like it: the house was hers and his father's.

All those little decorations appeared to him as the expression of instincts, moods, emotions that seemed to dominate his mother's life. His mentor told his students once: "Take inspiration from the countryside but avoid suburban aesthetics. That area produces sentimentalism, bad taste and small thoughts. A plastic flower is watered by a river of tears."

And yet, as thoughts such as these crossed his mind, he let himself be overwhelmed by the atmosphere. His mother's simple dishes acted on him like a charm: they tasted like his infancy and melted all his ideas and opinions into an irresponsible, sweet state of innocence. As he was enjoying with barely hidden joy his childhood dishes, his mother kept him updated on the neighborhood events: the tobacco vendor built a pretty new house for his son next to his; a high school girl got pregnant; his cousin Sorin had hepatitis; one of their neighbors eloped with a dentist, leaving her husband and two daughters behind. The news bulletin continued with their private problems. She told him in detail how she had saved a geranium with a mixture of soils she had created herself. She and daddy wanted to repair the sofa, as she was attached to it and did not want to throw it away. They had spent Christmas with Uncle Miron, and in a month they wanted to go to the spa for two weeks to cure their ailments. All those light informing sessions were hiding anxieties and dissatisfactions that came out after the desert.

"Your cousins complain that you never write or call them up. In all these years you never went to visit them."

He tried to get away with a light answer: "I am so busy, I barely come to see you!"

She persisted in her school-mistress tone, implying that she could teach him all his life: "You have no one close! You need your family."

This took him to the verge of wrath: "I have my own life and I am happy with it."

She changed tone, turned sad: "How much you've changed!"

Then she went out of the room in tears, and he looked at his father bitterly pushing away his wine glass: "Tears, tears, everything has to be drowned in tears!"

He was sorry for having created that tension, but unable to go and ask to be forgiven, as deep down he believed it was her stubborn desire to keep him bound to a life he did not like that caused all this.

At one point his father said timidly: “Try and be more considerate with your mum... At least when you come...She cries enough when you are away...”

These words inflamed Radu, who turned sarcastic: “Why does she cry, may I know? For her mean ideals I failed to achieve? For the fact that I do not slog to keep a wife and an army of kids?”

The father recognized himself in that model with a sigh. He replied timidly, smoothing the tablecloth. “Motherly worries... she is concerned that you are single. You travel a lot. Eat in restaurants... don’t take offense, she’s just a mother who cares too much for her son...”

His father’s tender tone was reassuring: “Okay,” he replied, reconciled, “but this son is a mature man! I have done so many things on my own, and I can’t say that my choices were wrong!”

His father nodded and stood up to take him to the back of the yard, where he had built an atelier in which he made objects like lacquered trays, overpots, pen holders. He knew that his parents were brought together by that infantile aesthetic that clashed with his.

Late in the evening, when he was ready to go to bed, his mother entered his old room with fresh sheets under her arms. She made the bed with caressing gestures. The room was pervaded by the perfume of the lavender and cloves she always kept in the linen chest. That smell immersed him again in the lukewarm waters of his childhood. Then, suddenly his mother turned towards him and asked: “Is there no woman in the world you would like to marry?”

He replied like a cheeky teenager: “Is this a question your super-intelligent neighbors ask?”

She kept silent, withdrew in herself, said goodnight and left. He waited for her to close the door, sat on the bed tightly pressing his fists on his temples and asked himself, *Why did I come? Who is made happy by my visits? Mother is all tears. Father is embarrassed, trying to mediate between us. I am nervous....*

*

He tried to concentrate on driving, while the sun set and the evening shadows lengthened. Memories returned to his mind against his will, with a hallucinatory vividness. He realized now in sadness that he would have desired to have another relationship to his mother. He had hoped that she would be able to understand him in time, but this did not happen. The thought that tormented him now was that she was not the mother he would have wished, and he was not the son she would have wished. He felt very lonely, as the evening was falling, and he was driving to his little town. And impotent. He could not change anything now.

When he arrived, it was dark. He parked the car in front of the house and had for an instant the sensation that nothing had happened, that his mother would welcome him as usual. The house rose in the dark. It looked the same as always, only the front windows struck him as two blindfolded eyes. His heart started beating madly, and, against all common sense, he hoped to find his mother in the kitchen knitting or making a marmalade.

This absurd hope became so intense, almost a conviction, when he slipped his hand between the iron bars of the gate and raised the latch. In a few steps he was behind the house. Here too the lights were off. He turned the handle and was welcomed by darkness. He extended his hesitant hand in search of the switch. In the poor light the familiar space of his childhood appeared strange, a place of passage, a place of nobody. Two cigarette butts on the floor, the carpet crumpled around a chair leg. Leftover bits of salami on the stained tablecloth. A stunned fly walking on the rim of a glass. He was standing lost, trying to find something familiar to cling to. Then he discovered the breadbasket, and the lace bands attached to the shelves and felt grateful. And yet how many times he had desired that kitchen transformed.

Some time passed before Radu became aware of the loud snoring in a nearby room. He put his bag on a chair and opened the door. In the weak streak of light penetrating from the kitchen, he saw his father sleeping in his work clothes. His feet were hanging over the edge of the bed. He bowed over his father's body, shaking him lightly: "Dad!"

The old man moaned like a wounded beast and moved his legs. Radu kept on shaking him, until he opened his eyes. On the father's face the return to reality was a painful disappointment. He stood up slowly and leaned his trembling body on his son's chest. They went to the

kitchen and sat down at the table. The father would not look up from the ground. *He is ashamed to show his pain*, thought Radu, stupefied by the change: a week ago he left a suffering man, but still strong. Now he had in front of him a stranger no longer in control of his life: his swollen face was lost under the short beard that allowed one to see only the hanging corners of the mouth. The sight of this different father filled him with compassion. He had had this feeling before when he felt his mother was keeping him prisoner in a dollhouse. He extended his arm to touch him, but his gesture died out in feeling the tablecloth soaked in wine. His father noticed that, and motioned to the bottle with a sense of guilt, "What else can I do? If I don't drink, I cannot go to sleep. We spent an entire lifetime together..."

The son was struck by these words: he had never realized the bond that had kept his parents together, as if he had a veil over his eyes. Did he take it for granted? No, he had simply believed that his parents had stayed together because of him, not because of each other. Suddenly he felt the need to know more about his parents' story. He wanted to look into his father's eyes, but the old man just gazed at the tablecloth and excused himself in a weak voice: "I cannot offer you much for dinner; just bread and salami."

The son answered with a lump in the throat: "I'm not hungry. Just tired."

Father and son drank a bottle of wine together talking about Radu's new projects and about his father's intention to retire. Each of them kept sealed inside the thought of the woman who had passed away and each of them was scared to reveal it to the other.

Late at night Radu decided to go to bed. He moved towards his old room, haunted by the thought that he had never asked his mother essential things about herself. He had been so intent on keeping her at a distance that now she was losing substance, turning elusive, no longer a character, but something indefinite that was gathering inside like a mood.

He opened the door of his old room and was struck by the aroma of lavender and cloves. When he had gone away his mother had filled the shelves with small vases and flowers made of colored cotton. In the old times he would have taken this as provoking: she knew he disliked her dollhouse aesthetics. Now he suddenly saw through these objects her effort to express herself. There didn't seem to be anything aggressive. She seemed to be so close, she could come in any moment with the fresh

sheets. On the street he could hear voices and the bark of a dog. He gazed at those little objects. They were now dusty and meaningless. The energy that had kept them together had vanished. But they said something about her effort to embellish world. And that was what he was doing too. How could he have ignored this?

He sat down exhausted on the edge of the bed. Nearby was an old photograph of his mother.

She was clumsily smiling from the cheap frame, her eyebrows and lips awkwardly corrected by the provincial photographer. Behind the forced smile she concealed the great sadness of an abandoned child. He would have liked to comprehend that sadness. Intelligence and will did not help, instead he felt that sense of being abandoned reaching him and taking him over. His chin started trembling, and in the absolute silence all the tears he could not shed gathered inside and flooded him with the roar of a raging river.

*

He remembered how people had scrutinized him at the funeral. He had gone away and was a stranger now: he dressed differently and talked differently. He felt those people envied him but also could not forgive him for having had the courage to move on with his life and leave that little picturesque place. He even had the impression that every look and every comment was meant to make him somehow feel responsible for his mother's sudden heart attack.

“What a pity she did not have the joy to have grandchildren!”

“She missed you so much.”

“She was very sad after you went away and came so rarely to see her.”

That little world he had tried to escape from was taking its revenge. His cousin stood beside him looking tragic, maybe thinking that this was the part of her life: she wanted to prove she was not just a fading forty-year-old provincial but the cousin of an architect who had made a career in the capital city. The memory of her behavior and aspect at the funeral caused him a mixed smile, something between irony and disgust.

Then his father who had wept so desperately came to his mind. He had wept like a child. This confirmed his idea about his father: kept infantile by his mother. He himself had not shed one tear, everything

seemed so absurd, so unreal. People were sighing or crying around him, and he heard an old woman saying about him, “God in heaven, what a stone heart!” For all those people he must have appeared to be a monster. He was so lucid and detached; *yes*, he had thought then, *they are crying for their own deaths, in fear and anticipation*. Not all of them were relatives or friends of his mother’s. His cousin was following him tenaciously and wanted to console him by standing as close as possible to him, until he felt her soft thigh.

He had a terrifying sensation that everything was so absurd, and it was the first time that death had struck so close to him. He remembered his grandparents in his childhood and adolescence, but now he felt that everybody was in a line to fall into an abyss, and he had just come one row closer. He had fixed his eyes on the word “eternal” written on the band of one of the funeral wreaths.

At the end of the mass the priest held a speech on the merits of “this devoted school mistress,” and everybody applauded. To him it sounded like a final seal on her life, a small, insignificant life. One of the millions of lives without a special destiny, as the great architect, his professor and mentor, would have said. An image came to his mind, of a life that was swept away by the grand flux of reality and drowned in its whirls. This image became terrifying when they started to lower the coffin. Seized with panic he turned suddenly rigid, while a thought was forming in his mind with cruel obstinacy: *I should not let myself be swept away, life has to be tamed, controlled*. That inner decision made him become pale. His cousin, impressed, whispered to his aunt:

“I’m afraid he is in shock!”

*

As he was driving and the sun was setting, scenes from his life came back from the recesses of his memory. He remembered how exultant he was when he had come to Bucharest, after being admitted to the faculty of architecture. But when he had met his fellow students, who were born and raised in Bucharest, he turned timid and unsure. They were so self-confident. He was hesitant, trying to absorb novelty from various sources, but insecure among the others. His luck was that the most brilliant professor liked him and decided to transform him. One day he had told him, “You have a lot of talent, but we need to work on your

character. You cannot go on in this fluid state. You need to crystallize, center your life on a principle, fix yourself precise objectives and strive to reach them.”

He was so receptive, he transformed so easily. But his parents did not quite like the change. He had grown distant from them. His father, doing his matchsticks buildings in the atelier he had built for himself at the back of the yard, felt childish compared to his son who assisted the professor in grand projects. And it pained his mother to see her only child more attached to strangers than to herself. The professor and his wife had adopted him. They had no children. The professor had enjoyed shaping him, trying to make him solidify. The image of his father at the funeral, crying like a child, made him feel embarrassed, as he had not shed one tear.

He was driving and the sun was setting on his right, the setting sun fitfully illuminated places he passed, little villages. He was so insecure. He even imagined that nothing had happened. He had decided to spend a few days with his father. He should have done so after the funeral, but he did not want to give up the lecture in Timisoara, he wanted to continue his normal life. He was going back home because he was trying to get out of that oppressive state of insecurity, of cowardly yielding, of fear. It was a way to close a chapter and understand.