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2, a novel
and
Words & Pictures: The Miracle of Artistic
Lending and Borrowing

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the thesis comprising of **2, a novel** and **Words & Pictures: The Miracle of Artistic Lending and Borrowing** constitutes my own work, composed by myself and it has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Irina Nedelcu

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Abstract

December 1989, Romania – a culture steeped in secrecy-fuelled paranoia is reflected in the family of six-year-old Adam Stan, whose father is missing and no one concedes to even talk about it. In the first of two sections of **2, a novel**, through the eyes of Adam the child, the narrative explores the fall of Ceaușescu's regime and the incandescent bouts of hope brought on by the first Romanian democratic summer, but overshadowed by the presence of an absent father. Adam keenly experiences the joys and injustices of private and public life in both urban and rural Romanian landscapes, before he is forced to emigrate with his mother to the United States. The latter half of the novel sees the adult Adam return to his native Romania after an absence of over two decades, having been reunited with his father and fully assimilated into American life. Adam's first impressions are of a country still in social and political turmoil, but his Romanian senses are dulled, his outlook cynical, his father's prohibitive voice never far from his mind. However, the seemingly new scenery and the people he meets end up exposing forbidden memories which prompt Adam's curiosity for coming to terms with his family's past.

Dualities construct the framework of Adam's journey: innocence and experience, child- and adulthood, nationhood and otherness, (post)communism and capitalism, personal and national trauma, culture and identity. **2, a novel** is a story about family, displacement, language, but most of all about finding a sense of self despite the ambivalent responsibility that comes with inheriting one's history.

2

A novel

Good Things Come to Those Who Run

At first he thought they were whipcracks, traditional carolers foretelling a prosperous New Year. One of the few captivating facts Adam had just picked up from first grade. But he was quite sure the time was wrong. There were still three more days to go till Christmas and that was a New Year's Eve custom. At the kitchen table, Grandma Bea was as still as the bust of Mihai Viteazul she so admired two streets down from her block. She even looked like him, the right side of her fringe was pointing upwards, matching the Prince's famous feather adornment. Her eyes were flickering in their sockets.

The noises outside kept growing, an unfamiliar whiz that made Adam think of mosquitoes. After all, they were famous for reigning over Bărăgan Plain in the summer. As he contemplated the possibility of giant winter mosquitoes, the sound of shattering glass came from the bedroom.

Grandma Bea jumped off her chair and thrust him to the ground, taking along her fork and his half full plate.

"They're shooting," she whispered in his ear, her golden cross dangling over his cheek in tiny slaps of Christian faith.

Adam could feel her heartbeat ticking against his shoulder, almost to the rhythm of the bullets outside: dum-dum, dum, du-dum-du-dum,

dum. She'd clasped his wrist in her bony hand, her skin a translucent map of violet rivers pulsing around liver spot islands. Her grip made his hand go numb. Bea's strength was no surprise. Only the other day he'd watched her chop up a pork leg with just two swings of a tiny kitchen axe.

“Who's shooting?”

“The army...” The lines along the corner of her mouth twitched with rigorous synchronicity. For a moment her wrinkles intrigued him more than the idea of army or war. He wanted to touch them, see how deep they went and if they felt like he thought they would – like the stripes of his green velour trousers back home.

“Why are they shooting? Someone did something wrong?”

“That's for God to decide.” She let go of his hand and rolled to the side: “Don't stand up! On your belly, you hear? Go to the living room! Go, hide under the table!”

“You're not coming?”

“Do as I say!” Using both her hands and feet Bea pushed him towards the door.

Adam dragged himself across the floor, out of the kitchen. He was dying to look back and see what she was up to, but resisted the temptation. He knew not to disobey the ‘Do as I say!’ commandment. Still he couldn't help wonder. Would she follow? Would she crawl, too? Bea never played Trenches with him and his friends, though this didn't feel like a game – in the hallway the walls were freakishly tall and the

coats on the rack looked like strung-up ghosts. His heart started racing, beats echoing through his neck.

When he reached the living room doorway, the shooting stopped. He turned his ear in the direction of the window and held his breath to make sure they had indeed stopped. Didn't even blink...

"They're not shooting anymore! Can I stand up now?" He halted on top of the living room doorstep and looked back at the empty frame of the kitchen door.

"Hide under the table, I said. On your belly till I say otherwise, silly child!" The tone in Bea's voice frightened him more than the reprise of cracking bullets.

Adam raised himself onto his elbows and pushed himself forward, to no avail. As he reached the doorstep, his knitted trousers got stuck on the popped-up-head of a nail which refused to let go. The same one that had torn his sock the day his mother dropped him off from Bucharest – a snare-like reminder of Adam's first Christmas away from home.

Reports amplified outside, the small iron ridge was holding Adam back. He unpicked the wool with his nails till he broke free. Nail beats nail! He pulled his leg aside, hitting the door in the process. A domino reaction unleashed: leg hitting door hitting radio hitting wall. An old family photo fell to the ground, marking the moment with scattered shards.

"What happened?" Bea shrieked from the kitchen.

“I broke grandpa...His photo.”

“Are you standing?” Bea’s head ducked into the hallway: “Get under the table, I said, and stay there. Don’t cut yourself! Did you cut yourself?”

“No, I’m fine!” He pushed the glass aside with his sleeve and made his way towards the table.

There was no room for him to get under, not with four chairs guarding every entrance. He pulled one by the leg and squeezed through, pushed the other three aside and made room for himself. It was dark underneath. Black like a cave’s belly, his dad would’ve said. Better look for the light. He lay on his back, trying to get a view of the window without popping his head outside the table frame. He wanted to see mosquitoes, planes or even helicopters. Grey ugly clouds were forecasting overnight snow instead. Adam could hear a buzz or two here and there, but the noises seemed to be moving further away, growing fainter. He put his arms under his head and looked at the dark-brown wooden roof of his outpost, then raised his head and mimed a quick sharp salute: “Comrade Stan, Adam reporting for duty!”

“Are you under the table, Adam?”

“I am, I am. Where are you? What are you doing?”

“Stay put!”

His right nostril let out a wet, warm drop that froze above his lip. He wiped it with the back of his hand – a fine red line was painted across

his forefinger all the way to his wrist bone. The sight of blood didn't panic him. His nose was famous for being sensitive, especially in winter time. He leaned his head back and put up his left hand like Bea had taught him. His nose kept bleeding on the inside, forcing him to swallow its tepid, choking streams. He gulped them down until there was nothing left but clean saliva. There were still traces of dried blood on his hand. He rubbed it on the carpet till all the red was brushed away. There was nothing cleaner than Bea's carpets, thanks to all the vinegar she used on them, but now his hand had an unpleasant, sour smell.

"Move over." Bea's head showed up under the table. She was holding a plate in one hand, carefully balancing her dainty body on the other. He sat up, making room for her and the rather small dish burdened with a giant food pyramid.

"No reason to skip dinner." She took two forks out of the pocket of her robe and handed them to Adam: "Carpet picnic."

Bea switched on the light, revealing each layer of food on the plate. Bread, cheese, mashed bean salad, zacuscă and the never missing onion – a stinky flower cut into four. No meat; three more days of Christmas Fast, a habit not even bullets could break.

"What's that on your face? Been picking your nose again?"

"Didn't even touch it—"

"Didn't touch it...Just started to bleed like that, out of nowhere? Let me see!" Bea grabbed Adam by the chin, lifted his head and squinted

to inspect his nostril. She licked her thumb and used it to wipe his upper lip – a habit he disapproved of, but could never manage to avoid. She didn't let go until she was satisfied with the level of cleanliness: "There, all gone. Just like your grandpa, God rest his soul, delicate nose. Remember him?"

Adam nodded. Was the nose bleed some kind of punishment for breaking his photo?

"He'd hold you on top of this table and teach you to walk," she sighed, then took out a handkerchief she kept tucked inside her sleeve, to blow her own nose. She flinched as two shots flew by the window. "God help us and protect us." She crossed herself, did the same for Adam then kissed his forehead: "Don't be scared. Are you scared?"

He wasn't. If anything, Adam found all this exciting: hiding under the table, dodging bullets, playing by military rules. He shook his head.

"Brave boy! Let's eat!" She extracted a slice of bread from one side of the plate, a piece of cheese from another, keeping the pyramid structure intact: "Who said eating on the floor can't be fun?"

"What if we want to go to the bathroom?"

"We'll go to the bathroom, obviously."

"Without standing up?"

"You can stand up in the bathroom. You can't be seen in there—"

"Bea, is this like the war you told me about, with the Russians and the Germans?"

“Oh, dear child, this is not a war, God forbid this is a war. No, it’s...This is...It’s a revolution...” She passed him a slice of cheese: “Here, have some onion with it. You want to grow up healthy, don’t you?”

He reluctantly took the onion from her hand, his eyes watered a bit, as if anticipating the sting to follow.

“What’s a revolution?”

“It’s when the people—” Two short knocks followed by a sharp third interrupted her answer. “Stay here and don’t make a sound! Must be Dan.”

Bea crawled from under the table towards the main door, leaving Adam and his revolution unresolved. The word had a familiar ring to it, reminded him of *revolt* – he’d read that one in his book of Brave Romanian Tales.

“Revolt-ution,” he whispered over the plate, “It’s when the people...” He paused and pressed the onion with his fork sinking it completely in the zacuscă till there was no food hierarchy left, “Eat on the floor.”

Bea came back in the living room followed by Dan, her next door neighbor. Seeing the grown-ups on all fours made Adam giggle despite of how serious they tried to look, two solemnly wise human dogs. Dan started firing questions: Where’s Adam? What are you doing with the

lights on? How long have you had them on? Want to get yourself killed? Get all of us killed? Until Bea managed to put a stop to his frenzy.

“Can’t be eating in the dark when the power’s not cut. That’s just ridiculous.”

Dan stuck his head in the table frame, his giant eyebrows two caterpillars kissing above his nose: “Hi, Adam! You all right?” He turned to Bea before Adam had the time to reply: “So what if the power’s not cut?” He switched off the light making the whole room night-black. “You don’t want them to see you, do you? Want to get shot? Use candles. Have you got any candles?”

Adam heard Bea fumbling through the cabinet. “My church ones,” her voice was followed by the sound of a match stroke then a faint light unveiled her and Dan in front of the table, on their knees, facing each other – two headless bodies in praying position. Adam watched their full-bodied shadows projected on the wall; the space between their silhouettes, dancing to the candle light, made him think of the Holy Ghost. Seeing is believing.

“Who’s shooting?” asked Bea. “Is it the army?”

“Who knows? Army, civilians, there’s no way of telling.” Dan stuck his hand under the table and snatched a piece of cheese.

“We’re fasting, but I can take out some pork jelly if you want, the one I made for Christmas,” Bea blurted out, apologizing for the frugal, meatless menu. Adam wished she’d let him have some pork jelly, too. He

didn't care much for fasting, nor did he really understand its purpose. Besides, pork jelly was his favorite.

"Oh, no..." Dan shook his hand. "Forget food, there's no time for food," he said licking his fingers. "We have to get out of the building! They're going to drop bombs. Said so on the radio."

"Nonsense!" Bea waved her fingers above the orange flame, making it shiver. "We're two hours away from Bucharest. We're not even a county capital."

"As if it matters. What's there to keep them from dropping bombs here? Precisely because we're not a capital, we're disposable, aren't we?"

"I'm not leaving my home."

"This is not a joke, Mrs. Stan. There've been disturbing reports on the radio: poisoned water...bombing...Our whole building could turn to rubble in just a few hours."

Adam had moved closer to them, on his belly, chin resting on his palms. He was watching them as if they were inside a TV set.

"What about Santa?" he cried out. "Where will he deliver the presents? What if the bomb blows up all the presents? What if--"

"Shush, now, boy. Country's burning down and you worry about Santa!" Bea reprimanded him. "Dan, do you really think they'll drop bombs?" Her question almost blew out the candle.

"We have to be prepared for whatever happens. I'm taking my family out of the house. We'll sit in the car for as long as it takes. I can't

offer this to all the neighbors, but you Mrs. Stan, you and Adam are like my family. There's room in the car for you two. God willing, we'll get through this... Together."

Bea's resolution to follow Dan surprised and delighted Adam. He'd be able to get a clear view of the sky, assess for himself any potential danger Santa might be exposed to, since none of the adults seemed to care.

They stepped out of the building into the cold dark night, Adam's hand buried inside Bea's. She had him wear two pairs of trousers plus a thick jumper underneath his sheepskin coat. He could barely move; had to be pulled by her as if he were a sleigh. With bells! His pocket was rattling with the sound of Bea's most treasured possessions, despite them being all wrapped inside two handkerchiefs. Three pairs of earrings, a couple of necklaces, each with its individual cross, and his grandpa's wedding ring were entrusted to him: "You hold the gold, just in case." She'd pushed the bundle deep inside his pocket then stuffed her bag with the rest: her dowry silverware, two icons, one loaf of bread, some cheese, and a glass bottle with holy water.

They took the back exit as Dan had instructed, keeping close to the wall, their shadows tucked away from the dim scrutiny of two light poles that guarded the high school yard behind Bea's building. All the way to the car Adam kept looking up, searching for those winter stars

he'd seen the previous night. The sky was dressed in mourning. Did they shoot them down?

“Get in, get in, quick!” Dan opened the door for Adam and Bea to squeeze in the back and share the seat with the Popescu kids. They'd been nicknamed Stan and Bran on fair account of the girl being tall and skinny and her brother, Radu, pumpkin-shaped.

“Thank God we're all together,” Dan's wife let out a steamy sigh from the passenger seat. “Are you comfortable back there?”

“I'd rather be in my bed, but at least we're not out in the snow. I've packed some food in case we get hungry,” Bea reassured them.

Adam could barely make out any of the speaking faces through the dark confines of the gasoline-smelling car. It was like being in one of those Russian cartoons where the bunny steps inside a cave and then everything goes black except for the whites of its eyes.

“Did Dan tell you about the water? We stopped drinking it this—”

“Quiet!” Dan silenced his wife. “Everyone quiet! Hear that?”

In the absence of words, their breaths were now communicating. Adam was trapped between Radu's quick, shy exhales, and Bea's calm, through-the-mouth breath, piercing the darkness in the form of sharp steam arrows. The wind outside was rasping against the car as if it had nails. Adam was no stranger to crivăț, but a different kind of sound was now approaching from nowhere. This was no voice of nature – it was metallic, heavy and repetitive, much different from the shootings, much

louder. So loud in fact, that soon he could no longer hear the breaths, not even his own. The noise passed above them and moved further until it was swallowed back by the wind.

“Helicopter,” Dan whispered, then resumed with force: “They could come back. We’re not leaving!”

Bea crossed herself three times: “God have mercy, protect our families, and everyone else, and us.”

“We’ll be safe here. Dad knows best!” Radu boasted, as if he knew for sure that Dan was far more powerful than God. Adam didn’t share his confidence. After all, Dan didn’t seem to know if Santa would have been safe. Besides, he knew better not to put his trust in dads.

“What if they bomb Santa and he can’t make it this year?” He turned to Radu for reassurance.

“What are you, five? Of course he’ll make it.” He leaned closer to Adam’s ear to drop a childhood threatening secret-bomb: “There’s no such thing as Santa! You get your presents from your...” The word rolled down Adam’s ear, and made its way to his chest, sinking like a boulder to the bottom of his stomach.

He leaned his head back and looked through the rear window. A fat snowflake fell out of the darkness sliding on the oblique glass. Another followed, even bigger than the first. Then another. Three white fluffs marking what was to become a snow fair, as if the helicopter had sliced open the sky.

Bea reclined and rested her head against Adam's. She squeezed his hand: "God...So beautiful..."

Adam sighed and watched the delicate ice feathers crash against the window, their melting shadows rolling down Bea's face like tears.

“You count now!” Adam was pulling his father’s hand using all the strength a boy could muster, but the man was as still as a statue. “Dad?” He looked up to see the man’s contour all blurred, as if melting in the sun. “Dad?” No reply came from the featureless face, but Adam knew it was Dad’s hand he was clutching. He could feel the rugged, pointy knuckles that secured his armpits whenever his father would lift him off the ground. The unmistakable dent on Dad’s middle finger – that honorable scar from drawing Adam himself wanted to have when he grew up – was in its place.

Adam breathed out relief, his heart blooming with joy and gratitude – the two of them would play hide and seek until dawn; they would build snow forts and tunnels that would last until springtime. No more empty chairs at the dinner table, no more unanswered questions, no more waiting! They would go back to being a family...and he could go back to being Dad’s son again.

“Dad,” he gave the hand an acknowledging squeeze. “It’s my turn to hide, go count!” He urged his father to turn around. He wanted him to count to a hundred, give Adam enough time to find the best hiding place. One that would keep him tucked away from sight. Teach Dad a lesson.

And yet he was hoping to be found sooner rather than later. His father had always been so much better at seeking. Game-wise.

“One, two, three...I’m counting...”

Adam spun on his heels scouting for a door, furniture, or any other kind of shelter. He was standing in the middle of an open field. No trees, no bushes. The land was dry with misshapen cracks that looked like poorly stitched wounds.

“Twenty-nine...thirty...thirty-one...” His father was lingering on each number as if it was his first time uttering it and he had to get used to the pronunciation: “Forty-two...forty-three...forty-four...” The counting was as loud as before, but Adam could no longer see where the words were coming from. As if Dad had vanished, leaving behind the sound of his voice. Was the field a hiding place? And if he could still hear his father, was his father able to see him? He started to run. Fast. Faster than he ever had; ground trembling underneath his feet. Tiny particles of crimson dust were rising from the cracks, creeping up his ankles and calves that looked as if they were covered in dried blood.

Adam could no longer make out his father’s voice. The steady counting had been replaced with distant violins accompanying a chorus that sounded incredibly familiar: *A-dam, A-dam, A-dam.*

He opened his eyes to Grandma Bea’s giant grin:

“Adam, we’re free! We’re finally free! It’s over.” She caked his face in kisses and pulled him from under the covers: “Come, Adam, this

is no time to sleep. Come do the Union Dance with me!” She dragged him in his pajamas all the way to the kitchen.

Unlike any other time, Bea had the radio playing so loud even the vigil light was dancing next to the icon of the Virgin Mary. He’d never seen his grandma this happy. He’d never seen her dance. He’d heard her sing that one time, when she made cozonac for him and his mom, the day after his dad went missing; it had sounded more like a finely crafted cry of pain, her eyes turned watercolor green. Now she was trilling, moving like a svelte chamois, clapping and snapping her fingers: “Come here!”

She took him to the window, pulled the curtain aside and inspected his face. Using the hem of her gown she wiped all traces of sleep his eyes had produced overnight then held his hands firmly and started going round the room. Her small kitchen was not fit for a circle dance and neither were they – it took more than just two people to make a proper circle and do the famous hora. But they spun so fast, as if they were stepping on air, holding hands with all the singers on the radio.

Adam didn’t know the words, but he followed Bea’s lead and sang after her, his shy, toneless voice echoing her dauntless trumpeting:

“Let’s unite, hand in hand

Every Romanian heart

Spinning the brotherhood dance

On Romania’s land.”

He mimicked her steps, left foot over right, faster and faster till there was no telling whether the room was spinning too, or just the two of them. Their eyes locked and she started to sing louder. He shouted even louder. They went round on the rug until it flew from under their feet and they landed one on top of the other. Bea was laughing with tears. Or crying with laughter?

They lay on their backs staring at the old yellow ceiling. Bea turned to face him, every wrinkle a wide smile: “Remember this day, Adam –”

“The day we danced till we dropped,” he chuckled.

“Yes! And we did that because there’s no one to tell us otherwise.” She brushed his cheek with the back of her hand. It smelled like soap, lemony.

He rose onto his elbows: “And Santa’s coming, right?”

“Of course he is. We’ll be the first on his list.”

“So he’s real.” He looked for reassurance on her silent face. “Radu says there’s no such thing as Santa. He says we get our presents from our dads.”

She raised both her eyebrows, making the lines on her forehead hide underneath her fringe.

“When did he say that?”

“Last night. In the car...And, if it’s true, Dad’s not here. He’s not even in Bucharest. If Dad is Santa, and Dad is gone, then Santa is gone, too. But Santa is Santa and Dad is Dad, right Bea?”

She started to pick some imaginary lint from Adam’s pajamas as if he’d just asked her to.

“Bea, is Dad Santa?”

Bea got up from the floor and turned down the radio.

“Do you believe everything you hear? And from who, Radu the Barrel?”

“He knows things.”

“Does he, now?” She was standing in front of him, winding veins running up her calves like thin blue snakes. She stretched out her hand and picked Adam up. “You know the saying: the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree?” She used her hand to dust off his pajamas.

“Mhm.”

“And would you say Dan is someone who knows things?”

He shrugged.

“Were there any bombs last night?”

“No.”

She shook her head along with him.

“Was there any point in us freezing in the car for three hours?”

“Not really.”

“Then what are we even talking about?” Bea walked to the window, looked outside: “Now’s the time to be happy!”

It was usually ‘the time to be polite, obedient, be a good little boy.’ Adam knew how to be all those things. Happy? What was happy?

Bea opened the window letting the crisp air pierce its way inside the kitchen.

“Come here!” She put out her hand and pulled Adam closer, her arm around his shoulders: “Hear that?”

He turned his ear to the outside world, but all he could hear was his own breath in the cold morning.

“Can’t hear any—”

“Shhhh,” she whispered. “Listen...”

He could hear her breath in addition to his own now, but nothing else. Not even the sound of cracking snow. And then, a winter wren broke the morning silence with a question. One answered. Another disagreed.

“That, my boy, is the sound of change,” Bea whispered. He tried to listen harder, see if he could make sense of the chirps. This was not the first time birds sang outside Bea’s window, but these trills sounded more like chatter, as if the wrens were now passing on messages.

“We’re a lot alike, you and I.” Bea squeezed his shoulder; her forefinger filled the void underneath his collarbone, like a puzzle piece. It felt cold. “When I was seven, my father went away and he never came back,” she stated matter-of-factly, as if she was recounting someone

else's story. "The only difference is that he didn't have a choice...He went to war. But your father...He has a choice now. You'll see!" She gave him a pat on the head as if she was praising him for having performed her favorite poem. "Are you hungry? Come on, let's have breakfast." She closed the window.

See what? What would he see? Adam hadn't given up on his dad; even if any attempt to talk about him was shushed and occasionally slapped away, making his return less and less probable. And now...He wanted to grab that 'you'll see' and shove it in the face of everyone who knew his dad and behaved as if he'd never existed.

Bea started to slice a loaf of bread, the radio chatting faintly in the distance.

"Bea, what will I see? Is Dad—"

"Go turn up the radio!"

Adam gazed at her mouth, envisioning news about his dad's return rolling out of it. Instead: "What are you daydreaming about? Didn't you hear me? Turn up the radio!"

He walked to the cupboard mechanically then raised himself on his toes to reach the radio. Using just his forefinger to touch the control, Adam liberated a grave, enunciating voice: *the National Salvation Front for the establishment of the Extraordinary Military Tribunal to bring the odious couple to justice.*

“Hear that? Justice...” Bea’s voice covered that of the announcer’s: “You’ll see. No more wrong. Just...Right. Go brush your teeth!”

Two days had passed since the tyrant and his wife were killed. They showed it on the TV: two fur-coated bodies riddled with bullets. Adam had peeked from behind the covers, and despite the black and white account of Grandma Bea's TV set, his memory of the blood stains was red. The execution was on everyone's lips: at home around family dinners, in bus stations or bread queues in the early hours of morning, on trains. It was bitter-sweet talk for most people – the guilt of having tainted Christmas Day with murder, appeased by a hasty satisfaction of being avenged.

“Still, I say they could've waited. Not as if two more days would've changed the sentence. Shame! And we call ourselves Christians,” said Adam's chaperone as the engine whistled its intention of approaching Bucharest North Station. The woman was seated by the window, clutching a brown fur hat in her lap, straightening it every now and then. “All this pain and suffering and now, when it's finally over, what do we do? Make God angry!”

Adam had been watching her from the adjoining seat, politely nodding at everything she said. After all, Bea had instructed him to listen to this madam and he was an obedient boy. He wasn't *listen* listening. Her

hat routine was far more intriguing: it looked like she was playing with an animal, smothering it, and then bringing it back to life.

“Let’s not mention God,” said the scrawny young man who was reclining on the opposite seat. He was caressing his girlfriend’s head which had the appearance of a fluffy cat napping on his lap – the girl let out a couple of snores throughout the journey, which could have easily passed for purrs. “It’s not like God’s been around much these past years, is it?” He gave the woman a scrutinizing look.

She looked out the window and squinted as if she were searching for a trace of God on the white speeding fields outside. No answer came except for the train’s continuous ta-tam.

“Even so, they shouldn’t have.” Her sigh drew a misty circle on the window which made Adam’s forefinger twitch.

He wanted to push her aside and write a big A across the steam before it had the chance to fade away, as he’d done the previous winter when his dad was accompanying him back home from his grandma’s. They’d travelled in an empty compartment, sat across from each other. All the way to Bucharest, Dad had tested his alphabet knowledge, prompting Adam to finger-write the initials of all the names in their family. He’d filled the window with letters and didn’t get a single one wrong. Dad was so proud of Adam’s writing skills. He even boasted to the ticket collector who made them wipe the window clean with the sleeves of their coats. By the time their train got to Bucharest, they’d

removed any traces of finger-writing, and then, just before they got off, Dad encouraged Adam to write again – one letter, his own initial.

“This is not the way to start over,” the woman’s grave voice thundered on. “Not with an execution...Too hasty...May seem like the just and gratifying thing now, but–” The engine whistle cut her short. “Bucharest!” She tapped Adam’s knee with her hat: “Almost home, young man!” Home. If only Dad was waiting for him with mom at the station. He had a choice now. Bea said so. No more wrong.

As the train drew nearer to the platform Adam got up and stuck his nose against the cold window, his small green eyes inspecting the spectacle outside: people waving flags, shouting *victory*, spreading their fingers in V signs. Making its way through the crowd, a heart-shaped face with oversized glasses he knew all too well. He hadn’t seen his mother for almost a month and it wasn’t so much the lapse of time but her nothing-can-go-wrong smile that made his insides warm, his eyes water.

She’d come alone.

Before he could climb down the steps of the wagon she’d already lifted him up: “Come here, man cub!” He grabbed her neck and pressed his nose against the soft, peach-like spot behind her ear. Smelled like home. If only Dad was home. *Is he?* The question froze behind his lips, his head locked in his mother’s tight, perfumed hug.

Adam hadn’t been away for a long time, and yet he couldn’t help being scared by Bucharest; it was bigger, louder, its snow dirtier. People

didn't stop to say 'hi', they looked like they were in too much of a hurry. But he was happy to overlook all of it. Mom was here: with her fast walk, her silence, her long stares, as if she were looking inside his head, and the short, almost unnoticeable smile of her eyes which always made her glasses twitch. He'd even missed her pliers-like grip required for crossing the street. They walked through the frozen city, guided by the lukewarm grin of that late December sun. Their shadows on the dirty white snow, stretched out into cartoon characters holding hands. Adam told her about the journey, his gabby companion and how Grandma Bea had put him in her care, about the fur hat and the young man stroking what looked like a cat, but was in fact his girlfriend's head. His observations always made her laugh.

They cut across Plevnei under the stern supervision of a giant snowman on the other side.

“Were you scared?”

“Of cat woman?” he asked without taking his eyes off the snowman.

“Of traveling alone.”

Her words failed to reach him. Adam was admiring the best dressed snowman he'd ever seen: red and white polka dot pan for a hat and the revolution flag across its chest. The coat of arms had been cut out – an imperfect circle showing off a fearless snow-white bust underneath the red, yellow and blue stripes.

“Mom, what’s a tyrant?”

His questions took priority and always came unexpected. She looked at the snowman then back at Adam: “An evil...A tyrant is an evil ruler.”

“Like our comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu?”

“He’s no longer ours and you don’t need to use the word ‘comrade’ anymore.”

“Ever?”

“I hope so.”

“Did you cry when they killed him?”

His question must have taken her by surprise since she stopped to light up a cigarette. They were one street away from Elefterie Church, but the tolling bells echoed as if through an amplifier, their sound swept around the city by the merciless wind.

“You know I’m not much of a crier,” she said letting out smoke, marking the air with a visible sigh.

“Bea cried.”

“She’s older, more sensitive.”

“She cried and shook her head and said: that’s not justice, treat him worse than a dog.” He crossed his arms over his chest and let out a couple of hopeless tuts.

“When did you get so serious?” She pulled his knitted hat over his eyes.

“Bea said things will never be the same.” Adam pushed his hat up then pulled down the sleeves of his coat. He was starting to grow out of it – the family sheepskin coat passed down from son to brother to cousin was claiming its right to be passed on again.

“Of course they won’t, things never stay the same.” She took his hand and placed it on top of her palm to measure it. “You’re growing up, we’re growing old, life changes.”

Although the tone in her voice was somewhat regretful, Adam took life changing to be something positive. She’d said ‘we’, ‘we’re growing old’, not ‘I’. The change both Bea and his mother were talking about was all the more clear. Dad was home! Adam could hardly contain his jubilation.

“Did you have to eat on the floor, too?” he asked.

“Did you?”

He nodded: “One of Bea’s bedroom windows was broken. Dum-dum. Dum-dum-dum. We had to drag ourselves across the floor. We couldn’t stand up at all. Except for when we had to go to the bathroom, obviously.”

“Obviously.”

“She’d sleep with the radio under her pillow. One night she fell asleep with it on. I could still hear *this is Free Europe* and when I tried to turn it off she slapped my hand: *We must know what happens.*”

Adam's mom crushed the cigarette butt under her boot till it sank in the snow then took his hand to cross over Dâmbovița. The river was frozen, a patchwork quilt of ice with tiny strips of water for stitches. A bushel of people, in front of the Municipal Hospital, were waiting in the bus station, pressed together like penguins fighting the cold in an organized manner. Above the uniform mass of dark-hatted heads rose one wrapped up in bandages with a yellow-red stain on the side.

“Stop staring, Adam!” His mom pushed his chin up to close a wondering mouth agape. He turned away from the gauzed head to look at the approaching bus, but the stain had already been imprinted on his memory – the shape of a bleeding butterfly.

On the bus, his mom sat him on her lap like she used to do when he was little. She even kissed him on the cheek with an embarrassing noise that made him twitch.

“Missed me?” she asked, as he was wiping his face with the back of his hand. “No need to answer, I know you have.” She removed his hat and straightened his fringe.

“Did Santa bring me any presents?” He pulled his head from under her hand to get a better view of her face. Any sign, even the tiniest one would have done: a smile, a quiver, an involuntary blink, anything to confirm his hopes. There was none. She was too good at keeping secrets!

“I thought he already came at Bea's, didn't he?” He looked at her looking out the window. “How many presents do you want? It's not like

you wrote two letters. Hey, look over there!” She pointed at a tank stranded on the pavement, three blood-red carnations sticking out of the main gun. Two boys were holding cut-out flags over their heads, bouncing next to the open hatch. A few military men were smoking and talking to the boys’ dads. Adam waved at them. The men waved back.

The bus pulled up in front of their building. It was just as he remembered it. Better even. The pale orange frontispiece was shining in the late noon sun as if it was radiating from inside; the blocks of flats surrounding it, looked grey and sad by comparison. As they crossed the street, he looked up at their kitchen window. Did the curtain just move? Was that him? Adam’s feet were itching – he wished the snow was made of springs, strong enough to trampoline him all the way up to the fourth floor. The elevator wasn’t fast enough.

He followed his mom inside their flat’s long hallway, three times as long as Bea’s. The wallpaper, with its tall drawn branches, made the hallway look like the inside of a forest. He couldn’t wait to run from one end to the other, but he had more important matters to attend to. The light in the living room – that room of living memories, where the three of them had spent all those Sundays watching Teleenciclopedia – was on. It had to be Dad.

Adam ran into the living room without taking off his boots. He’d played this moment in his head ever since Bea had confirmed its likelihood: his dad in his washed-out jeans and his dark green sweater

lying on the couch, feet up on the armrest, hand resting under his head, the other hand holding a cigarette like a rebel breaking his self-imposed rule of 'no smoking in the living room'.

Adam kept his eyes on the floor, building up the reunion. First sign: his dad's slippers resting at the foot of the coffee table.

"I knew it!" he shouted and looked up.

The couch was empty. The TV turned off.

"Knew what?" His mom sneaked up behind him. "And when did you stop taking your shoes off when you go inside the house?"

"Where's dad? Bea said he has a choice now. There's nothing keeping him away, that's what she said!" His chin was trembling.

"Bea also said you'd be a girl." His mom squatted down in front of him: "It's good to listen to Bea..." She started taking off his boots and coat. "But sometimes it's better to think for yourself."

"Why are his slippers here?"

She kissed his forehead and held him close to her chest. He pushed her away: "Where is he?"

"Mind your tone, Adam." His mom stood up and put on the slippers. "I've been wearing them. Had to throw mine away, they broke."

He could barely swallow, saliva honey thick, yet bitter. He started to cry.

"Adam, look at me!" She grabbed him by the chin. "Trust me, you'll be the first to know if he comes back. I know you miss him. I miss

him too. But for now it's just you and me. Remember?" She whispered in his ear: "Mother bear and cub..." Then took off her glasses and kissed his tear-wet cheeks.

"If you talk to him," he spoke in between hiccupped cries, "Tell him...to never come back...tell him he's missed his chance. He might as well be dead!"

"Adam!" She raised her hand then let it drop on his shoulder. "How can you say that? Revenge is a fool's game. You're not a fool, are you?" She sat him on the armchair and kneeled in front of him. "I don't want to lie to you. He might never come back...Truth is..." She paused to gather up courage: "I don't know," She let it slip through her teeth, half embarrassed, half relieved then resumed with confidence: "But for now, we have to believe he will. Bea was right about one thing: there's nothing stopping him to get in touch now..."

Adam stood up and ran to his room slamming the door behind him. He swallowed his tears, snot and saliva. *I don't know*. The words were ringing in his ears, their hopeless echo settling on top of a foul feeling. He took a deep breath and proceeded to look around the room, making sure everything was in one piece. He searched for traces of bullet holes, but the windows were intact. The big orange plastic Teckel dog he'd got the previous Christmas was guarding his desk as instructed.

"Good job, Patrocle!" He rewarded the artificial dog with a pat on the head: "I told you I'd be back before New Year's."

Adam had no trouble keeping his word and he was just a boy. Why couldn't Dad come back? His chin pulsed with smothered anger and disappointment, but he clenched his jaws and tucked away any whimpering sadness.

He sat on the bed, his back to the window, staring at the shadows of the neighboring blocks projected on his wall. He watched them rise as the sun went down; concrete giants, home of the many whole families unlike his. The dying sunlight made Adam's room look like an illustration from one of his storybooks – a battle's aftermath, him the surviving hero.

Six months and four days...His dad had been missing for six months and four days exactly. Adam had never been very good with numbers or dates, but he had no trouble remembering this one – sewn into his memory like the monogram Bea put inside every one of his t-shirts. 25th of June – six months and four days ago – he was running home from pre-school to meet his dad who would take him swimming. It was to be Adam's first swimming lesson planned way back in the year. One doesn't forget a first time, even more so if it never happened.

He burst through the door, threw his school bag on the floor and rushed inside the kitchen: "Here I am!"

"You are, indeed." His mom was squatting in front of the oven: "Go wash your hands, and take that school bag to your room. You've got a treat waiting."

"I know."

"I don't think you do...I'm making you a double dessert for today. How's that for a super-mom? We've got cherry sponge cake in the oven and your absolute favorite: bird's milk." She got up and started to stir the milk on the hob.

“Great! I’ll be having both when we get back.” Adam grabbed an apple from the table and started crunching its green side – the one he liked best. “Where is he? We’re going to be late.”

Adam’s mom placed the spoon on a plate next to the stove and turned to him. She took off her glasses and rubbed her nose with her forefinger. Her eyes were burning blue, trapped behind a teary pellicle. The look on her face was no stranger to Adam. It was the look she’d give him whenever he came up with one of *his* questions; like *why is Comrade Ceaușescu on the inside cover of every book if he didn’t write any of them?*

“Adam, you’re not going swimming.”

“Why not?” He parroted her serious tone, sign that he wished she wasn’t serious.

She was.

“Come here, I need to tell you something.” She pulled him closer, till he could feel her breath on his cheek, then finger-combed his fringe.

He drew back: “What?”

“What’s Dad’s number one rule?”

“There’s no such thing as no can do.”

“That too, but the one about keeping secrets.”

“Oh,” He straightened his back and started to recite with pride: “There’s one family and it lives in this house. Don’t talk to anyone about what you hear at home.”

“Good. Remember that. It’s very important. Listen to what I say and never repeat it. And please, no questions.”

Too late. Three had already sprung up in Adam’s over inquisitive mind: *How important? Where’s Dad? Why aren’t we going swimming?* And quite a few others were queuing behind.

Mom placed her thumb on Adam’s forehead, caressed it gently to disarm a hostile frown. She took a deep breath.

“We won’t be seeing Dad for a while. I don’t know where he is, when or if he’s coming back. I don’t want to lie to you, you’re smart enough to be my friend through this. He’s gone. I can’t explain, don’t ask...Just try to understand...” She covered her face with her hands and pulled the skin to her ears, as if her head was made of Play Dough. “He’s gone,” she repeated and let go of her right cheek, keeping the left one imprisoned in a clownish half-smile. “I know I’m asking too much of you, but try not to think about it. It’s best you forget we even talked about this. Adam, if anyone asks about him, you don’t know. Which is true. You don’t. Do you understand?”

He opened his mouth several times, but he couldn’t find the right thing to say. There were plenty of questions dying to come out, but he’d promised he wouldn’t ask any. He nodded gazing at the air, past his mom, blinking very slowly as if to contain the furious storm inside.

She squeezed his shoulder, “Adam?”

His eyes were fixed on the stove; milk boiling out of the pot. The white foam rose to the surface, drip-spilling all over the flames which turned from blue to orange to blue – fickle.

They'd never talked about his father since. Whenever someone asked Adam about his father's whereabouts, he'd simply say *I don't know*, and change the subject. Everyone wanted to know. *What happened to your dad? Have you heard from him?* Neighbors, kids at school, the principal, even the cleaner asked him once. After a while Adam learned to shut them out, he'd just pretend he didn't hear the question. He'd become a master at avoiding conversation. But now, when things were changing, when Bea talked about Dad for the first time in half a year, he couldn't help but hope for his return.

After dinner Adam joined his mother on the living room couch. She was still wearing Dad's slippers as if she was determined to make a cruel point about their owner's absence. The words *he might as well be dead* were still ringing in Adam's ears. What if he really was *dead*? The thought made his stomach swirl with fear. He drew closer to his mom. She didn't even look at him; sat there, legs crossed, tapping the air with her right foot.

They could have played the human remote control, the game where her wishes were his commands. *Switch to Bulgarians. Turn it up. Make the color less yellow. Contrast, fix the contrast.* None of that appealed to him right now. He kept silent, half frightened half ashamed,

staring at the animated screen of the TV: footage of people hugging, children handing flowers to soldiers, passers-by shouting *Victory* at the camera, all under the colorful title *Free Romania*.

He turned to his mom. The doorbell rang. Twice.

“Go see who’s at the door!” His mom instructed without taking her eyes off the TV.

Adam stood up, and walked towards the hallway, his stomach churning, fear and hope vying for supremacy. Those four steps to the door had him go through bouts of hope, fear of getting his hopes high and back to plain hope. He touched the handle, a faint smile on his face, and opened the door to their neighbor, Mrs. Ionescu. She was dressed in black from head to toe; shaking, her face swollen and wet. There was no way of telling what frightened Adam more: the sight of mourning black or the crying grown-up wrapped in it.

“Who is it, Adam?”

Mrs. Ionescu could barely speak.

“Come, Nora, come inside.” His mom led her into the living room and sat her on the couch. Adam remained by the door, keeping a safe distance from the teary spectacle.

“Adam, go get some water. Bring sugar, too. And spoon. Go, go, don’t look at me like it’s the first time you’ve heard the word sugar!”

Adam's mom force-fed Mrs. Ionescu a spoonful of sugar and shoved the glass of water under her nose. After watching her take a couple of sips she asked:

“Who died?”

“Gabi,” She wiped the tears off her face to make way for new ones. “Shot in the head!” Her yelp silenced even the happy faces on the TV – *transmission to resume shortly* – as if they'd been invited to take a moment of silence.

Adam's mom put her arms around Mrs. Ionescu and caressed her hair. The room was dead quiet except for the clock on the wall, counting its seconds in between the woman's helpless sobs.

“Why Gabi? Why him?” Mrs. Ionescu pulled away from the hug: “A civilian! Why him? Been missing for three days...” She squeezed the glass with her shaking hands then took another sip of water. “What will I tell the kids?”

She caught a glimpse of Adam's head behind the armchair.

“Adam, you remember my husband Gabi, don't you?” Her sad face moved in a slow motion nod that Adam mirrored shyly. “Of course, you do. They killed him. They killed him, Ada—”

His mom hugged her tightly: “That's it, let it out, and cry it all out.”

Adam wanted to tell his mom to blow over her pain and make it go away like she used to blow over his playground bruises. He recalled

seeing Gabi before Christmas when he'd given Adam a pocket size car with running wheels and doors that opened. Then he remembered what he'd just said about his dad. *He might as well be...*

"We don't even have a burial place," Mrs. Ionescu wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "Who gets one in their thirties?" She started to rub the ring on her finger.

"Don't think about that now."

The two women smoked in the living room, breaking a house rule, broken only on special occasions. That day Adam learned that 'special' can also mean 'sad'. He sat on the armchair and stared at the pattern on the carpet: two brown flowers with teeth for leaves.

"Worse than an animal," Mrs. Ionescu mumbled. "Lying on the cement...They said he'd been dead for two days."

"When are you bringing his body home?"

"Have to find a car first, can't keep him there much longer. New bodies are still coming in. Women and men...So much death..."

Adam's mouth became dry, his saliva sand-like and hard to swallow.

"They asked..." Mrs. Ionescu mumbled in between cries. "Do you want him to be cremated?"

"Do you?"

“Did he? I don’t know! So much I don’t know!” She buried her face in her palms, her hair flowing down her shoulders like the pendulous branches of a willow tree.

“Give him a proper Christian burial. I think he would have liked that. And I’ll make those meatballs he loved so much.”

“Where will I bury him?” Mrs. Ionescu started rocking, her eyes fixed on the floor. Adam’s mom drew closer and took her in her arms. He wanted to go over there, put his arm around her, too. Strength came in numbers, Bea always said. He felt too small, his arms too tiny to make an impact.

Adam stood still in the middle of the room, long after Mrs. Ionescu had left, as if his feet had been sewn into the carpet. He was watching his mom watching him. Their walls echoed with the widow’s wails making their way from downstairs, now supported by the chorus of her weeping children.

We’ve triumphed! The TV resumed transmission making Adam startle. He ran to his mom as if he’d just woken up from a bad dream: “I’m sorry for what I said. Forgive me! Dad’s not...He’s not Gabi...”

She held him close to her chest, tight, her heart pounding in his ear, as if demanding to break out. They stood like that, feeding off each other’s embrace; their bellies kissing with each breath, until she finally let go: “I’m going to have a cigarette.”

“You can smoke here. Special occasion, remember?” Adam took a cigarette out of the pack, placed it between her lips and lit it up for her, eventually, after a couple of failed attempts. This was his first time using a lighter.

A pall of smoke floated over the trembling headlines on the TV, concealing the odd letter, but that could not prevent Adam from reading. That winter he was exposed to new and soon to be overused words. *Libertate* was one of them.

Until then, Adam had no idea so many colors existed – life had suddenly switched from black and white to Technicolor.

It was the spring of 1990 and the TV speakers were bursting with the sounds of Madonna and New Kids on the Block. Ideas of change and wellbeing had spawned under a prayed-for democratic rain, taking multitudes of forms such as free speech, unrestrained commerce, private sector, safe abortion and passports.

For Adam, the changes were different and many; so many of them in fact, he could barely keep track. When he returned to school in January the portraits of Nicolae Ceaușescu had been taken down, leaving behind empty, bleached patches. After a while, icons or paintings took their place, but some of them were just too small to cover the marks left by the Comrade, as if his memory had been imprinted on the walls. Everyone was instructed to tear the inside cover of their manuals, which held the once-smiling dictator, and bin it – there were a lot of pages, garbage overflowing that day. They had to learn the new anthem, *Wake up, Romanian, from the sleep of death*, but they were not required to sing it every day before class. Teachers became ‘Mister’ or ‘Mrs,’ and any accidental use of ‘Comrade’ was now reprimanded in front of everyone.

Kids looked different too, now that the uniform was no longer compulsory: they livened up the classroom with their distinct patches of color.

It was the perfect time to be a child and be presented with a vast array of treats that had seemingly appeared overnight, not one but five different types of chocolate from Mars bars to Snickers and Bounty. Pepsi and Coca Cola replaced the Romanian Brifcor once frugally shelved above the counter. Adam no longer had to pray for those rare birthday parties where the birthday boy or girl would get sweets from their relatives in Germany – gummy bears were now everywhere. And not just one kind, they came in all the flavors he could dream of, even Coca Cola – he knew that taste all too well by now.

Unlike most children who had pocket money they would spend at the recently opened corner shops, Adam still took his mom's sandwiches to school. The thought that his dad would have given him a daily allowance, made his absence all the more present. On the bright side, he was now allowed and even encouraged to write with his left hand; that and the fact that English had been introduced in the curriculum, made school exciting.

Even at home the changes were significant. No more waking up at four in the morning to queue for bread or milk. No more green bananas his mom would have to wrap in newspaper and leave on top of the cupboard for days to ripen; they'd get the proper ones, yellow and ready

to eat. No more watching Bulgarian cartoons and guessing what the characters were saying, now they had a full hour of cartoons every day, in Romanian; and films too, American ones, which he could watch at home on National TV, not played on a neighbor's video player with the volume down, in a crowded living room.

One thing stayed the same – the *not talking about Dad* rule was immutable. As if Dad had been some sort of a dictator, too. His photos were not binned, but tucked away in a box up high, on top of his mom's bedroom dresser, out of reach. But Adam didn't lose faith, nor did he drop his 'casual' observations, especially when he was watching TV with his mom: "Spartacus looks a lot like Dad. Look, he even has the chin dimple!" Any mention of his dad, in whatever context would always get him sent to his room to do more homework.

"But I've done it!"

"Do it again."

It took a lot of *go do more homework* to avoid mentioning Dad in front of Mom. She did manage to have it her way eventually – there was no point in exhibiting the memory of a man who was clearly in hiding. Still, Adam didn't give up on being reunited with his dad. He secretly defied his mom, by not doing homework. Homework was what *she* thought he was doing. Instead he'd draw sketches of buildings, pretend to be an architect like Dad. Keeping his memory alive. In secret.

That year on his birthday Mom took him on a walk through the center of Bucharest. Spring was at its peak and cherry trees in blossom compared nuances of white and pink with proud magnolias. They strolled along the fountains in front of Casa Republicii then stopped for papanasi in the Old Town. On the way back, they passed by Universitate Square where people were gathered in groups singing along to folk music.

“Let’s go see the concert!” Adam pulled her hand and started walking towards the crowd.

“It’s not a concert, Adam.” She held him back and pointed at a placard hovering above the crowd.

He read the inscription out loud: “Down with Communism.” He turned to his mom, “Isn’t it down already?”

“Luce! Luce!” A woman was waving at them from the crowd, screaming his mom’s name. Adam began to wave back frantically, but his mom held his wrist tight, forcing him to stop. They started to walk in the opposite direction, but the woman was adamant. She ran and caught up with them out of breath, her hair, long and golden, was oily at the roots, plump sweat beads stuck to her forehead.

“So good to see you!” She threw her arms around Adam’s mom who pulled back as if she was trying to avoid a wasp. The woman let go of Adam’s mom the moment she saw him and was now giving Adam an ecstatic stare as if he was her long-lost son: “And this must be—”

“Adam!” His mom pulled him back and held him behind her, away from the woman’s touch.

“You’re all grown up, now. You may not remember me. I used to work with your–”

“We really must go, we’re in a hurry, but nice to see you.” Mom lifted him by the arm, as if he was a toy, and led him through the crowd towards the bus stop.

“Wait! Can we talk?” The woman shouted behind them, her voice soon swallowed back by crowd-buzz. But then two words broke through, loud and clear as if she was speaking on a microphone, “About Mihai?”

Hearing his dad’s name made Adam shudder. His palm sweating, fish like, slipped away from his mother’s grip. His mom turned to the woman, a vein pulsing above her right eyebrow. Adam knew all too well what that meant for him, it either preceded a severe scolding, or very rarely, a slap across the butt. He had no idea what was to follow where grownups were concerned. “What *about* Mihai?” she asked, uttering the name with conviction as if it was just that – a name, no real person attached to it.

The woman looked at Adam: “I just wanted to clear things up. I’m sorry if–”

“No need to apologize,” Adam’s mom changed the subject: “Why not tell us about what’s happening here on this fine day?”

“Great gathering, don’t you think?” The woman led them towards the crowd and stopped by a fountain surrounded by people.

Adam raised himself on tiptoe, but he was too short to see past the fountain. He was the only child, surrounded completely by grown-ups. He’d never been in a crowd before. He was scared, but at the same time he felt safe, somehow lighter, as if his feet were no longer under the rule of gravity.

“All these people peacefully united, making sure all that death was not in vain.” The woman was now holding on to Luce’s arm. She drew even closer, trapping Adam between their skirts. He looked up, but had no view of their faces, blocked by their puffed out chests. “Has he been in touch?”

He stretched out his neck so as not to miss his mom’s reply: “Now is not the time. Say Adam, what do you make of this gathering?” Mom lifted him allowing for a full view of the Square.

Adam scanned the crowd, wondering at the sight of all those heads making up what looked like patterned carpet rolled across the Universitate Square. Could Dad’s be one of these heads? What were the chances? Adam knew better than to get his hopes up, but at the same time, he couldn’t help it. After all, today was his birthday. What better way to celebrate than finding Dad? He caught glimpse of a man’s haircut, his sideburns having the same length as his father’s. Adam was determined to keep his eyes on him, wait for him to turn so he can get a

clear look of his features – he didn't even blink. The resemblance was striking. The man even wore a jeans jacket just like Dad's. A disappointed sigh parted with Adam's lips as he discovered a bushy moustache on the man's face.

“He made the right choice!” He heard the woman say to his mom.

“How do you know?” Mom held Adam tighter, pushing him up, further away from the talk. He lowered his head without her seeing. “You're still here, aren't you? Have you left your family?”

“He did it for you. For Adam—”

“Please don't talk about my family. You're just—”

“I did what I thought was right,” Adam heard the woman say as his mom lowered him down, “You'll see... You'll thank—”

Her words were muffled by the crowd's humming. Everyone began to sing along to a man's voice which made its way through the speakers. The voice of the people resounded so loud that they soon covered that of the singer:

I'd rather be a tramp than a traitor,

I'd rather be a hooligan than a dictator,

I'd rather be a hoodlum than an activist,

I'd rather be dead than a communist.

The woman was belting out the lyrics with her eyes closed, a continuous smile across her face. Adam's mom did not sing, but she kept tapping the rhythm with her fingers on his shoulder.

“We need all the voices we can get,” the woman shouted at Adam’s mom. “I bet Mihai would have—”

“Adam is—”

“Big enough to care. To make himself heard. To shout, even.”

“I can shout,” he shouted. Then added even louder: “Down with Communism!” His reaction made the two women burst into laughter. Hearing Mom laugh made him twitch with joy. So what if he didn’t see Dad? This was still a pretty great birthday. Adam felt like all those people there were celebrating him, too. Even if they were not really singing Happy Birthday, it felt like they were to him.

He wished they’d stayed longer, but his mom pulled him quickly to the side. She walked fast, dragging Adam after her as if she was running for their lives. He was out of breath when they got to the bus stop, the crowd no longer in sight, their voices still echoing with urgency. He didn’t want to go home just yet; people were getting off busses and heading towards the Square. It was like him and his mom were the only ones leaving.

The two of them sat in silence on the bus ride back home. She didn’t even notice him dangling his feet – a custom she would normally discourage. Adam turned to her a couple of times, eager to ask about the woman, the people, but most of all about his dad. She kept avoiding his look until they got home.

“Is there anything you want to ask me?” She offered from across the table as she was grating cheese over the thin cut fries – Adam’s favorite food in the whole world. “You’re allowed one question. Make it your best.” She placed the plate in front of him.

Adam put his fork down and stared at the uneven pyramid of cheese flakes melting into the burning hot fries. One question...The first that came to mind was ‘where is dad,’ but he knew she didn’t have an answer to that one. It wasn’t so much what he could ask, but what she was capable of answering. He cleared his throat: “Why were all those people there? You said it was not a concert. What were they doing there?”

He could see pride swell up her eyes: “Asking for a new government. You read the signs; no more communism.”

“But Nicolae Ceaușescu is...”

“Dead. But he wasn’t ruling alone. That’s what they’re asking. Whoever was part of the old ruling should not be allowed to rule anymore. Ever.”

“Why do they even have to ask?” He picked up his glass: “What was the revolution for?” The question echoed briefly inside the glass before he sipped it back along with the water as if it never existed in the first place.

“You stop judging, D! He’s your brother…”

“You sure *he* knows that?”

Adam was glued to the wall in the hallway, breath held, listening to his mom and uncle talking in the kitchen. His knees were shaking, left cheek pulsing underneath inflamed skin. He’d just been in his first fight, but no amount of pain was going to stop him from collecting information. He stuck his ear on the wall, feeling the words vibrate as if they’d been trapped inside: “You would have done the same.” A clink-clank followed, sign of his mom stirring sugar into her coffee; she was always very meticulous; Adam’s eardrum pounding to the sound of the spoon inside the cup.

“I’m not married, Luce. I don’t have a son.”

One of them got up from the table, the chair’s screech on the kitchen tiles made Adam’s spine shiver. Still he could not part his ear from the wall. He wasn’t able to make out all of what was being said, but the fact that they were talking about his dad felt like some sort of victory. It even justified him getting into a fight; his aching bruise was worth it.

The chatter had stopped, nothing but empty sounds for a while until he heard his uncle again: “Is this it?” What was what? Adam’s heart

was beating so loud, he had to take a step away from the wall for fear of disclosing his presence with its heavy thumps, missing a few muffled words in the process. No way of telling whether they'd been hers or his.

“Very cryptic,” his uncle concluded.

“Does it surprise you?”

What was ‘cryptic’? He wished he had infra-red vision, like Robocop, use that thin red laser to slice the wallpaper trees down the middle and cut through the wall – a line small enough for him to squint and see what they were referring to.

“Why isn’t he coming back?”

Why isn’t he? Adam pressed his ear harder on the wall in case his mom would whisper her answer.

“You know him, likes to go forward.” The crunchy sound of a lighter was followed by his mom’s smoke-exhaling sigh.

Adam’s lips reproduced the word *forward* soundlessly, letter by letter, trying to figure out whether it was the name of a place. Forward where? And more importantly how *far* was *forward*? His legs began to ache, pins and needles running through his thighs. He could barely stand anymore, but now was not the time to give up; words kept flowing behind the wall:

“You’re not really considering this—”

“Don’t really have a choice.”

As he slowly squatted down...

“Think of Adam!”

...his keys slipped out of his pocket, the carpet not thick enough to silence their fall.

“What was that?”

“Adam, is that you?” His mother opened the kitchen door: “Didn’t hear you come in. We’ve got company. Come, see who’s here.”

Adam followed her voice and went into the kitchen, his head down, the left side of his face turned towards his shoulder, trying to conceal his bruise from their gaze.

“There’s the little man!”

Hearing D without a wall between them was all the more intense. His voice, unmistakably like Dad’s, made Adam’s chin tremble, tears would soon come tumbling after.

“Adam, say hi...What’s wrong?” His mother lifted his head, the sunlight made his tear ducts overflow. “Dear God, what happened?” She took his head in her hands and inspected the bruise.

“Who did this?”

“An...drei...”

D’s head showed up above his mom’s: “Just a scratch.” Thank God he looked nothing like his dad. Adam could not have held back his inevitable crying-out-loud otherwise. Uncle D, not Dad. “I’m sure Andrei looks a lot worse. Ain’t that right, cub?” The voice threw him off again,

but mostly being called *cub* by someone other than his mother. He scanned the table for Dad evidence.

“Andrei from the sixth floor?” His mom sat him on the chair then took out some ice from the freezer and put it on his face: “Why would he do this?”

Adam stretched out his arm and took a postcard from the other side of the table: a weird statue, with a crown of thorns pointing outwards, hovering above the water. His mom snatched it out of his hand before he had the time to flip it over and see the writing on the back.

“That's mine,” D took the card from her hand, folded it and hid it inside his shirt pocket.

“I asked you what happened!” His mom snapped.

“Andrei hit me.” He kept squinting at D's pocket, hoping to make out some of the writing trapped behind the fabric.

“Just like that? Why? What did you do?”

“I hit him first, OK? It was me.”

“Cub's become a man!” D put his hands together mimicking a pride-infused clap.

“You stay out of it!” Luce barked at him, making D put up his hands like they do in movies when held at gunpoint. “Why, Adam? Why would you hit him?” she asked.

“Wouldn't shut up about dad, kept saying how he was an informant. That's why no one knows where he is,” he directed that at his

uncle, praying for a sign of weakness, a wink, anything to make him feel he had finally found an ally.

“Kids these days know all kinds of words. What’s an informant?” D lit up a cigarette and paused to remove a shred of tobacco from his lip – he studied it as if it were alive, rubbed it between his fingers then let it drop dead in the ashtray.

“Adam, that’s no reason to hit someone!” His mom pressed the ice on his cheek making his whole face shudder with pain.

“How do you know? You weren’t there!”

“Tone, Adam. Watch your tone...” She raised an eyebrow and shook her head, pointing at his bruise: “You look like a boy from the youth detention center.” She ran her fingers through her hair, peeling off the fringe from her sweaty forehead. “What am I going to do with you?”

“Send me forward!” He regretted giving away his recent findings as soon as the words left his mouth, but he was too anxious to keep quiet. He knew now. They had better know he knew they knew. No more hiding! “I want to go forward, too!” His words echoed against the kitchen tiles, their zeal all zany, now they were out in the open.

His mom took a step back, looking away from him as if he wasn’t even in the room. He knew all too well the meaning of not-being-looked-at and searched for a glimpse of understanding on his uncle’s face instead. He would have settled for an almost smile, a nostril flare, anything. The man was heavily silent like the Bucharest summer heat. Even if he was on

Adam's side, there was no way he could go against Mom. Only one man ever could, and his absence was the reason why they were in this mess in the first place.

"OK, Adam," she spoke in a calm and soothing voice: "You win."

It was too good to be true. Adam's feet started to tickle and itch and so did his palms, like someone had set fire to his extremities, "Really?" He could barely contain his joy.

"Oh, I'm sending you forward all right." She nodded at D, her face giving out signs which Adam read as *the time has come*, then lowered her head to deliver straight in his face: "You're going to spend the summer with your uncle."

"What?" Adam and D shouted in one voice.

"You said you want to help? This is help. You're taking Adam with you to the mountains," she instructed D.

Mountains? Adam couldn't care less about mountains. If he was going to leave home, it would be only to join his father. Not to be estranged from his mother too.

"No, no, Luce. That's my work, not some holiday retreat. This is not a good idea," D articulated Adam's feelings.

"It's the best idea I've had in ages!" She gave Adam a smile. He'd brought this all on himself. *Forward? I'll give you forward, listening in on grown up talk.* "Who said anything about taking him with you to work?" She reached for the pack of cigarettes and extracted one with care,

as if she was taking out dynamite: “He’ll stay in the village. There are mountains, fresh air. Can’t you see how the Bucharest heat is tampering with his sense?” She lit up her cigarette victoriously. Adam wanted to scream.

“Well I can’t watch over him, I’m sorry.” D restored his hope.

“You don’t have to.” There was no talking her out of it. There was no talking her out of anything, period: “Bea will watch him and I’m pretty sure my sister wants to send Matei away for the summer, too.”

“Two kids *plus* mom? Said I want to help, not sacrifice myself.” D gave his beard a comprehensive scratch.

“Listen,” Adam’s mom drew near her brother-in-law and tapped his secret-holding pocket: “You’re in this already. Don’t make me—”

“God, Luce, if only you’d been as determined with...” he paused to look from her to Adam and gave a ‘busted’ shrug: “Better pack warm clothes, kid. Summer is nothing like you know it up there.”

Adam jumped to his feet: “I don’t want to go!” He ran to grab a hold of his mom, but she stopped him halfway, her hand stuck to his chest, holding him at arm’s length. “Please, mom, I want to stay here with—”

“No, no, no. You want to go forward. And forward you shall go. You know begging doesn’t get you anywhere. Go pack your bag because you are going.” She grabbed both his shoulders and turned him away

from her, towards the door, then gave him a little push. He started walking.

“Good,” her voice resounded behind.

Good?!? Losing Mom, too? What if she was gone when he'd come back? Was he even going to come back? Adam's head filled up with scenarios, somber ones – like his leaving would lead to him becoming an orphan for the summer, or worse, for good, because Mom was sending him away so she could leave too, just like Dad, leave him all alone – leaving was the central theme in all of them.

“**People** should learn to savor their first cigarette...Watch me closely.” Matei was perching on top of the toilet seat, a long Kent in between his fingers.

Adam was leaning against the sink, watching his older cousin as if he was some kind of magician about to reveal the secret behind his most acclaimed trick. The toilet was far too small to accommodate two people and it smelled appalling – he didn’t dare to venture any guesses as to what were the contributing factors.

The train was shaking its lazy old cars, causing Matei to waste two matchsticks before properly lighting one. He opened the small window above Adam’s head, took a drag and let out the smoke, the wind spitting it back in his face.

Matei coughed out, “Flavor...It’s American...” He nodded then stuck the burning cigarette under Adam’s nose: “Here, take a puff! Goes well with your black eye.”

Mom smoked all the time. It looked so easy: place your lips around the non-burning end, go ‘puff’ and let it out. Adam could do that, too. He took the cigarette with his right hand, made the victory sign with his left and placed the end between his fingers. He’d held a cigarette

before, passed it to his mom, but never a burning one. It felt alive. As if it had a little engine inside. And it was warm. He put it to his mouth, but before he could put his lips on it, the smoke went straight for his eyes. He struggled not to cry, stuck the cigarette in his mouth. It was wet, tasted like stamps. He took it out and puffed out clean air.

“What are you doing?” Matei slapped him over the head. “You have to inhale! Think of it as a straw. Imagine you’re drinking. Like this,” He snatched the cigarette from Adam’s hand and sucked on the burning straw. The smoke he let out was so thick it turned him into a foggy silhouette.

“Your turn, show me what you’ve got!”

Adam took a deep breath, then a mouthful. A warm, partly sweet partly metallic taste rolled around his mouth. He blew out cotton white smoke.

“Not bad,” Matei tapped him on the shoulder.

Adam felt proud. If it’d been a test he must have passed it. Not to mention the satisfaction of getting back at Mom for sending him away. Still, he hoped she’d never find out.

They finished smoking and washed their hands and mouths. The water tasted so much worse than the cigarette. Someone knocked on the door.

“Busy,” shouted Matei. A second knock followed.

He opened the door to none other than uncle D.

“Well done, Matei! Now you’re smoking?”

Adam felt his face turn white.

“You, too?” D’s expression, a solid proof of disgust and disappointment.

“He didn’t smoke. He was my cover!”

“And what a good example you’re setting! You’re lucky I don’t tell your mother.”

“You started smoking when—”

“Quiet, smart mouth!” D’s hand landed on Matei’s shoulder, pulling him out of the toilet in one short tug as if he were made of cloth. “Your cousin and I are going to have a little talk, now. Go back to your seat,” he shouted at Adam who spun on his heels and started walking down the corridor.

He was determined to get as far away as possible from D’s scolding that he doubled his pace and tripped over the feet of a young man who was leaning against a compartment door.

“Easy!” He grabbed Adam’s t-shirt, preventing his fall.

“Excuse me,” he mumbled as the man released him.

“Excuse me, Sir. Didn’t your father teach you to respect your elders, young man?” The question was followed by a mean laughter. Adam’s savior only looked a few years older than Matei, but he sounded just as taunting and he was smoking, sharing a cigarette with a girl his age. “Watch where you’re going, and mind those manners,” he spat at

Adam and tutted like a grown-up, then offered to his companion: “That’s the problem with today’s youth, too much freedom, freedom misunderstood.” They both burst into laughter, cue for Adam to make a run for it.

He went past two empty compartments and another where a family with two children were spread on their seats like pancakes. He finally found Bea dozing in a serene state of oblivion.

“Bea, are you sleeping?” He sat next to her.

“Yes,” she offered without opening her eyes.

Adam started shaking her arm to the rhythm of the train tracks:

“Bea, wake up!”

“What is it, Adam?” She looked around puzzled, her hair pointing in all directions. “What happened? Where’s D? Ma—”

“They’re having a talk,” he reassured her. “Bea, do you remember what you said about Dad? That he’s coming back?”

Bea took a comb out of her purse and started applying precise double strokes on her rebel curls, “When did I say that?”

“Last winter, remember? That morning when we danced in the kitchen.”

“Who knows what I said that day? I was drunk with happiness, we all were.” She gave him a pat on the head. “No point in thinking about that now anyway. We’re going to the mountains. Wait till you get there, you won’t want to go back home.”

Adam opened his mouth, but she pinched his chin, stopped his jaw from moving: “Just like your father when he was a boy. Took me days of begging for him to go away for the summer, weeks even, and when he finally relented, he could barely be dragged back home. Did you know he ran away to my brother’s farm one summer? Couldn’t find him for months. He wanted to become a jockey.” She put her comb back in her purse. “Are you hungry?”

Adam shook his head.

“Then you should get some rest. Have you had your afternoon nap today? You’re not allowed to miss that, come on.” She took off his sneakers and laid his head on her lap. Her legs were crossed, the right one dangling in the air. He closed his eyes and rocked to the train percussion: tum-tum, tum-tum, tum-tum. She hummed a song and ran her fingers through his hair the way his mom had always used to make him go to sleep. Adam dreamt of his dad as a young boy, riding horses.

“Wake up, wake up! We’re nearly there. Hurry, hurry!” D was standing in the middle of the compartment clapping his hands. “Let’s go boys. Ma, wake up!”

“What? Why didn’t you wake us up earlier?” Bea stood up and started to fix her hair in the small mirror above her seat. “You know what I always say: better...”

“Get there early than rush like a fool, I know Ma, I remember. But I have a better one. And that’s good things come to those who run.”

“It’s good things come to those who wait,” Bea spoke out.

“Those who wait don’t run. How can they ever catch a break? Now hurry, hurry!” D started taking down everyone’s luggage.

Bea looked outside the window, “We’re not even close to the station. What’s the rush? The train hasn’t even started to slow down.”

“I know. This is when we get off...The train won’t stop, Ma. We have to jump.”

“I’m in no mood for jokes. It’s late and I’m old.”

The boys, who had been pretending to be asleep, jumped to their feet:

“We’re jumping!” They put their shoes on and started to tie their laces. By the time Adam finished his right shoe, Matei had already finished tying his and started tying Adam’s left shoe. Older cousins were not so bad after all.

“Out of the question, D, have you lost your mind? Can’t you be responsible for once in your life?”

“It’s fine, Ma, I’ve done it quite a few times. It will slow down to the point of stopping. I wouldn’t put anyone’s life in danger. Please, trust me. We either jump, or walk for 10 kilometers. Do you want to walk that long?”

“What about your driver? Can’t he pick us up?”

D turned to face his mother, but didn’t say a word. He just looked at her, biting his lower lip. “Please, Ma,” he pleaded. “This is the best

option. For everyone.” He stared at Bea as if he was trying to hypnotize her.

Grandma Bea let out a short grunt which could have passed for either yes or no.

“Thank you!” D stamped his cheek with a loud kiss. “Now everyone get your bags and follow me.”

They ran outside the compartment and got to the end of the car. D opened the exit door. The wind pushed through, testifying to the speed of the train. It was going fast.

“Come on, come on, come on, slow down,” D implored.

“This better be one of your jokes, D! If so, it’s not a very good one. I thought you’d have more sense. For the kids. We’re not jumping out of a speeding train and that’s final!” shouted Bea.

“No we’re not,” said D.

“We’re not?” the boys whined.

“No. It should have started to slow down by now. We’re getting close to the village. There’s our house. Quick! Who wants to do something forbidden?”

“What are you doing, D? You’ll give me a heart attack!”

“All right. Let’s see some teamwork. Matei, you hold on to the rail and secure the luggage. Ma, grab on to him. It will get bumpy.”

“Oh, dear.”

“Adam, you come with me. Matei, when the train stops make sure you throw our luggage out. And make sure Ma gets off safe. Then run!”

Adam followed his uncle back to the compartment, the blinking lights on the corridor, urging him to hurry.

“See the red handle up there?” D pointed above the door. “I’ll lift you up and you pull it as hard as you can. Ready?”

His palms were sweating. He wiped them on the back of his pants with confidence, as if they were made of talc. He had to do this right.

“Ready!”

In a moment his head touched the ceiling, the compartment seemed so tiny from up there. Adam grabbed on to the red handle. It was cold. He closed his eyes and pulled it with both hands. It must have lasted less than a few seconds, but for Adam, the moment was glorious. He felt like an Olympic champion finishing a gold medal winning rings exercise. Then came the downfall. The engine squealed like a stabbed pig and the train stopped abruptly, taking both of them along with it.

D snatched Adam by the armpits and ran out the door. There was no sign of Matei or Bea in the corridor. Uncle D leaped off the train, boy clutched to his chest. Time froze...Then a thump brought it back to reality. A bushy mound had cushioned their landing.

“Are you all right?” D picked him up and started feeling his bones. “Can you run?”

His body felt lighter, a feather in the midnight gust. He saw Bea and Matei running towards the forest.

“Yes!”

“Out-run your luck, then.” D pushed him. “Wait for me by the trees!”

Adam swooshed across the dark-blue field – he ran as fast as he could, like he would in a dream, but he didn’t look down. Tall razor-like straws of grass pinched his skin all the way up to his knees. He kept his eyes ahead till he reached the trees. Bea was leaning on a massive trunk, her hands over her chest as if she was trying to manually slow down her heart.

“Do you think they’ll catch him?” Matei grinned looking back at the far away train, flashlights zipping alongside it.

“God forgive us,” Bea pleaded. “That son of mine will be the end of me. I shouldn’t have let him do this.”

“Do what?” D showed up behind them carrying the luggage.

“Will you ever grow up? Never, ever do this again. Promise that never in your life you will do this ever again.”

“Too many evers, Ma. Come on, let’s go, we still have a bit of a walk ahead of us. I honestly don’t know what happened. The train was supposed to stop. Maybe the conductor fell asleep. But we sure did wake him up. That’ll teach him.”

Adam picked up his backpack which felt like it was empty – either he'd gained supernatural powers or gravity was out of order.

They walked into the night to the sound of crickets, the moon in the distance, half hidden by a mountain. The only time Adam had seen so many stars was, never. They passed through an apple orchard and every fruit appeared blue in the moonlight.

“There it is!” D pointed ahead.

Behind the leafless branches of an old walnut tree stood a Grimm-like house, the kind of house that could talk, with windows for eyes and a big door for a mouth. Adam was afraid it would swallow him whole once he'd set foot inside.

“Let's go, purple face!” Matei walked past him, his shadow stretching far behind, trying its best to keep out of the house for as long as possible. “Adam, you coming?” he shouted, earning a gentle slap on the head from Bea: “Quiet! It's late...”

Adam didn't want to be there. He would have given anything to go back home. He sighed and began to walk slowly towards the eerie house, following his cousin's protesting voice. At least he wouldn't be there alone.

“**Never** mind what Bea said,” Matei growled through his teeth. “She’s sleeping, isn’t she? What’s she gonna do about it?”

Adam knew better than to go against Bea’s word. Even if she was asleep, the woman had special powers, magical powers which – he knew all too well – served her even when she was sleeping. There were times he even thought that Bea had eyes on the back of her head; that she could see everything he did even when she was not looking. He wanted to go on an adventure with his cousin, but at the same time he didn’t want to get in trouble. At the start of his holiday, Adam had made a resolution: he would behave so that Mom could hear all about it and bring him back home as soon as possible.

“What about uncle D?” he asked, a fearful tone in his voice.

“What about him?” Matei got out of bed and was now tiptoeing around the room. He gathered all the clothes and pillows he could find and threw them back on the bed. “Listen!” He squeezed in next to Adam and started whispering with conviction: “D’s not coming back tomorrow. You heard him! A wall fell down in the mine and he’ll need to be there for at least a couple of days if not more. And please don’t tell me you’re

worried about Bea! Even you can't be this much of a baby. Bea is sleeping. We're just gonna go on a little mission. See what this old house has to offer since no one has bothered to show us. If she wakes up, we'll tell her I got sick and you took me to the toilet." Matei started to rub his hand on his belly, left to right. "Now that I think about it," he said, "I do feel a bit of a sting on my left side."

"Let's just sleep. Maybe you're tired."

"Maybe *you're* scared."

"I'm not!" Adam sat up and held his breath. He was trying to listen in to any noises coming from Bea's room to make sure she was sleeping. A couple of snores confirmed his expectations. "Why do you need all these clothes for?"

"In case she wakes up and looks over to see if we're asleep. Just to make sure the bed doesn't look empty." Matei finished filling his side of the bed with clothes and pulled over the thick blanket, covering what looked like a sleeping boy. "Are you coming?"

"How are we going to get out?" Adam pointed at the doorknob which Bea had tied to the leg of the wardrobe using a pair of her stockings. The only other exit was through the adjoining room – Bea's room.

“The window,” Matei half-whispered with excitement. “Come on; are you a boy or a baby?”

Adam didn’t like being called a baby. He didn’t feel like one. He’d just been in a fight – his bruise testified to him being anything but a baby. He got out of bed without a word, allowing his cousin to turn his side of the bed into a make believe sleeping Adam.

They walked to the window; the floor’s uneven boards creaking under their feet, making each step resound with dread like the insides of a horror house. Matei tried to open the window but it wouldn’t budge, as if its wooden frame had been glued shut. He gave it a jolt to no avail.

“We’ll have to go through Bea’s room,” he told Adam, instilling a biting sense of peril in his stomach.

“She’ll wake up.”

“No she won’t. We’ll just crawl to the door. She won’t even know we’re in the room.”

They got on all fours and headed for the door, the one that separated their room from Bea’s headquarter, the one that had to *be kept open at all times*. They passed by Bea’s bed holding their breaths, carefully minimizing the sound of each movement until they got to the door. Matei stood up. He grabbed the handle, held it with both hands, and

began to twist it slowly as if he was trying to crack open a safe. The door let out a sharp noise as it opened, making the massive Saint George icon on the wall move with a short thump – the dragon was dead. Adam froze in the doorway, eyes glued to Bea’s bed, daring himself to blink.

“She’s sleeping!” Matei pulled him out of the room onto the dark hallway.

Adam felt as if he’d been blindfolded. He couldn’t make out where the walls were or even if there were any walls at all. It was as if they’d entered a cave – the air was cold and damp, everything around him black.

“I can’t see.”

“I know! Fun, right?” Matei held out his hand and began to tickle Adam’s ribs: “Watch out for ghosts!”

Adam slapped his hand away: “Do you think they have ghosts?” he asked, the sound of his own voice frightened him.

“Don’t be silly. We’re in the country here. They have strigoi!” Matei blew air on Adam’s face making him shiver. “I think I found the stairs. Come on!”

Adam’s hand was holding on tight to his cousin’s t-shirt. So tight in fact, that his fingers began to hurt. He followed Matei down the stairs,

the wood moaning with every step. Adam had never been afraid of strigoi because he didn't believe they were real. Until now. Everything he'd ever heard about them was now popping into his mind in the most gruesome of details. He remembered the legend of the dead strigoi with their human and demonic nature, creeping out of their grave to go back to their family and go on living as if nothing had happened, weakening their relatives until they would die in their turn – the thought that Dad could come back as one, made Adam's blood freeze.

As they got downstairs, a weak moon-ray crept on the floor guiding their feet towards the main room. Matei had Adam walk in front of him: "Wouldn't it be fun if we saw a strigoi?" He squeezed Adam's shoulder and pushed him towards what looked like an armchair. Adam took two steps forward when the arms of the chair began to move, the furniture sat upright and gave out a spooky moan.

Matei screamed so hard he fell on his back and was now crouching on the floor, hands wrapped around his stomach. He didn't look like he was having fun, more like he'd been injured, his belly worsted with pain.

“**Wait here!**” D leaned Adam against the tall wooden fence as if he was some kind of long-tail gardening tool. He fixed his shoulder between two boards to make sure he wouldn’t fall off, and disappeared behind the creaking gate.

A ruthless, yellow sun uncovered tiny particles of dust along the main road. Adam wished he was home more than ever. The thought of running away began to take shape. He’d run to the train tracks then walk in either direction till he got to a station, say he got lost from his school group, pretend he didn’t remember the name of his school or his teacher, give his Bucharest address, then cry for extra effect and hopefully find someone willing to take him back to his mom.

As much as he’d tried, he couldn’t find anything *magical* about washing in a pot or cutting through the house then across the back garden in order to get to the toilet, which wasn’t even a toilet. Just a hole in the ground, covered by a wooden box, on the top of which someone had cut a circular hole – he almost fell inside the first time. There was nothing idyllic in being woken up at sunrise by a mad rooster, then setting out to work the field. They never ran out of things to pick here.

To make matters worse, Bea wouldn't stop praising nature, the village and its people. She'd wake up with the chickens to go gather hay, pick blackberries or get a mountain tan. Why say you were on holiday if you were going to work? To top it all, Matei was now being sent back to Bucharest; he'd been throwing up all night, cursing the 'strong mountain air', but Bea insisted it was appendicitis. Adam was by no means unsympathetic to his cousin's pain, but his own fate of being stuck here alone was far more painful.

He looked at the road as it stretched in the distance and contemplated his escape, but D returned, followed by a limping old man, just before he could gather the guts to make a run for it.

"Adam, say hello to Old Man Sandu. I'm leaving you with him to take you to Bea."

Fear churned Adam's stomach. The man D was leaving him with was none other than the dreadful strigoi he and Matei had ran away from, except he was real, flesh and bone real. Old Man was a pretty accurate nickname, his crumpled skin struggled to hold on to a statue-like face. He measured Adam with his stare from head to toe, as if he was about to cook him – he did look like the kind of man who eats disobedient children.

"But I don't want to go, take me back to Bucharest!"

"I don't have time for spoiled child drama, Matei's belly torture will do. Say hello and be grateful I'm not leaving you with the chickens."

He turned to Sandu: “Thank you so much for this, and if he doesn’t behave, leave him in the woods, he’ll turn into a lamb after spending the night with bears.”

The old man let out a grunt then set ahead on the road. D gave Adam a shove making him stumble into an unsteady walk behind Sandu. He turned his head to throw one more plaintive look towards his uncle, but he was nowhere in sight.

“Keep up,” Sandu growled, his voice covering the whirling river on the left side of the road. “We’ll cross over the water there.” He pointed to a very poor attempt at a bridge: a sheet of uneven wooden boards stretched across a metal surface with no rail or rope to hold on to.

Sandu stepped on it first and headed for the other side, bouncing up and down along with the structure as if they were made of the same material: “Come on boy, we haven’t got all day!” he shouted without looking back.

Adam stepped right on the middle of a board and tried to place his next step on the following one, water running under his feet.

“Learn to get the hang of the movement. Don’t fight it! It’s like dancing with a partner,” Sandu shouted from the other side, resting on his cane.

The bridge bounced up and down with every step. Adam held his breath, struggling to ignore the bubbling water underneath, its howls resembling to an evil spell that chanted *Fall, Fall, Fall*. He managed to

get to the other side in one piece, keeping his tiny feet from slipping between the boards.

“The boy made it. Finally! Let’s move; it’s long to go till far away.”

There was a time he would have asked the old man what he meant, would have even tried to make sense of his words, but over the past few days Adam had learned that everything here was, different. If anything he was the weird one, the city boy, the boy with the black eye.

They made their way through the forest, Adam stepping on the holes left behind by Sandu’s cane as if they were road markings. The sun rays cut through the tree line revealing an enchanted world that buzzed with insect-talk.

“You’re as fast as a dead man. Have you eaten today, boy?” Sandu stopped to wait for Adam. “Walk in front of me!” He used his cane to hook Adam’s shoulder and dragged him forward.

Adam walked faster, his steps making their mark on the mushy ground. He could hear the old man’s cane behind, sticking in and out of the mud.

As they moved forward, the number of trees started to diminish and tall raspberry bushes took their place, dozens of miniature pink baskets hiding behind leaves. Adam stopped to pick a few. He managed to stick three big ones in his mouth, savoring their scent and flavor with his eyes closed.

A cold, stiff object hit his throat by his Adam's apple, mouth still full of raspberries he hadn't had the chance to swallow yet. Out the corner of his eye he saw Sandu's cane stretching from under his chin all the way to the old man's steady hand. He was looking at Adam, his knotty forefinger pressed against his lips. He didn't even blink. It was as if he'd been turned to stone. Then, with one flicker of the eyes he instructed Adam to look to his right.

A bush was moving in the distance, two dark brown ears hovering above it. Sandu pushed Adam's head to the side – a crack in the brier allowed a clear view of a chubby bear cub feeding on berries.

“Hold still,” Sandu whispered in his ear. “And pray the mother-bear's not nearby...”

Adam stood there, breath held, watching the pink jowls slobbering over leaves and branches, a dumb smile on his face. He didn't care about the mother bear, in his head, he and cub were the same. Two orphans, sent away from their home. The baby bear let out a couple of moans which Adam took for chuckles. He wanted to run over to it, challenge him to a hugging duel. Sandu grabbed him by the arm and dragged him slowly in the opposite direction, cutting through the line of trees that led the way to a clearing.

“We've got another half hour to go. We'll rest for now.” He stuck his cane in the ground right next to Adam's foot and sat down crossing

his legs. He started to pick up leaves, smelling them, keeping some, tossing others.

Adam sat beside him, “What are you doing?”

“Making a cigarette.”

Adam looked around him on the ground and picked up a big leaf, smelled it, and handed it to the old man who looked at it briefly: “I can’t smoke oak! My lungs are not that strong. Got enough here for what I need, thank you.” He pulled out a paper from his pocket, ground the leaves with his fingers and rolled them up, licked one end, glued it then lit it up with a match.

Adam sniffed at the air. It didn’t smell of cigarette: “Smells like fire!”

“That’s because it is fire. Fire burning leaves. Is this your first time in the mountains?”

“I’ve been to Sinaia,” he replied with pride.

“Sinaia is for tourists.”

“They have bears there, too.” He’d heard his mom say she’d seen one once.

“Domestic bears, to please the tourists. They’re not bears, they’re monkeys. These are ancient woods, here. Dacians lived here long before...Have you learned about Dacians?”

“They were conquered by the Romans.”

“That’s what they teach you in school?” Old Man Sandu sniggered. “Dacians were sons of the mountain.” He puffed out thick yellow smoke. “All of this around us, mountains of the sunset. They knew them inside out. The Sun God came to rest here. Close your eyes and listen. The trees have stories to tell if you have ears to hear them.”

Adam closed his eyes, held his breath and listened. He couldn’t hear anything other than the wind moving through the leaves.

“Can’t hear anything.”

“Of course you can’t, you’re from the city – you can hear tires and car horns echoing against concrete. Children here are brought up with the sky as their roof. Wash their face with dew in the morning.” He pointed his cigarette holding hand at Adam’s face: the smoke went straight for his eye. He bit his tongue as hard as he could and didn’t let out one single tear.

“I don’t care about these stories anyway. And Dacians lost their land, they lost everything. Romans ruled them. They couldn’t even fight!”

Sandu’s face stretched into a bitter smile – it looked like it was about to break in two, straight down the middle.

“Don’t believe everything you read in history books. Dacians were fearless warriors. They used mountain silver to make their arrow heads; shot them up to part the clouds whenever they needed the sun to warm the earth.”

Adam looked up to see some leaves gently moving to make way for a few rays of light. It looked like liquid gold pouring into the forest.

“They had wolves like we have dogs,” Sandu continued. “Lived and ate with them and a young man like you had to fight a wolf before he could fight in battle.” He squeezed the end of his cigarette, making it spit out its burning head, and crushed it under his foot.

“I was in a battle,” Adam stated with the nostalgic confidence of a decorated war veteran. Old Man Sandu raised his brow as if it was being pulled by an invisible hook. “We hid from a helicopter late at night, and had to eat on the floor. They were shooting, broke Bea’s window,” Adam blurted out, gaining a pitiful smile.

“That’s no battle, boy! Just mindless city folk. It’s what happens in the city where men are done fighting nature...” Sandu pulled himself up on his cane. “They start fighting each other.” He tapped the ground in front of Adam: “Come on, keep walking.”

They started to move, Adam kept looking at the trees pleading for a sign of their talk. *One word...*Nothing. Not even a syllable...An interjection...One sound. He got impatient, furious even. It all started to come back to him in the form of frantic waves, crashing atop his very little confidence: anger towards his dad for not coming back, his mom for having sent him away, his uncle for leaving him with the old man, but mostly towards himself for not being able to fit in. Anywhere. He felt like everyone was trying hard to teach him a lesson, a different one each time,

but no one bothered to ask whether or not he wanted to learn. Everyone had something to say about his black eye, about his attitude, but no one asked how he felt. No one even cared if it was still hurting or not.

“How did you get that black eye, anyway?” Sandu looked at Adam, his eyes washed-out blue like the river he’d victoriously crossed.

“Stood up for my dad!”

Sandu nodded. He seemed impressed.

“Does he know that?”

Adam never thought about it until now. What would have Dad said of the bruise? Would have been proud? He shrugged back at the old man.

“Pain for no reason is like a cart with no horse. It might seem purposeful, but it won’t take you anywhere. Does it hurt?”

“Not anymore.”

“Good. Then you’ll have no trouble working the field. Have you ever picked blackberries?”

“No, but I like to eat them.”

“So does the bear, but it can pick them without stinging its paws. There’s an art to everything, you know?” He didn’t, but gave a confident nod. “The trick with blackberries is to remember that you spot them from above, but you pick them from below. Otherwise your hand will get clawed by the thorns. Pull it out and it will not only hurt, but it will hurt for a long time.” Adam had stopped listening after the word bear which

had conjured in his mind the image of the orphan cub. They had so much in common: two motherless brothers against the world. He wanted to go back to the woods and hug him, feed him, let him know he's not alone.

“You don't want it to hurt, do you?” Sandu resumed.

“It won't. What if I've got Dacian blood? I could...”

The old man shuddered with laughter: “Impossible,” he declared and pointed his cane to the hill in front of them where two women were inspecting the blackberry bushes. One of them waved at Adam, her head covered by a red scarf. He'd never seen Bea's head covered by anything but a hat – she looked different, younger.

“**They make** the city look a shoe box by comparison,” Bea was gazing at the stars, picking her teeth with a grass straw, speaking in between successful picks: “This air...Is...Pure...Health!”

They had just finished eating dinner and were lying on their backs in the garden, crickets picketing their quiet time.

“Life...At its best!” Bea’s enthusiasm left Adam cold. He’d been missing the ‘shoe box’, the smell of melting tarmac, his bedroom, the TV and even his mom; her most of all, even though she’d sent him away. He resented D for taking Matei back to Bucharest, and he despised himself for being immune to sickness. He tried to poison himself with mushrooms, only to find out afterwards, from a pride inflated Sandu that, “Everything is edible in our forest.” Adam felt miserable here and no one seemed to care.

“Will you stop sulking?” Bea threw a stick at him, but missed. “Learn to enjoy these moments, Adam! They’re not coming back. Leave the worries to me and your mother...Don’t let childhood pass you by.”

Adam stared at a patch of grass in front of him, ran his fingers through the needle-like green straws and pulled out a few. They snapped at the middle, letting out a strong odor which smelled a lot like ink. If

only there was a way to forget it all and be born again. As a country boy...A Dacian even, live among the wolves if need be.

“Sanduuuu, Old Man Sanduuuu,” a desperate cry made its way across the fence, piercing through the still night.

A caneless Sandu climbed down from the porch, dragging his bad foot behind: “Ion, is that you, boy?” He raised his head to look over the fence.

“Sandu!” A young man burst through the gate, stumbling over Bea’s legs. “Have to come now!” He was fighting to catch his breath: “Sorry, Ma’am,” He bowed to Bea. Adam made him out to be a scrawny teen, about the same height as his cousin, his features concealed by the night, except for his eyes, glittering wild.

“Calm down, boy...The stars are all still up there in the sky...” Sandu checked if Bea was unharmed. “My neighbor’s son, Ion,” he offered apologetically as he helped her up.

“Can’t pull out the calf on my own!” Ion shouted, making the old man take a step back.

“How’s your cow knowledge, Mrs. Stan?” Sandu asked Bea as he walked back to the porch where his cane was resting.

“My husband and I had a farm, God rest his soul,” Bea remembered with nostalgia. “We didn’t have any cows, but I did deliver a few baby goats.”

“Knew you were one of us!” Sandu held up his cane like a triumphant ruler. “Let’s go!”

Adam followed them out the gate, onto the dark road, even though no one had bothered asking him to come along. His only cow knowledge was that *the animal was used for milk and meat*. He walked fast behind them, barely keeping up with three-legged Sandu who was leading the way. They entered the garden of the neighboring house, guided by moo-groans that grew louder as they reached the cowshed.

“Dare you to hear that in Bucharest!” Bea elbowed Adam.

Ion pulled the door aside with one hand and lit the gas lamp that was hanging by the frame. A scratch of moustache cast him into premature manhood; his eyes looked like they were smiling, their corners pointing upwards: “Come in!” He moved aside, revealing the manger underneath the wooden pillars of the shed.

Adam held on to his grandma’s skirt, his head popping from behind her elbow. The cow was lying on the ground, breathing heavily – each breath blowing up the dirt and hay all around. The air was stuffy hot, reeking of milk and manure.

“We need clean water. Go fill this!” Sandu kicked a metal bucket with his cane making it roll to Ion. “Mrs. Stan, help me get her up.”

Bea kneeled next to the cow and started to pat it between the horns, over the only brown spot on its cream fur. Its slow blinks revealed two eyes as big as Adam’s fists.

“Come on girl, get up!” Bea stroked its head gently.

Sandu stuck his cane underneath its back legs, trying to push it upwards. The cow let out a painful moo just as Ion came back with the bucket full of water. He set it down to help Sandu with the push. Adam wondered if the calf was stuck underneath.

They managed to lift it, but the animal’s legs were shaking, barely able to hold its own great bulk upright. Adam took a few steps back and watched Sandu and Bea as they moved behind the cow’s tail. After washing his hands in the bucket, Sandu stuck his left one inside the animal, all the way to his elbow. The cow let out a terrifying moan.

“I got the leg. You push her belly now.”

Bea moved to the side and started rubbing the cow’s belly with rapid front to back movements. Sandu began to pull until a calf the size of a mountain dog fell out. It was wet with blood, as if it had just been skinned alive. The cow sniffed its motionless offspring then poked it with the snout, pushing it all the way to the opposite wall, making it slide on blood and guts.

The calf let out a faint cry then got up on its trembling twig legs, stood for an astounded moment then fell to the ground like a sack of potatoes, dust rising all around it. The mother’s pink-white tongue, the size of a loaf of bread, started to clean the calf. With every lick, its color turned from dark-red to chestnut.

“Wanna see another one?” Ion was grinning over Adam’s shoulder. “Come, come with me!” He led Adam to the back of the stable where he stopped in front of a grilled door.

“Go on, stick your hand inside.”

As if!

“No thanks.”

“Go on, it won’t bite. It’s fun!”

Adam looked through the bars – nothing in sight, not a single movement, not even a shadow, all black. “What’s in there?”

“Another calf. Two months old, this one. Go on, stick your hand through the bars! You’ll see.”

Adam slipped two fingers through the bars then quickly retracted his hand.

“Coward!” Ion started laughing. “How old are you anyway?”

“Seven. You?”

“Ten.”

Ion looked a lot older; Adam would have said he was Matei’s age, older even, maybe fifteen. The dark hairs above his lip, plus the physical strength were not the traits of a ten-year-old, certainly not of any of the ten year olds known to Adam. With only three years between them, he *had* to prove his courage. He stuck his hand through the bars one more time, then pulled it back out, this time slower, but still fast enough not to touch whatever was lurking past the darkness.

“There’s nothing there.” He looked at Ion who grabbed his elbow and was now pushing his hand inside. Adam could no longer see the end of his arm, as if it had been amputated. Something wet and cold brushed the tips of his fingers then his hand was swallowed, to the wrist, by a warm, cushiony, toothless mouth that started to suck on it.

“There’s your nothing!” Ion burst into laughter and tapped Adam’s shoulder: “Thinks you’re his mother’s tit!”

After a while, the animal figured out that there was no nourishment coming out of Adam’s fingers and let go. He pulled his hand back into the light and saw it wrapped up in white foam. It smelled like milk.

“Fun, right?” Ion’s teeth were shining in the poorly lit shed. “Here, wipe it off.” He pulled at his own T-shirt and handed Adam the bottom side to wipe his hand. He wasn’t sure he wanted to. “Better than yours, look at it, so clean!” Ion encouraged him. Adam wiped his hand on as little fabric as possible, then let go of the t-shirt.

“What’s your name?”

“Adam.”

Ion pulled out a lantern and stuck it in Adam’s face as if his name was written somewhere on it and he wanted to make sure he was indeed telling the truth. The light was piercing his eye, uncovering his still bruised left side.

“Hold still. Wanna see something.” Ion stuck the lantern closer to Adam’s face, the artificial heat warming up his cheek.

“It’s a bruise, all right, I was in a fight!”

“So? Don’t care about your bruise...Just...Wanna see your ear lobe.”

“What for?” Adam pulled back, but Ion grabbed his chin, turned his head to the side and tugged at his ear lobe.

“To see if you can be trusted.” Ion put out the lantern: “You’re good. It’s joined. You’ve got Dacian blood, not Roman.” He looked Adam in the eye: “We can be friends now.”

“Things happen to be different here.” Ion was waving two red plastic buckets, as if he was attempting to take off: “Someone goes missing here, it’s easy: they either moved to town, you know, to go to school, or they got eaten by wolves.” He placed both buckets in his left hand, using his right one to unlatch the gate. “It’s usually wolves.” He held the gate open for Adam to go through, and then put the latch back on. “But nobody goes missing like that. One whole year without a sign?”

Adam followed Ion through the dusky orchard all the way to a well rising out of the ground like an unfinished tower, its top covered with a wooden lid. He had been listening to every single one of Ion’s words, religiously following the narrow thread of his friend’s logic. There were no wolves back home that could have eaten his dad, simply because there were no wolves in Bucharest at all. Maybe one or two, but they kept them in a cage at the zoo. And his dad had already been to school and to university; so that was out of the question also. Where was he, then? Why wasn’t anyone looking for him?

“At least you knew him.” Ion let the buckets rest at the foot of the well. “My father died before I was born. There are some pictures of him,

and Mom says we look alike, but I can't see it. I see nothing but a stranger." He set aside the wooden lid: "Wanna see how deep it is?"

Adam drew nearer the well and popped his head over the opening, trying to make out his reflection. A miniature version of what must have been his face blinked far, far away. "Echooo!" he shouted, his voice being thrown back at him a thousand times. He envisaged his dad standing on the exact opposite side, past the water and through the earth's belly, doing the same. Perhaps their echoes would even meet in the middle, embrace briefly, then carry on forward, past each other, without ever going back – his all the way to his dad, his dad's all the way to him.

Ion pushed Adam aside to make way for the bucket that was chained to the well. He lowered it, filled it with water and pulled it back up, barely spilling a drop. It all looked so easy – especially spinning the wheel to pull up the chain, visibly taut with the burden of its load. A few spins later and both their buckets were full. Adam used both his hands to pick one up. It barely budged.

"You'll spill it, I got it!" Ion lifted both buckets at the same time, using them for balance.

"I can help, you know?" Adam knew he wasn't able, but that didn't stop him from wanting to be.

"Close the lid."

He tried to unhook the lid, but it was as if it had been welded, its wooden planks nailed to the side of the fountain.

“Give it a jolt!” Ion seemed to be running out of patience:
“Harder!”

Adam grabbed the lid with both hands and gave it a sturdy shake, setting it free. He managed to scrape off a bit of thumb skin in the process, but didn’t want to make a fuss – he sucked the blood as he followed Ion to the gate. After all, the boy was carrying not one, but two buckets full of water, when Adam couldn’t even lift one.

The moon grew bigger as the night fell chilly and black over the trees, their crowns looked like hooded heads of inconspicuous spies.

“Adam,” Ion whispered. “Think I know how you can find out about your dad. But it’s not—”

“How?” The zealous tone in his voice made him flinch, his reaction taking him by surprise; as if the question had not been uttered by him, but by someone else, someone with a lot more grit and conviction than he ever had.

They were standing by the fence, in front of Ion’s house, a dim light flickering from the garden. Ion put the buckets on the ground and sat on a log placed next to the gate like a bench. He signaled Adam to join him on the wooden seat. The fact that someone was finally interested in his dad, someone who was willing to listen to him talk about his dad and would even come up with solutions, made Adam swell and burst with confidence: “How? Tell me, how?”

“You city folk, so impatient! No wonder we outlive you.” Ion leaned to the side and ran his fingers through the grass, then rubbed his hands together and gave them a long sniff. “This is quite serious,” he resumed, “So I have to make sure—”

“It’s very serious. It’s the most—”

“Listen!” He looked back at the house to make sure no one else was there. “Before I tell you,” he lowered his voice, “I have to make sure you really want this. Like, really want it because it’s important and not because of some tantrum.” He crossed his arms and let out a long sigh, as if he were the wisest, oldest man in the land. “Things don’t happen just to hurt you. No, no.” He shook his finger twice. “A couple of years ago I suffered like a dog because my grandpa didn’t take me with him up on the mountain to watch the sheep over the summer. One whole week I cried. No joke! Ask my mom. Turns out the old man fought a bear up there, and lost his arm. All of it! Shoulder included. But he was able to fight the bear and not get killed, thank God! If I’d been there with him...Who knows? The bear might have eaten us both, or just me.” Adam was staring at him, not blinking, his eyes the size of shallots. Ion scratched his chin: “Maybe it’s good your dad left. For you. You know?”

Adam had bitten his lip and was now chewing on a strip of skin. The taste of his own blood made him anxious. Good for him? How could that be? Why? How?

“Well?”

“Well what?” All the rage he’d been bottling up for so long finally found its way out: “I don’t know! Maybe it’s better, maybe it’s worse. Who cares, anyway? I just want to know what happened. Where did he go? Why didn’t he come back? Did he leave because of me? Because of Mom? I want to know! I have to know!”

Ion shushed him.

“I have to,” Adam whispered. “Will you tell me how?”

Ion looked up at the moon as if asking for permission, then back at Adam: “Fine. But know this is black magic. It’s not for everyone. To use it, you really—”

“I really...” He nodded with confidence.

Ion stuck his hand in the bucket and splashed some water on his face. He wiped each cheek on its corresponding shoulder and began: “Here it goes! Before midnight, right before the clock strikes twelve, you stand in front of a mirror, in the dark, holding a pillow. You start to flip it in the air and count. You have to flip it for an exact 99 times.”

“99? Why 99?”

“Because, that’s the number. You want to know how it’s done or not?”

An insomniac cuckoo began to cry its rhetorical song making Adam tense: “So I flip it 99 times?”

“Yes. And then, just as the clock begins to strike midnight, you stick a needle in the pillow and keep your eyes on the mirror. It all

happens in the dark so you have to be alert. No blinking!” Ion stopped to catch his breath, “If you can. Then,” He put his hands out to draw a figure in the air. “The Devil will show up in the mirror, dressed in black, hat on his head.”

Adam’s mouth was dry, its hard palate felt like tree bark scraping against his tongue.

“Before he looks at you, you have to stick your hand through the mirror.” Ion pushed his hand forward almost poking Adam in the eye. “And snatch his hat!”

Adam tried to picture it, but somehow it didn’t add up. He’d never seen the Devil, but he imagined he’d be quite tall; at least taller than a seven year old.

“What if I can’t reach it?”

“You’ll be his slave forever.”

Adam gasped for air.

Ion stood up and grabbed the buckets: “But if you can do it,” he resumed as he made his way through the gate, its death-like screech making Adam quiver. “He’ll grant you one wish to get his hat back.” Ion nodded with pride: “My neighbor got three sacks of potatoes last winter. But he was starving. So were his kids. That’s why I asked you, is he really worth it, your dad?”

He had to be, Adam thought. But then why didn’t Dad make a deal with the devil? He was tall enough to snatch the hat in one go.

“You don’t have to answer now.” Ion signaled Adam to close the gate behind him. “Can’t do it at mine, anyway. We don’t have a mirror.” He shook his head. “And you don’t want to do it in Sandu’s house. I saw your grandma, she crosses herself more than our priest – she’ll kill you if she finds out we even talked about it.” He let out a short laugh then made his way towards the house.

Adam stared at Ion’s shadow as it grew bigger with every step. The buckets made his arms look like wings about to spread out. The boy seemed to know far more than any child Adam had ever met, more than some grown-ups, even. Plus he was his friend, generous enough to entrust Adam with this otherworldly secret, one that could settle once and for all the matter of Dad.

He sped up to overtake Ion, and turned to face him: “Let’s do it tonight!” He was bubbling with courage: “We can do it at Sandu’s after Bea goes to sleep. Uncle D won’t be back until tomorrow. No one will know.” Had he paused to think things through, Adam would have let out a pee drop at the otherwise dreadful thought of *the Devil*. But tonight he was irrationally brave. Plus, there was nothing he couldn’t do with Ion by his side.

“Are you sure?” Ion laid down the buckets and studied Adam’s face like he did the first time they met.

His palms produced a hint of cold sweat, anticipating the glorious hat-snatching moment. What was sure, anyway? Bea’s unconvincing

distractions? Mom's unbreakable silence? This was Adam's chance to step up and show them.

They ran back to Sandu's house, where Bea put them up in her room, the one with the bigger bed: "No running around! You go to sleep, you hear?" She turned out the lights, allowing the moon to cut across the ceiling – two straight lines that kept them silently awake until they finally heard Bea's discreet snores from next door.

"You'll need a needle," Ion murmured. "Where are we going to get a needle now? It's close to midnight."

Adam stuck his hand underneath the bed and pulled out a ball of yarn with a crochet sticking out of it, "Can we use this?" He pulled out the hook with care, making sure he didn't ruin Bea's doily – she'd have known it was him who'd messed with her yarn.

Ion inspected the crochet needle in the moonlight: "It can work, but you have to be very quick and make sure it goes through the fabric. Here," He handed Adam the hook and his pillow: "Practice."

Adam began to stab the thick, plump mass, making it cough out feathers.

"Enough!" Ion stopped Adam's hand in mid-air on its way to a third and final strike. "Don't want to cut it open. Has to be thick and fluffy or else the Devil will think you're cheating."

They walked on tiptoe to the mirror, holding their breath every time the floor creaked. Adam held Ion back, and waited patiently for

Bea's snoring to confirm they were good to go again. He laid the pillow on the floor, in front of the mirror, and sat down, prompting Ion to join him. From the floor, the room looked like a museum, St. George's icon observing them from the opposite wall. Last time Adam had been on the floor it was under Bea's living room table.

As they waited for the clock to strike midnight, Adam recounted the shooting, the shattered glass, the helicopter. Ion listened mouth open, eyes frozen; daring himself to blink. Bea let out a short cough in the other room, reminding them of what they'd come here for.

Adam stood up facing the mirror, and held the pillow by its sides, as if it were a tray with handles. He started spinning it and counting as silently possible, but loud enough to keep himself focused. When he got to ninety the clock struck its first gong in a row of twelve. He spun the pillow nine more times then pushed the needle all the way through, twisting it as if he were driving in a screw.

On the twelfth stroke he looked at his own reflection in the mirror and waited, eyes wide open, his hand reaching out. Ready! A figure hovered in the distance, making its way towards him. He couldn't breathe, his chest tight, as if it had been hit by a ball of ice.

"What are you doing out of bed?" Bea turned on the light making Ion squeal. Adam kept the crochet in his hand and crossed his arms over his chest.

“We’ll talk about this tomorrow, don’t you worry.” Bea picked up the pillow and put it back on the bed; Ion gathered the dripping feathers behind her. She held the duvet for him to get in: “Night time is made for sleeping. Don’t make me come back a second time.” She made a sign with her head for Adam to get in bed.

“Shame on you!” she whispered in his ear as she tucked him in.

The sound of her words hovered above the bed long after the lights went out. Adam was ashamed. The thought of Bea ever finding out he was conjuring the Devil made his heart shrink. He lay on his back, looking at the ceiling, praying for forgiveness. *Our Father, who art in Heaven...*

“Adam?” Ion breathed just as Adam was about to cross himself. He used his tongue, mouth closed, to represent the *Name of the Father, The Son and The Holy Ghost*. He didn’t want Ion to laugh at his piety.

“What?”

Ion turned on his side, facing him: “Tell me about the revolution.”

“I told you everything.”

“Tell me again!”

“Why?” he asked as quietly as possible.

Ion drew nearer, sat up on his elbow: “My cousin from Brasov, he’s eighteen. He wanted to go to Bucharest when the revolution started. Was so upset his parents didn’t let him go. I’ve seen what they showed on Sandu’s TV, on the news. But it looked like a film. Even though they

were speaking Romanian. Still a film to me. But you,” He pinched Adam’s shoulder and gave it a shake. “You are here! I know you. And you’ve been there...Come on, Adam, tell me! Tell me again!”

He’d never seen Ion this interested in anything he had to say. It made him feel important.

Adam sat up, mirroring Ion’s position, left hand holding up his head: “Bea’s kitchen,” he paused building up tension. “Evening.” He used his finger to draw a square on the empty sheet between them: “We were sat at the table; Bea at the head, me by her side. Forks in hand, ready to attack our fasting feast.” He licked his lips: “When—”

“Leave home...” Adam repeated his cousin’s words as if they were part of a poem he was trying to memorize, focusing on their order and much less on the meaning, “For no other reason than to—”

“Leave. That’s right! Take off, run away, and leave everything behind.” Matei gently tapped the right side of his belly and grimaced like an old man in pain. “Think about it!” He pushed his chair further back on the porch, taking shelter from the late morning sun. “Leaving your family without a word? You do that when you’re not coming back...” He paused and gazed past the garden, at the locked gate. “People do that. Mom says men more so than women. Uncle Mihai is a man,” he asserted. “Why do you think everyone keeps quiet about him? They’re probably too ashamed.”

Adam pulled out a thick splinter from the deck, and used its tip to draw the shape of his hand, while contemplating his cousin’s theory. He was angry, sad even, but there was no room for shame where Dad was concerned. His dad would never make him feel ashamed. He wanted Adam to be an architect just like him; had taught him how to draw, had taught him what doors and windows looked like on a blueprint. They had

travelled together, watched football together, built snow forts and tunnels together. No way he'd left of his own will. Someone had *made* him leave.

He tossed the splinter out in the garden and gazed up at Matei. From down where he was sitting, his cousin looked like a giant, menacing. "Did your mom tell you this?"

"Not directly..." Matei paused to put his feet up on the table, and crossed his hands behind his head. "Had to piece it together from what I heard whenever she talked to Dad or your mom."

"What did you hear?" Adam drew closer, his trousers brushing over the porch.

"You know what they're like when they talk grown-up. They even turn the lights out," Matei sniggered. "But I did catch the fact that he ran away."

"Who ran away?" Bea showed up in the doorway carrying a jug of milk and a plate of sliced bread topped with honey.

"This boy at the hospital," Matei managed to produce on the spot, a self-congratulating grin on his face.

"Get your feet off the table!" Bea pointed her elbow at him, spilling some milk in the process. "You're not in Bucharest here, show some respect!"

Matei lifted his t-shirt, uncovering the bandage stuck over his recent cut: "I'm injured, Bea. Have to get comfortable."

“I’ll show you comfort!” She used a napkin to wipe the milk from the floor. “Thought you were brave and it didn’t hurt one bit.”

“It didn’t, but now it itches.”

“That means it’s healing. You’re not the first to have his appendix removed. Sit up straight and eat your breakfast.” She poured milk in a cup along with a thick layer of cream.

“Take the skin out!” Matei’s face twisted with disgust.

“You’re going to eat it if you want to go out today. Adam, get up! Come sit at the table.”

“I’m not hungry.” He took the seat next to Matei, allowing him a direct view of the gate. Ion would come by any minute now.

“At least have some milk. I don’t want to hear no,” Bea anticipated his objection and placed the cup in front of him.

The moment she turned around to get herself a chair, Matei fished out the skin from his cup and plonked it inside Adam’s. He licked his guilty finger, satisfied: “This cream is utter delight,” he offered to Bea who nodded with pride. “So what do you do for fun around here?” he asked Adam who was struggling to swallow the double helping of cream. “What did I miss while I was away?” Matei showed off his bandage again, using it to apologize for his absence.

“Ion took me up the mountain,” Adam started, mouth full. “We saw wild horses...” He swallowed. “And last week we went to this cave and bats came flying out of it. You had to climb down a wooden stair and

then go through a tunnel. At the other end there were eight brown-red rocks that looked like Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. And on our way back we—”

“Who’s this Ion?” Matei interrupted with suspicion.

“My friend. He lives here in the village.”

“Ion the villager,” Matei let out a short laugh and held his belly protectively. “You’ll get it when you read Rebreanu.” He offered Adam one of his you’re-still-too-little-to-understand looks.

Adam turned to Bea for help, but she was busy sipping her coffee, gazing past the porch at the garden, clearly not in the same universe as them.

“He’s only ten,” he countered Matei. “But he looks older than you. And he taught me how to make hay stacks, and take water out of the well.”

“I’m sure you’ll use that a lot back home,” Matei let out through his teeth.

His sarcasm passed Adam by – over the past weeks, the thought of going back home had become distant and abstract, almost forgotten. His mom called quite a few times, but he’d never been around when it happened. Sometimes Bea would take the calls, other times uncle D – she’d told both of them to ask Adam to write her a letter. He didn’t. He’d started one shortly after Matei went back to Bucharest:

Dear Mom,

I want to come back home. I don't like it here.

But then he'd met Ion and none of it was true anymore. The days seemed too short from the moment Ion would pick him up in the morning to when he'd drop him off for dinner; the nights too long until they would meet up again. Each day a new adventure: whether it was bathing in the river, riding through the forest on the back of Ion's bike, rolling down the mountain on a mattress of leaves, learning how to hold a scythe...He'd never get to do any of that in Bucharest. He might have never gotten to do these things ever again, but no matter...At least he'd done them once.

Adam smiled and took a bite of a honey-buttered slice of bread, then washed it down with milk. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, the way men did in the field whenever they stopped their grass-cutting dance to drink water.

"What are you smiling about?" Matei poked him.

"He's here!" Adam stood up and waved towards the gate, Ion's head floating above it. "He's brought the cart! We're going to pick up hay!" He started doing a victory dance that managed to catch Bea's attention.

"Enough with the circus, Adam! You're not going to pick anything today. Matei is in no shape to ride a cart. And you're not leaving him alone. Think of something to do here, around the house."

"Yeah," Matei approved. "Do we have a TV here? I saw one in the living--"

“You didn’t come to the mountains to watch TV!” Bea started to clear the table. “If you wanted TV you should have stayed in Bucharest.”

“But Bea, we should watch the news, see what happened with the miners. They were on their way to Bucharest when I left. And Uncle D asked me, nay he instructed me to watch the news for him, give him a full report tonight when he comes back from—”

“We’ll watch it tonight. I don’t want to see you inside the house while the sun is out. You hear?”

“Good day, Mrs. Stan.” Ion climbed the steps to the porch.

“Hello, Ion,” Bea’s voice became all mellow. She was always taken with the boy’s rustic politeness. “This is Adam’s cousin, Matei.”

“Can I see your cut?” Ion shook Matei’s hand, staring at his belly. “Adam told me...” He looked at Adam for confirmation.

“I’m not allowed to take off the bandage yet, but it’s not pleasant.” Matei shook his head. “Looks like the end of a Christmas sausage.” He lifted his t-shirt to uncover the dressing.

“Are we going to gather hay? Is that your cart outside?” Adam could not contain his excitement.

Bea cleared her throat: “What did I say, Adam? Matei is not allowed to make any effort,” she explained to Ion.

“I figured,” he said. “I’m done working for today, the cart is already full. We can go over to mine.” He began to fidget. “I’ve got a

surprise for you.” He looked at Adam whose grimace turned from disappointed frown to well-appointed excitement.

“What? What?”

“Found a hedgehog family under the barn last night. We can play with them. The little ones are so funny. They don’t have any spines yet and when you touch them they hunch and look like rubber balls.”

Adam spent all afternoon with his cousin at Ion’s and still didn’t get to see the hedgehogs – Ion was so enthralled with Matei that he’d forgotten about them the moment they walked out the gate.

“We don’t really watch TV in Bucharest. We have a video player, you know?” Matei boasted as they were lying on top of fresh hay in the barn.

Ion shook his head, “What’s that?”

“It’s like a box and you put a cassette in and the TV shows you what’s on it.”

“Like what? Films?”

“Oh, boy! Not just *films*. American films! Adventure, action, romance, you name it. War...” Matei gazed at the ceiling, as if battle scenes were projected on it. “Those are my favorites. Deer Hunter? Exceptional.”

“Can you speak American?” asked Ion.

“Technically it’s English,” Matei corrected him. “Adam can speak it too...” He threw his little cousin a bone only to take it back again: “Of

course, I speak English better than he does, and I speak German too: eins, zwei, polizei.”

Ion giggled like a five year old: “Tell me about the revolution. Were you in Bucharest last Christmas?”

“Fought like a true hero!” Matei tried to stand up with very little trace of heroism, holding on to his right side. “I was right in the middle of it. Do you know what it’s like to go out on the street and see nothing but blood? That’s my memory of last Christmas: blood-spotted snow. And eating on the floor while listening to our windows being blown away by bullets. It wasn’t easy. One of our neighbors was shot right next to me.”

“Did he die?” Ion asked in a high-pitched voice.

“Of course not. But still, watching a man bleed is not exactly like watching Bambi’s mom get shot, if you know what I mean.”

Adam lay on his back, all quiet. He pulled out a grass straw from underneath him, and tied it into a knot. He tightened it until it broke. He then picked another straw on which he’d bestow the exact same fate. He knew his cousin’s bravado all too well by now. He’d fallen for it himself so many times. If only he were older. Or at least bigger than Matei so that the truth could stand a chance, force it out of him.

The sun set over the mountains turning the sky all crimson, another prompt for his cousin to offer a vivid example of the blood he’d seen, naturally culminating with his own as a result of his operation.

“You were awake?” Ion marveled.

“Of course I was. They only anaesthetized me from the waist down. Gave me a shot in the spine.” Matei pointed at his back. “I was very much aware, though. And even if they say you can’t feel anything, you can totally feel them going through your belly, but it feels more like there’s a thick duvet between your skin and their hands.”

“Can you show us the hedgehogs now?” Adam finally spoke out – he’d heard the appendix removal story way too many times.

“It’s too dark now, but I can show you something better.” Ion nodded then smiled at Matei as if *he* was his friend. “Glow worms,” he enunciated, looking for traces of wonder on Matei’s face.

Unlike his cousin who didn’t seem very impressed, Adam’s heart sped up with excitement. He had heard of glow worms and even seen a drawing of one on a stamp once, but he’d never seen one for real. He thought they were a myth.

“Do you have a jar we can take with us?” Matei asked Ion as they walked out of the barn.

“What for?”

“To make a lamp shade. You’ll see!”

They walked through the back garden which led them onto the main road, crossed the river over the bridge and entered the forest. A narrow path led them to a clearing then back into the woods, two kinds of sounds claiming their attention: leaf-talk caused by a faint wind accompanied a symphony of insects.

“How much longer? I’m tired!” Matei leaned on a tree to catch his breath.

“Here it is!” Ion pointed at a green-glowing path unravelling at their feet.

An entire city of luminescent creatures was buzzing under leaves and grass straws. Adam got closer to see if they had any electrical wires attached to them. They had antennae, but they didn’t look like they were responsible for producing all that phosphorescent light. Would the glow fall out if they touched them?

“Put out your palm!” In the cup of his hand, Ion was holding three glow worms, pulsing with their shining electrified heartbeat.

“Do they have a heart?” Adam asked as he drew nearer.

“At least one,” replied Ion.

“What color? Do you think it’s green, too, or maybe golden? Is that what’s making them glow like—”

“Phosphor’s making them glow,” Matei offered all-knowingly.

“Let me see!” Adam put out his hand and waited impatiently for the glowing wonder to touch his skin. It was fuzzy like a cotton bud and warm, heating up the center of his palm, green light radiating all around.

“Feel free to drop them in here.” Matei held up the jar he’d brought along. There were already three worms inside, one of them flickering like a broken light bulb.

“We can’t take them!” Ion pleaded.

“How am I going to appreciate them otherwise?” Matei picked up the glow worm from Adam’s hand and dropped it inside the glass prison, on top of the others. “I can’t bend to get more. Go on, help me out here,” he supplicated Ion.

“But why do you–”

“Listen,” Matei put his hand on Ion’s shoulder. “This is all very beautiful, but what’s the point of it all if I can’t enjoy it at home? Eh? We’ll take some in the jar so Adam and I can keep by our bed tonight. You know he’s afraid of the dark.” He gave Adam a gentle tap on the head as if he were an old, sick dog.

Adam shook off Matei’s hand. There was an ounce of truth in his cousin’s words – there had been a time when he was afraid of the dark, but ever since he arrived here the fear of *the dark* seemed to have vanished. After all, he’d waited for the Devil at night, with the lights out.

“I guess we can pick a few, just this once,” Ion gave in to Matei’s pleas and squatted to look under the leaves for more glowing potential prisoners.

“Could make money out of this, you know?” Matei’s enterprising chord got struck by the glimmering wonder: “Girls would buy these jars like crazy!”

“But they’d be dead by morning,” Ion sighed with guilt.

“Even better!” Matei held the jar close to his face, the green light uncovering a devious smile: “That way you get to sell more every day.”

“**To get** out of the cellar without being seen, you had to go through this narrow passage underneath the house,” D recounted as he was puffing his cigarette, his chair rocking on the porch. “And yes, chances were we’d come across mice, moles maybe, definitely spider webs, but nothing out of the ordinary for the underground.” He exhaled a screen of smoke, and watched it dissolve in the night. “But your dad couldn’t do it.” He took a generous sip of wine from his baked clay mug the size of a miniature cauldron. “He just couldn’t do it,” he repeated, a sour smile on his face.

Adam was watching his uncle from the opposite chair, grateful for D’s loose tongue, all the while praying that Bea wouldn’t come down to take him to bed. The moon had long hung its light on the gate, as Sandu would refer to nightfall, but sleep was not on Adam’s mind. He even stopped wondering when Matei would come back from the alley where he was playing the hero in front of Ion and a couple of older girls. He couldn’t care less, not when D was talking willingly about Dad. It wasn’t vital information about his whereabouts or the reason he’d left, it was even better – what Dad was like as a child.

“Did Bea find out?”

“She didn’t have to. He went to her and confessed straight away.”

D yawned and filled his mug again to Adam’s relief.

He couldn’t help but hope to uncover his connection to Dad the child: “Was he afraid of the dark? Was the tunnel dark?”

“We had a lantern. It wasn’t the dark that scared him. The thought of having to hide from Ma killed him. Ain’t that right, Ma?”

Bea had showed up in the doorway, her head covered with a scarf, a tight and secure net for her curlers.

“Time to go to bed, Adam.” She held out her hand without stepping out of the house.

“But uncle D is telling me about Dad.”

“Is he?” Bea stepped onto the porch; her feet hardly visible underneath her long robe, floating as if she were a ghost.

“What we were like as kids...” D paused to look at his hands, as if they were imprinted with pictures of his childhood. “Pretty much an indicator of how we turned out. Remember the tunnel under the house?” He locked eyes with Bea, holding her disapproving gaze as if everything else around had disappeared, including Adam. “He was so afraid of getting caught he turned both of us in. Came running to—”

“You were kids,” Bea cut him short. “Better ease—”

“Kids, Ma, but still so different. One brave enough to suffer the consequences, the other just out for himself, backing out at the first sign of danger. Too weak to handle it, running away like a rabbit, chased by

his own shadow..." D tutted and waved his hand in disgust. "Couldn't handle the tunnels? Let's see him handle the real underground. Come down the mines with me and then make up his mind about danger--"

"Enough!" Bea's shriek made Adam gasp.

His uncle's words went flying in and out of his head. He wanted to remember each and every one of them, store them for later, and check them for clues. Dad wasn't a scared rabbit. He designed buildings with tunnels underneath. He would've had no problem going down the mine. He wasn't afraid of the dark, just as *he* wasn't afraid of it either. Adam had to prove his uncle wrong.

"I want to go to the mines. Take me with you tomorrow!" He spoke out, his commitment baffling the adults.

D smiled to himself: "That's not a place for children."

"I know it's no place for children, uncle D, but how else could I learn what my favorite uncle does for a living?" Adam tried one of Matei's routines.

"Did flattery get you anywhere before?"

Adam walked up to his uncle and put his arms around his neck: "Nowhere yet, but will it get me to the mines?"

"It'll get you back up your mother's--"

"I think you've had enough wine," Bea prevented her son from delivering Romanian's most used curse, and took both the jug and the mug inside the house. "Bed time, Adam!" Her voice resounded behind.

D pulled out of Adam's hug, "You don't have to atone for your dad."

"But I want to..." Adam nodded. "For me! I want to see the Earth's womb," he skilfully quoted his uncle, knowing all too well that flattery sometimes did get things done.

Uncle D stood up and walked towards the house. He stopped in the door frame and tapped the threshold with his foot: "If you're here at five in the morning without me having to drag you out of bed, I might consider taking you along."

Adam was wide awake when Matei sneaked back into bed, but he pretended he was sleeping. He wanted D to take *him* to the mines. Him and only him. After his cousin fell asleep he held his eyes open, first on their own, then with the aid of his fingers. He watched the moon through the curtains, the dark sky's very own light bulb. It projected the pattern of the lace curtain all across the ceiling – a slideshow filled with stories for him to decipher. Devil heads spitting fire at galloping horses, stone hammers cutting out rose-shaped rocks, leaves that turned into birds which turned into hands, cliffs and daggers, cliffs that looked like daggers.

"Wake up, little demagogue!" D emptied a glass of water on Adam's sleep ridden face, making him jump out of bed as if he'd been sprinkled with fire.

Matei put his pillow over his head and let out a grunt.

“I’m up, I’m up!” Adam whispered and ran around the room looking for something to wear. Yesterday’s clothes looked like they could handle the Earth’s insides. He pulled on his trousers in a hurry, wiped his teeth with the back of his t-shirt then slipped it on.

He ran down the stairs, out of the house into the garden, his laces untied, happy to have made it in one piece. An old van was purring on the other side of the fence, D holding the back door open for him.

“You want to see the mines, but you haven’t learned to tie your shoelaces, yet.”

“I didn’t want to keep you waiting.” He jumped in the back almost crushing the paper parcel placed on the backseat.

“Don’t sit on our breakfast!”

Adam carefully set the food to the side and watched the house grow smaller in the distance as they drove away.

“Petru is my collector,” D introduced Adam to the driver – a skinny man with pointy cheekbones, a secure resting place for the thick metal frames of his glasses.

“I’m Adam.” He stuck his hand between the front seats, his handshake invitation went unnoticed. “So you pick up samples. Do you have hammers?” He’d spent part of the night trying to remember everything D had told him about his work.

“They’re all in the back under your seat,” Petru spoke out, his calm voice followed by a long husky cough that almost drowned out the engine.

D put his hand on the driver’s shoulder: “Want to stop for water?”

Petru shook his head and rolled down the window: “Fresh air is what I need. Are you cold, Adam?”

“No.” He stuck his hand under his seat, feeling the lid of the big metal box from one end to the other. “How many tools—”

“I thought you wanted to learn what your uncle does for a living, and not his boring team-mate.” D took out a notebook from the glove compartment and scribbled something in it.

“But I do know: he’s the collector and you’re the prospector.”

D turned to face Adam with a piercing, serious gaze: “You’ve got the wit-gene from me, don’t you forget it.”

“How old are the mines?” Adam moved from one window to the other to get a better view of the mountain as the van made its way up on a narrow, winding road.

“Roman times. Our greedy ancestors were the first to make a living out of these mountains,” said Petru as he slowed down to park the car on the side of a plateau.

“We’re here already?”

“Not just yet.” D got out of the car and opened the door on Adam’s side. “First things first.”

“What are we doing here?” Adam’s feet carefully followed his uncle’s footsteps to avoid getting his trainers soaked in dew.

“We’re getting some core samples using a magic tool from that box Petru’s carrying. Go give him a hand. Put those muscles to work.” D pinched Adam’s undefined deltoid – it tickled.

“Core as in heart?” He put his hand on top of Petru’s, presumably sharing the load, but actually contributing to it.

“Yeah, we’re Earth doctors.” Petru set the box down. “We’re monitoring the Earth’s heart.” He kneeled in front of a hole in the ground, no bigger than the top of a milk bottle.

D opened the box and took out a roll of pink striped paper, a long needle attached to it and handed them to Petru. He extracted a wire which he unraveled and let slip inside the hole.

“What’s that?” Adam leaned over his uncle’s shoulder, staring at the roll of paper. The needle began to move, drawing erratic lines on the unfolding sheet.

“A lie detector,” D whispered.

“It uncovers all the Earth’s secrets,” added Petru. He put his finger under the needle’s fresh, fine drawings then jotted something down in his pocket-size notebook.

“What does it say?” Adam struggled to make out the writing, but nothing made sense – numbers and random letters were scattered on the page in multiple directions.

“We have to take it to the lab to find out.” His uncle took out the wire and put it back in the box. “And now for the real adventure, the mines!”

They drove through the forest, lines of leaves dancing behind the car only to settle back like waves crashing in reverse. The sun was sending its sharp rays through the wind-blown trees, light uncovering nature’s dwelling – multiple shades of green came to life.

The entrance to the mine was an old wooden frame sticking out of a tall ochre cliff. The color reminded Adam of Bea’s Christmas sponge cake. He closed his eyes, and took a deep breath, his memory recreating the smell of ground walnuts.

“Looks like it’s made of cozonac!”

His reaction made his uncle laugh. D wrapped Adam in a grey coat which hung all the way to his ankles. He had to roll up his sleeves four times to release his small hands. Then he had him try on a helmet, but all it managed was to make Petru laugh until he coughed.

Adam followed his uncle and Petru inside a tiny metal elevator that squeaked its way down to the heart of the gallery. It was like they were in a giant bucket going down a deep well.

“Always walk in front of me.” D turned on the light of his helmet guiding the way from above. “Let’s see if we hear the old rocks talk.” He touched the walls gently with his palm, as if they were alive.

Any sign of light or air was scarce, but the tunnel had a voice of its own, breathing along to the sound of their steps. Once in a while drops of water would take a lethal jump together, making their landing resonate briefly in the form of a giggle.

Petru led the way to an opening barely big enough for one man.

“I’ll do it this time.” D pushed Adam aside and went in. He squatted down by a pile of rocks and started holding them up one by one, studying their texture in the light of his helmet.

“Look, Adam!” He handed him a rock the size of his hand, a golden dot sticking out of it.

He rubbed his thumb against the pointy surface – it felt cold.

“Gold?” he whispered for fear the Earth might hear and wake up.

“Like in Ali Baba’s cave.” D put the rock back and came out holding two bigger ones, not one trace of gold in them – grey, ugly and far from precious.

“Why not take the one with the gold?” Adam expressed his confusion loudly, his voice echoing in the tunnel.

“That’s the miners’ job,” offered Petru.

“Our work goes much deeper.” D stuck his ear on the wall. “Come hear this.”

“What?” Adam pressed his face to the cold wet surface above his uncle’s waist. “I can’t hear it! What?”

“Not there.” He lifted Adam until their heads were at the same level. “See if you can hear it now.”

Adam placed his ear on the rocky structure and squinted as if narrowing his sight would improve his hearing. He couldn't hear much, except for his uncle's breath, heavy from all the smoking, but so clear, present.

“Hold your breath,” D instructed and held his.

A faint buzz travelled behind the wall, like nothing Adam had ever heard. It sounded much more subtle than insect-talk, less muffled than the sea-moans, very much alive, all the while conveying a sense of peace. Why would Dad not want to hear this? Surely he would have listened to the Earth too had he been there.

“I heard it!” He turned his ear away from the wall and was now staring at his uncle, his face a beacon of confidence: “If I can hear it, Dad can hear it, too. He's not a rabbit. And neither am I.”

“I never thought you were.” D put him down and placed his helmet on Adam's head, holding it with his hand from behind: “You lead the way!”

“**Home** isn’t *where*, it’s *what*.” D’s words had become Adam’s mantra ever since he’d heard his mom was coming to get him. Bea had been right, yet again. As much as he’d wanted to go back to Bucharest, the month spent in the mountains had provided him with a second home. He wasn’t ready to leave just yet. What was the rush, anyway? Why now? Why not go back with Matei at the end of the summer? Why would his mom come for him herself? And why wouldn’t she spend some time here too? Sandu had a spare room if she didn’t want to share the bed with Bea.

“Maybe it’s good news. What if uncle Mihai is back?” Matei suggested as he helped Adam pack his bag.

“Why wouldn’t they both come?” Adam found himself torn between the excitement of seeing his mom and the unhappy prospect of having to leave.

“Maybe he’s got to work in Bucharest. Maybe he can’t stay long and he has to go back.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know! Where he went in the first place?”

“Then why come back at all?”

Things didn't add up. If only D had been around to hopefully shed some light on all the mystery. Hours before Mom phoned to announce her arrival, D had been called back to the mines for a work related accident. Adam prayed he'd get to see his uncle one more time before he left. He did. D came back with Petru to see Adam off and take him to the station.

On the morning of his departure, Ion showed up early and gave Adam a pebble he picked from the river. It was dark blue in the shape of a triangle.

"Looks like an A." Ion held it up by its most pointy end. "For Adam," he assured him and handed him a piece of paper with an address scribbled on it: "We never get any mail around here. Send me a postcard from Bucharest?"

Adam tucked the paper inside his backpack – he'd found a secret pocket which fitted it perfectly. He gave Ion a long hug infused with all the thank yous he felt he owed him: "Not just a postcard. I'll write you letters, too."

"I'll see you back in Bucharest." Matei ruffled his hair – he wasn't the hugging type.

Bea however, had tears in her eyes. She held Adam tight and kissed him twice on each cheek, with wet noises and sighs in between: "Bea's brave boy!" She wiped off any lingering kiss traces, and pinched his skin till it flushed.

On the way to the station, D kept playing with his cigarette, deciding to light it, and then changing his mind again. He didn't say one word, not to Adam, not even to Petru whose cold seemed to be getting worse.

Adam held his backpack clutched to his chest, gazing past the windshield, unable to focus on the road. The further they drove away the more he was torn between leaving and going to see his mom.

“Remember you're not a rabbit,” D said as he got out of the car. “You're leading the way.” He took his hand and walked him towards the entrance.

Mom was waiting on the platform, checking and rechecking her watch and the tickets. Her hand froze in the air as she saw them approaching. She ran to Adam and lifted him off the ground in one go, as if he was made of feathers. She held him so tight he almost ran out of air.

“You've grown since I last saw you.” She put him back down and leaned in to kiss D on the cheek.

Adam's uncle pulled back to light his cigarette, “Was the train busy?”

“I had a seat.” Mom squeezed Adam's shoulder as if she was making sure of her son's authenticity. “And we have a whole compartment to ourselves on the way back.”

“A life of plenty!” D exhaled a trembling line of smoke aiming it at Adam's mom.

“Have you been a good boy?” She ran her fingers through Adam’s hair.

“The best,” D replied in his place. “He’s been enjoying himself, too. You could have waited until the end of the summer. I would have brought him—”

“We’ve waited enough!” She reached for D’s cigarette, but he quickly put it back in his mouth, sucking the burning straw with gusto.

Mom kissed Adam on the forehead: “Aren’t you happy you’re coming home?”

Home? Happy? He was. He should have been. Truth was that *home* had been on Adam’s mind for far too long to the point where it ceased to be desirable. Home had become an abstract notion, its reality no longer essential. Adam looked at his uncle in hope that D’s face might contain a plausible answer to Mom’s question.

“Of course he is!” D encouraged Adam with an arm squeeze. “Where’s your enthusiasm, cub? Your mom came all this way to get you, and you?” D cleared his throat, “You just wait and see where she’s taking you.”

“Where?” Adam looked up at the grown-ups, a curious smile on his face. His mom and uncle seemed to be engaged in a staring contest, D’s intimidating frown heading for the win. “Where?” Adam asked again and tugged at his mother’s shirt. “Where are you taking me?” He spat out

the question, but he already knew the answer. He felt it and there was not an ounce of doubt about it. They were going to see Dad. “Are we—”

A loud whistle startled his mom. She let out a stifled shriek, but was unable to hold back a sparkling tear that started to roll down from the corner of her eye.

“Better stop that, woman!” D wiped her cheek. “You’re like our ambassador now. Want the westerners to think we’re a bunch of criers?” He put up his still burning cigarette and placed it between her lips. She laughed out her germinal cry and took a drag.

The mechanic blew his whistle once more, this time alerting the passengers to get on the train. D lifted Adam with one hand and carried him to their car. He kissed his forehead before he placed him safely inside the train, then helped up his sister-in-law and jumped off just as the wagon signaled its departure.

D waved at them from the platform then turned around, heading for the exit. He didn’t look back. Not once.

Adam and his mom had just taken their seats as the train sped away, leaving the village behind, draped in a cloud of dust. Adam looked at the passing trees, their leaves waving him off. As the scenery changed from cliffs to plains, his reflection on the window became clearer. His hair looked lighter, shining golden around a serene face. He opened his mouth, stuck his nose on the window and covered it in steam, then drew

an A. He didn't wipe it as usual; instead he added the rest of the letters to his name and left it there to dry.

His mom caressed his hair, making his neck tingle in response. She unzipped her bag and took out a postcard which she held between her palms as if it were a frame-less icon she would pray to.

"This is it, Adam," she sighed with relief. "I'm glad I can finally show this to you." She handed Adam the card – the same card D had hidden in his pocket. The card Adam had been desperate to read.

He took the postcard and held it by the corners with both hands, careful not to bend it. The thorn-crowned lady imprinted on the front was rocking to the train's jerky rhythm. After carefully inspecting every element, he put his finger over the golden flame as if he was checking its temperature.

Adam took a deep breath, flipped the postcard and started to read each word out loud.

* *

Their boat came to a rest in the middle of the lake. The mountain rose out of the water and split the horizon down the middle, scattering the morning clouds.

It's not blue, said Adam as he looked through the binoculars.

His father steadied the oars and pushed up his Yankee cap to wipe his sweaty forehead. I told you it's no big deal, he said. I could have taken you to see the Woolworth Building, instead.

I like it that we came to see the Blue Mountain.

Even if it's not really blue?

Adam looked at the mountain again, this time without the aid of binoculars. We can see buildings all the time, he replied.

His father went through the shopping bag and pulled out a can of Coke. The sound of cracking aluminum echoed against the morning silence. He took a long sip and let out a sigh. We could go up on the fire tower if you want, he said.

After the fishing?

There's not enough time to do both. Mom will be waiting for us with lunch.

Can we come back after we eat?

Another time, maybe. I have to get back to work.

Adam put his hand in the water like a ladle, filled it and emptied it and then filled it up again.

His father set the Coke can on the floor of the boat and secured it with his feet. I got another job this month, he said. Really big project this one. A hotel. Did you see the draft I was working on? The one on my desk?

Adam shook his head and stuck his hand back in the water. He rubbed his fingers against the boat's wet wood panel, back and forth.

I will show it to you when we get back, said his father. You can learn all about it like you used to when we were back home.

The sun hit the lake's soft undulations, yielding multiple explosions of light all around. Adam took his hand out of the water and held it up to dry. He watched each drop dribble along his arm then hang on to his elbow, before falling back in the lake.

His father opened a small plastic bag and took out a live worm. He tore it in two and hung one half of it on a fishhook. He gave Adam the prepared rod.

Do you know what to do with it to catch a fish?

Hold it still, said Adam.

Last time I went fishing I was about your age. A bit younger maybe. I was never any good at it.

Did your father teach you?

His father finished sticking the remaining piece of worm on his fishhook and threw it in the water. My brother, he said and watched the insect get swallowed by the dark blue lake.

Adam fixed the rod between his knees and took out a can of Coke from the bag. He popped it open and gulped down the bubbly drink in a hurry then looked at his father, Tatã?

English, Adam.

Sorry...

Adam took another sip of Coke. Dad, he said. There's this boy at school, his name is James. And his grandmother is Romanian.

So is yours. But you are American now.

I know.

His father took off his Yankee cap and let it rest on his knee. He ran his fingers through his hair from right to left. Good, he said. Very good. He put his cap back on.

Adam used his hand as a visor to shelter his eyes from the sun. When are we going to go back?

We're not. Only forward, remember?

James goes to see his grandma for Christmas. Why can't we go back to visit?

Because we left. You don't want to go back there.

Why not?

His father's rod twitched. I think I got something, he said. Help me pull it out?

Adam stood up and put both hands on the shaky stick while trying to hold his with his foot.

They could feel the nibbling through the line. His father yanked the rod upward to hook the fish. Reel it in, he said.

Adam spun the line and thrust the fish out of the water. It landed between them, tipping over the Coke. The fish slapped its tail on the floor of the boat, showing off its red belly.

Redbreast sunfish, his father said. What do you want to do with it? Have Mom fry it?

Throw it back.

You don't have to. We can take it home. Have it for dinner.

The fish closed and opened its mouth like a singer, its dance seemingly happy.

Throw it back, said Adam.

Are you sure?

Yes, please! Throw it back.

His father grabbed the slippery fish with both hands, holding its head still. You have to pull out the hook, he said.

Adam kneeled in the puddle of Coke. His fingers were shaking, but he removed the fishhook in one go, a couple of blood drops splattered his hand.

They watched the fish swim back to life.

Why?

Why what?

Why don't you want to go back?

Life isn't always about what you want. And it's better to stay away if you can.

Away from what?

All the evil. I don't even want to remember it. Some things are better left forgotten.

Even Bea?

His father took Adam's fishhook out of the water. He folded the sticks and placed them by the grocery bag. I don't expect you to understand, he said. Bea could have come here with us, but she chose not to.

Why? And why can't we go back to visit?

Things seem so simple when you're a child. For you, back home means Bea and uncle D and nature, but that's only because you haven't been exposed to anything else. Because your mom and I made sure you were protected.

From what? Tell me!

His father cleared his throat. Romania, his voice trembled. My Romania, he resumed with disdain, is dark and vicious. Long before you were born and long after, it was like a cage full of animals. Animals trained by force and starvation, turned against one another until they had no choice but to obey the master.

He's gone, now. They killed him.

Yes. And now, you'd think with the cage gone, all should be well again. Why leave, right?

Adam nodded.

His father looked past the horizon. Why leave, he repeated.

Adam put his hands on his wet knees. They were sticky.

His father began to row towards the shore. Because it's dangerous, he said. The animals run free now, but they are still very much wild.

Adam watched the left oar as it disappeared then emerged victoriously with a splash, coated in dripping water. He looked up at his father; drops of sweat were making their way down his temple, rolling past the eye, as if he were crying.

It can't be all bad, Adam said after a while.

There are good things, too, said his father. Like family. It hurt leaving it all behind. But that is a small price to pay to get away from all the bad. Remember that. No dreams can ever become real back there.

Why didn't Bea want to leave?

Some people just get used to the bad. They don't see it as bad anymore. For them the bad turns into habit.

Was it hard?

To leave?

Adam nodded.

It was hard to hide. To abstain from getting in touch. I didn't think I would see you and your mom again. That postcard I sent you...Had to carry it in my pocket for months until it was finally OK for you to get it. We all suffered when I left. Thank God it was only for a little while. This is our home now and we're together. We don't have to hide and communicate through postcards.

The father moored the boat to a jetty and helped up his son.

I've kept it, said Adam. Your postcard.

* *

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Back Home

At first you count: two days, six months... Until you stop. People never wait here. They make things happen. Leave home to get home.

Mihai, May 1990

Adam flips the postcard: behind the faded, glossy paper, a decrepit Statue of Liberty saluting the Twins across the Upper Bay. The sharp 90s yellow font, once proudly spelling *New York*, is now a bleached yellow *New Yor*. The 22 year old surface scrapes against his fingertips like a dry lip. Postcards age too; with wrinkles and all...It's been with him everywhere. An ID of some sort, without which Adam could and would not prove his Adam-ness; the sole physical proof of life before the great dream.

He tucks the postcard inside his notebook just as the plane rubs its wheels against the landing track. Outside the window, an all-wrapping white hints at the shape of cars and houses scattered underneath. Last time Adam saw this much snow, he was six and fatherless.

Ladies and gentlemen we have reached our destination: Bucharest, Romania. Please remain— The announcement is muffled by the sound of metal clips unbuckling. People stand up impatient, eager to collect their belongings from the overhead compartments. Adam cringes at the sudden rush of Romanian being shot all around him. It sounds

familiar like English, except it isn't. He can't help but take it personally, being forced to turn his head in the direction of every recognizable word.

"The language sounds so weird!" An English statement comes to the rescue, uttered by an olive-skinned woman with a Barbara Streisand meets Elena Ceaușescu profile. "It's like popping bubble wrap," she complains to her boyfriend who's taken Adam's backpack out of the overhead compartment, in order to retrieve their luggage.

"Give it some time." He hands her a bag: "You'll fall in love with Romania. It's...exotic..."

The couple heads for the exit, the word exotic lingers in Adam's ears – capitalist convalescing from communist contagion. He puts his notebook inside his backpack and stares at his crammed up belongings, wishing there was enough room for him in there too. Too late to change his mind now. He's here. This *here* that's been playing in his head, over and over again for years: in black and white, then in color, in and out of focus. It's finally happening, the moment he's been equally dreading and anticipating. He makes his way out of the plane, strutting as if the fate of the world could stand entirely on his shoulders and he would carry it without breaking a single drop of sweat. When shitting yourself, exude confidence. Just another American in Bucharest.

Aurel Vlaicu International Airport looks a lot like St. Paul, Minneapolis where Adam once waited 8 hours for a delayed flight to take him back to San Francisco after having shot a corporate ad for Lipton.

One that was never aired. It was supposed to set his career in motion, help him change gears from AD to director, but the client decided to ‘go another way’. So did Adam’s hopes – had to go all the way to Romania for the much sought-after first directing gig. And now he can’t shake off that damn Minneapolis feeling. He hasn’t even set foot out of the airport yet and it’s all déjà-vu: same neon-morgue light reflected by the same cream tiles separated by small black squares. It even smells the same – like a hospital room that’s just been cleaned. Hello, unforgettable antiseptic odor of failure.

At least they’re paying him better. The Romanians. He couldn’t believe his luck when they sent him the offer. *It’s not your luck, it’s theirs!* Dad’s pride stricken words resonate like a catchy jingle: *They must be over the moon to get an American director!* Almost-American-almost-director more like it, but whoever loses sleep over the fine print, anyway. *Eyes on the job, Adam! No sentimentalities! We’ve come a long way since we left,* his father proclaimed as he drove him to the airport. *You’re going there as an American director,* the word American rolled with excessive pride from his mouth like a spell. It was the first time Dad had seen Adam off. Felt like he was going to war. They parted with a long good-bye hug infused with the slim, but significant chance that he might not come back the same, if at all. *Don’t drag us back, Adam!* His father delivered along with a final, forceful handshake.

Dad's warning seems pretty ludicrous in the context of the first inklings of *back*. Adam stops his seemingly confident strut to retrieve his earphones from his backpack. People rush past him as if they're giving away prizes at Passport Control. He scrolls to the RATM folder and presses play. Best way to roll in an airport: furious bass and unsettling drum to match the coats, heads, wheeling bags, people shuffling like mechanical toys through society's giant antechamber. Everyone is in a rush only to end up waiting – to leave, to return, for luggage, for a loved one, for someone to check their passport. If only time would wait as well. Why is there time in no man's land? Someone should amend that. Make it the resting place of the socially challenged.

Adam follows the queue for *All Other Passports* grateful for the few non-EU citizens in front of him: a young mother with two boys, the older one repeatedly crashing and picking up his toy plane, the younger one picking his nose. In front of them, an old couple holding hands – matching jackets, glasses and haircuts – they're patiently waiting for their turn behind the yellow line. On the EU side, mayhem: people huddled against each other like scales on the back of a beastly dragon, moving in unison, saving up every inch of time and space.

Know Your Enemy starts playing in his ears as a giant poster promoting Romanian tourism grabs Adam's attention, the tagline *explore the Carpathian garden*, blasted all green and happy underneath a falling leaf. Nothing to explore here but rumors and tumors, Dad would say.

Adam reckons he's pretty much safe from either. Here just for the week, thank God. Eyes on the job!

He's now first in line to the customs booth where a young blonde woman is scanning passports with her steely stare. Adam removes his earphones without pausing the music, de la Rocha's rage booming out: *all of which are American dreams, all of which are American dreams, all of which*— Embarrassed, he turns down the volume. He imagines being arrested for out-of-context nationalism: You have the right to remain Romanian...

"Welcome to Bucharest, Mr. Stan," Blondie hands him back his passport no questions asked. She didn't even flinch at the sight of his last name. No questions about length of stay or the purpose of his visit, and she did not, surprisingly, look up his ass for foreign currency. Maybe things *have* changed.

Three dead-still belts are waiting for the luggage from five different flights: London, Paris, Munich, Athens and Budapest. The locals tap their legs, roll their eyes and sigh loudly, waiting for the belt to move. A couple of slick young men with gelled hairdos are complaining about the delay of their luggage until they notice a babe trinity, girls whose faces scream 'less is more unless it's makeup'. The belt jolts to life. A rubicund kid tries to jump on, trips over a jam-packed duty free bag that's saved by Adam's calf.

A plump lady – balancing her bulk on very high and very thin heels, with Cirque du Soleil precision – cuts through the crowd and snatches her bag off the belt. Words like: miseducation, disrespect, uncouth are thrown at the woman who waves them off with her hand.

Other suitcases start to roll down the belt. Size does seem to matter when it comes to Romanian luggage. Some of these cases are big enough to fit a medium sized man; or two midgets. By their worn out look they must have smuggled at least a dozen. Adam's dark green Samsonite makes its way towards him, but his attention is grabbed by a small, dark-brown vintage case. Grandma Bea had an identical one she'd use to travel to Bucharest and back – one she'd mostly stuff with food – it even has the broken zipper, firmly held in place by an old, rusty safety pin. A pale hand retrieves the suitcase quickly before Adam has the time to see its owner.

“Excuzati!” Adam expectorates some Rom-glish babble and squeezes between an old man and his daughter to reach the handle of his own suitcase just in time.

He walks through the arrival gates, which squeak, once upon opening, twice upon closing. Further from the impressively small, but fidgeting welcome crowd, an earthy, wide-shouldered young man, phone clutched between his ear and shoulder, is holding up a crooked sign that reads *Mr. A. Stan*. He's too emerged in a frothing conversation to notice

Adam is standing in front of him; a conversation that seems to heavily feature ‘this American’ the man is waiting for.

Adam can’t help but revel in the devious yet comforting feeling of understanding Romanian without letting it show. Ears exposed, concealed identity. Dad’s stubborn vigilance might not be so implausible after all: *Always keep the upper hand. Romanians don’t need to know you understand them. How else are they going to show you their true face?*

The man hangs up the phone and locks eyes with Adam, raising his brows.

“I’m him,” Adam points at the sign making it tilt even more.

The man takes a moment to look at Adam then at the name, before deciding to put the sign down.

“Welcome to Budapest!” He shakes Adam’s hand with both hands then takes off with his suitcase, signaling him to follow.

“Sorry?” Adam can barely keep up with him as he crisscrosses through the crowd with his luggage.

“Budapest, Bucharest,” offers the man as he balances the suitcase on the escalator steps. “Foreigners mix them up.” He leads the way inside the underground car park where dispersed lights do more concealing than revealing. “Technically we’re in Otopeni now, fifteen kilometers from Bucharest. It’s only a half hour drive to your hotel.” He stops behind a dirty black hatchback Volvo, unlocks the doors and slides the suitcase

inside the trunk, prompting Adam to throw in his backpack. “Front or back?” He gives him a piercing look.

“Excuse me?”

“Where do you want to sit? The front or the back of the car?”

Adam hesitates and goes for the front seat. It’s stacked with newspapers and empty packs of cigarettes, a plastic bottle – half full with orange juice – and two mobile phones.

“Throw everything in the back. I get the phones,” says the driver. “Sorry for the mess. Hi, I’m Peter.” He shakes Adam’s hand, this time making eye contact: “It’s Petre,” He lifts his right eyebrow as if to punctuate the correctly Romanian pronunciation of his name. “But Peter is easy in English.” He fires the engine and drives off.

Adam offers a grateful smile. He could dazzle *Pé-tre* with his Romanian diction skills if he wanted to, but he makes the sound decision to let this one slide. After all, he is not Romanian anymore. Why pretend?

Outside, the cables of electricity poles are hanging under the heavy weight of snow, like giant white sausages put up to dry.

“Romanian winter!” Peter lights a cigarette: “Smoke?”

Adam shakes his head mildly disgusted. Peter rolls down his window, letting in the biting smell of fresh snow. Adam closes his eyes; he’s a kid again, sticking out his tongue to catch the fleeting icy flakes. Even the cold has its own distinct smell. A warm drop rolls out of his

nostril and rests above his lip. Adam wipes it off with his finger. His nose hasn't bled in years.

"Are you OK?" Peter throws his cigarette out the window and takes out a tissue from his pocket.

Adam leans his head back and puts up his hand the way Bea had taught him.

"That's the way to do it!" Peter swerves to avoid a hole, making Adam's head bump on the window. "Sorry!" He looks at him, lips tucked in a repentant grimace.

"I'm fine." Adam rubs the tissue under his nose, removing all traces of dry blood. "It stopped."

"You remind me of my friend," Peter offers with warm enthusiasm. "George," he gives the name a vigorous Romanian inflection. "He lives in Canada and when he comes back to Bucharest. Not often... You know, for Christmas. The moment he comes out of the plane, blood comes out of his nose," he lets out a hearty laugh. "Every time!"

"Must be the winter," Adam concludes, but he can't help thinking it might very well be punishment.

"Hope you don't mind," Peter turns on the stereo as Romanian hip-hop creeps from the speakers. "This is Paraziții. If only you know Romanian... True poets..." He licks his lips as if having uttered the word *poets* has produced a sweet taste in his mouth. "You may learn some curse words while we get to the hotel. But don't say you learned from

me.” He sticks the gear into third and speeds up as suicidal snowflakes crash against the windshield.

Nothing unusual about the hip-hop beats until a loud *dă-te-n gâtu’ mă-tii* penetrates the confines of the car. First ones to come back, curses...Or maybe they’re the last to go. Dad still can’t avoid them as much as he hates himself for it. Like the word *fuck* isn’t enough. How could it be when there’s so much to fuck in Romanian: throats, dead relatives, crosses, tombs, various organs – most commonly liver – going all the way to Christ or Easter. All referenced back to the key factor in pretty much all Romanian curses: Mothers.

“You want juice, water?” Peter asks as he turns around to look for a bottle while steering the car with just his left hand.

“I’m fine, thank you, please watch the road!”

“You afraid I hit a dog, eh?” He resumes the driving position, both hands on the wheel: “They’re on the pavement – drain holes keep them warm.”

Adam’s attention takes the scenery’s bait. He’s gazing at the icy fields, barely blinking so as not to miss any of the moving pictures. Houses run past, leaving behind chimney smoke tracks. Three crows pierce the sky like precise black arrows. No familiar buildings in sight, but he’s no stranger to these charged clouds hanging above a sea of white, signs of a wrathful God.

The car rolls down a bridge, giving them a jolt as it pulls closer to a sign reading *București*, despite the scars of a recent blizzard.

“This is it,” says Peter. “First time in Bucharest?”

Adam nods with conviction. Some things are better left forgotten, certainly better left unsaid.

“Well, not much to see, if you ask me. Not much left of what the city really was. Little Paris, they used to call it. Look!” Peter points at a stone arch, a smaller replica of L’Arc de Triomphe. Adam knows exactly where they are – by Herăstrău, the park where his mom took him once. Day after Dad disappeared. She didn’t let her sadness show. Not one bit. Maybe it was all an act, maybe she was struggling to conceal her pain, but to Adam the child, she actually seemed happy. *Who needs Dad when you have me for Mom?* They had corn on the cob and cotton candy and then she let Adam climb one of the giant tilla trees. That was the first and last time he ever climbed a tree with her permission.

As the car heads towards Piața Victoriei the winter scenery thaws, unveiling vivid summer shades in Adam’s mind. He can almost feel the cobble stones despite the thick snow carpet underneath. It’s where he first learned to ride his bike while singing *got my bike, I’m a biker* – his very own adaptation of the young communist anthem *got my tie, I’m a pioneer*.

“This was my favorite boulevard,” laments Peter. “Paved with stones from 19th century. Now they replace them with asphalt.”

“Reconditioning?”

“Ha! You’re funny. They sell them.”

“The stones?”

“To the highest bidders: France, Great Britain, countries who give a shit about history. We’re famous to want to forget.” Peter turns up the volume as a hoarse voice belts out something about streets and villas to a bass-infused beat: “They say: the money from EU disappear in villas and streets that don’t exist,” he sighs then recovers quickly and points to his left: “The famous Revolution Square, where people died in December of ‘89. Died in vain. Mostly young people,” he declares in a solemn tour guide fashion. The scars still visible after all these years – the frontispiece of an art deco building is branded with bullet holes, like cancerous sun spots on white skin.

The car ploughs through the snow, making a hasty last-minute skid at a red light. Just in time for Adam to observe significant changes on Calea Victoriei. A hotel bearing the façade of the first Romanian National Theatre stands proud next to Palatul Telefoanelor – *the first Romanian skyscraper, built in the 20s*, he can hear his mom whisper in his child’s ear. A phantom taste of home-made chocolate haunts his mouth. *Cat tongues* they called them, thin chocolate strips the size of a thumb, which his mom would get from the sweet shop across the street. It’s been replaced with a posh shoe shop. At least there’s variety in shoes now. Adam only had two pairs growing up here – one for summer, the other for winter.

“Are you tired? Or you just don’t like to talk?” Peter turns to him waiting for an answer. Or two.

“Not much of a talker. Unless I’m being paid.”

“Teach my wife to do that. She gives so much of it for free.” Peter follows the car in front of him as the light turns green. “We’re close to the hotel now. You can rest before I come back to take you to the meeting.” He checks his watch. “You have like four hours.” He turns left on the roundabout: “Are you...jet...leg?”

An increasing, unfamiliar buzz prevents Adam from correcting him. In front of The Intercontinental Hotel – his choice of accommodation on account of the brochure’s *best view in town* review – hundreds of people are gathered, holding up signs, belting out slogans, their breath hovering above their heads like cartoon speech bubbles. Peter pulls over in front of the hotel entrance, fully ignoring what Adam considers to be an angry mob. A placard with an English tag-line catches his eye: “To be, not T.B.”

Extras? Shooting a movie? Adam’s first thoughts quickly sink into the dad-inherited paranoia and he begins to mumble with panic: “What...Is this...Are they...”

“Protests.” Peter waves his hand, “You know that saying, too much noise for nothing? It’s nothing! I’ll get your bags.” He exits, leaving Adam to a final repetitive verse on the stereo: *Sunt inofensiv, dar gândul meu e criminal.*

Adam steps out of the car, trying to make out what's written on the signs hovering above the crowd. He wonders whether they're still calling for *Jos Comunismul*. The 25-story tower, his home for the next few days, is overlooking the seething gathering in a menacing yet protective way.

"Need help checking in?" Peter drops his bags in front of the sliding doors that offer a sneak preview of warmth before they slide back shut with a swift, jangly whimper.

"I got it." Adam takes out a ten dollar bill and hands it to him. "Thank you."

Peter raises an eyebrow: "You're welcome. But you don't need to tip me. It's a bit...How do you say?" His nostrils flare as he searches for the perfect word: "Offensive. I work for the same company that hired you. Do they tip you?"

Adam wants to speak, his words frozen just like his dollar-holding hand.

"I'm kidding." Peter shakes Adam's hand with both hands. "I'm not offended! But I am serious about the tip, no need." He lets go of the grip and shows Adam his watch, taps the screen with his forefinger: "Eleven. I'll come back for you at three," He puts up three fingers and waves them at Adam then walks back to the car and gets in.

Adam stares at his own feet and luggage stuck on top of the *Welcome* mat, well covering the *wel* part in its entirety.

“Get some sleep,” Peter shouts through the rolled-down window, as he drives off.

Adam picks up his bags and disappears behind the sliding doors. Dim lounge music shuts out the crowd’s unsettling murmur, accompanying him as he walks to Reception. The thick burgundy carpet cushions his every step, making him feel like he’s walking on top of a giant sponge.

An all-smiling receptionist asks for his passport in the sweetest of voices as if there’s no ounce of threat outside, just tropical islands and spas. “You’ll be in room 983,” She looks up and signals a tall bell boy to take Adam’s luggage upstairs.

The elevator is silent and slow. “So what’s going on out there?” Adam asks the bell boy who’s bitten off and is now chewing a string of dead skin from his thumb. The bell-not-exactly-boy, more like a Lennie-kind-of-boy, shrugs. His name tag catches a beam of the overhead spotlight: *Mihai*.

“The Occupy movement?” Adam insists.

“Some people call it the new revolution,” Mihai offers with prevalent disinterest and clenches his protruding jaw, making it look like some kind of prehistoric tool used for cracking skulls.

“Is it...dangerous?” Adam follows him outside the elevator.

“Don’t worry.” Mihai unlocks room 983 with one slick move of card-in, card-out. “There’s no danger. This is Romania.” He opens the door wide: “Welcome!”

Adam walks inside and drops his backpack by the bed – it matches the dark blue frills of the cover. At least his luggage fits in...Mihai places Adam’s suitcase next to the bed, then straightens his back and stares at an invisible target in front of him. He even taps an inaudible jazzy tune on his thigh, the fabric of his trousers waving down his leg.

“Thank you!” Adam pulls out the bill he offered Peter, which has no trouble finding a loving home in Mihai’s chest pocket. He exits satisfied, leaving Adam in the middle of the room, unsure of what to do next.

He takes out his laptop and makes a couple of failed attempts to connect to the hotel Wi-Fi. Why Fi on technology and its uncontrollable whims! As he’s about to give up, the Skype icon starts to bounce up and down, his contacts list loads up on the screen. It’s way past midnight back home – everyone is offline since. If only his body would pick up on that. He can’t really sleep...He doesn’t feel even slightly tired.

Room 983 is clean, impersonal and quiet. A replica of an old photograph hangs above the night stand: a sepia rendition of Calea Victoriei in the 20s, the handwriting underneath reads *Little Paris* – a posh crowd parades their hatted heads, suits and canes along the

promenade. That distinguishably Romanian *Fuck convention!* prevails as a line of cars splits the mass down the middle.

Adam takes out his camera and opens the door to the balcony, stepping out into the knifing cold. The crowd's willingness to fight the bitter weather is admirable, constant in voicing their demands – whatever these may be. He looks through the view-finder and zooms in. He's not the only voyeur. In front of The National Theatre, propped on its immovable socle, the statue of Caragiale observes the protesters with an I-told-you-so glance.

Several plump snowflakes begin to drop from the sky, landing gently on the heads and shoulders of the crowd. A blessing of a sort, as if the snow seems to say *this too shall pass*.

Romanian has three words for snow: *nea* from the Latin *nivem* (snow), *zăpadă* from the Slavic *zapadati* (to fall) and *omăt* from the Slavic *ometu* (white dust).

The phone on the nightstand buzzes five or six times before it finally urges Adam to take his head out from under the pillow and pick up.

“Hello? Mr. Stan? Petre Ionescu is waiting for you at recep—”

“Hello? It’s me...Peter...The driver! Said I pick you up at 3? For the PPM,” he emphasizes each letter of the acronym as if it were an individual word, “Pee Pee Em, remember?”

“Be down in a minute,” Adam mumbles and puts down the receiver, missing a couple of times before setting it down properly.

He’s dozed off, clothes still on, camera clutched to his hand. He’s left the balcony door ajar, allowing a subtle draft to creep over his sweaty nap, and render the side of his neck stiff – now he can’t turn to his right unless it’s with his entire upper body. On the floor, the laptop screen bleeps with thirteen missed calls from his parents and a low-battery warning. Adam closes the lid.

The room’s striped wallpaper looks like it’s caging him – an ironic, perpendicular counterpoint to the stripes on his shirt. He stands up, dizzy. The phone starts ringing again, cue for him to speed up. Cursing at the thought of not being afforded the time to shower, he quickly changes into a set of clean clothes, nearly missing a couple of buttons on his jeans.

His coat and backpack are lying on the floor, next to his laptop, in a crime scene fashion, as if waiting for a concluding chalk mark to arrest their position. He picks them up, ignoring the machine's ring-a-ding fit, takes out a Diet Coke from the mini-bar and heads out the door.

He chugs down the fizzy potion, waiting for the sugar to impart on him the much-needed energy boost. His reflection on the polished elevator door shows an even more tired Adam than he already feels. He hasn't shaved, but he couldn't care less. Careless, that's the look he's going for. What do they know, anyway? They'll probably think it's the latest Californian trend. What if they don't? What if appearances matter most here and he fails to make a good first one? What if...

At the reception desk, Peter is playing with his car keys, rolling them around his forefinger, back and forth. It looks like he's engaged in a secret gesturing code with the receptionist who's playing with her necklace, biting off its charm and then spitting it out, only to sink her teeth into it all over again. They drop their act when they see Adam approaching.

"And they say Americans are right on time," Peter grins.

Adam zips up his coat and straps on his backpack with military precision: "They say that about the English. Americans are just right." He can't show any sign of weakness. He's a pro; it's what they're going to pay him the big bucks for.

He follows Peter towards the exit and puts on his sunglasses as they walk out of the hotel. Through the dark green lenses of his Ray Ban's, the crowd outside looks like a cheery festival gathering. Adam stops in front of the sliding doors and stands up on his tiptoes, measuring the size of the mob from left to right. There's hardly anything menacing about the people holding up their assorted, colored signs written in an impressive range of fonts, as if they're all graphic designers and art directors convening for an art summit.

"Come on!" Peter shouts at him. "They wait for you like the holy moaște!" He unlocks the car for Adam.

"Holy what?"

"Moaște," he enunciates as he slips into the driver's seat. "It's how we say in Romanian. You know, like the body of a saint...Pieces of the body..." He pauses to think of a better explanation: "You go to church and pray to them for miracles." He puts his hands together in a prayer and looks up. "The moaște make it happen. Like the goldfish. But real. That's what you are to them. That's how bad they wait for you." He nods and taps Adam's shoulder.

Adam shrugs off Peter's hand, offering what he deems as an overly modest face. As if there isn't enough pressure on him already, now he has to live up to *holy* expectations.

The car makes its way down the boulevard, heading towards Piața Romană. Traffic is slow, the line of cars advances at a funeral pace as if

it's part of an official parade. Piles of dirty snow are lying about on street corners, like miniature landmarks. The afternoon light is merciless, revealing every aspect of the architectural mismatch: the clash of old and new, pre-war embellishment next to communist austerity next to post-modern minimal opulence, all held up together by a myriad of cables.

“What's with the wires?” Adam asks unable to take his eyes off the black threads weaving through the skyline.

“You didn't see them this morning? They're everywhere. TV, phone, Internet...All up there.” Peter points at an intricate web of cables. “It's like this since the 90s. The number kept growing and growing with all the cable companies that came out. We got used to looking at the sky through them, can't even tell they're there. If they take them down, I think we'll go blind,” he laughs. “Like those dogs, you know? With hair in their eyes.” He tugs at his fringe, but it's too short to even reach his eyebrows. “My aunt has one and she cut his hair. Poor dog doesn't come out from under the table anymore. Has to look through the table cloth to see.”

They exit the boulevard onto a narrow alley leading up to a tall, white mansion. The hundred year old architecture has been renovated; its façade still adorned with tacky Christmas lights. A glowing reindeer – just one of its antlers working – stands half-proud in front of the entrance.

“They’re gonna keep the Christmas lights till March,” Peter shakes his head as he pulls in the driveway. The car stops an inch away from sparkly Rudolph, making its working antler flicker.

“Here!” Peter opens the glove compartment and takes out a white card, the word *visitor* imprinted on it. Adam looks at the card then back at Peter, with what he suspects might be the insecurity of a first grader being dropped off by his parents on his first day of school. Not that he’s built too much of a connection with the driver, but he wouldn’t mind having some more of his local knowledge sprinkled throughout the meeting. At least until he can get a clear sense of whom he’s dealing with in there.

“You need this to get in,” Peter waves the card and points it towards the entrance. “I would take you, but they don’t let me go in.” He shrugs and gives a little whimper resembling that of a helpless dog: “I’m not allowed inside...”

Adam clears his throat, visibly shocked and livid.

“I’m joking,” Peter laughs: “You Americans, you believe everything,” He wipes a couple of laughter tears from the corner of his eye. “Go on!” He leans over to open the door for Adam. “I have to pick up something from the studio, but I’m coming back for you after the meeting.” He gives him the card which Adam takes reluctantly, as if it might grant him access into a mental institution, or worse yet, a prison. “Go, go!” Peter insists. “Holy moaște, remember?”

The stairs to the entrance are covered in sand which crunches underneath Adam's steps, like broken glass. He swipes the card twice before the door finally opens on the third attempt. Inside it smells like recently cleaned carpets and air freshener, something floral. Above the reception desk, big block plastic letters read *Radvertising* in red. A young woman welcomes Adam, taking off her oversized glasses to allow for a better view of her gaudy make-up, her eyelashes stuck together, burdened with mascara.

"Mr. Stan?" Adam nods. The woman stands up and steps from behind the reception desk, making her necklace bounce against her generous chest. "Welcome! May I take your coat?"

"Thanks." Adam hands her the coat without making eye contact. She's one head taller than him, courtesy of her very high high-heels. He's forced to stare at the floor, his stiff neck has barely loosened for him to look up, and looking ahead would easily constitute grounds for harassment.

"I'll take you to Iancu's office until the meeting starts."

"Thought I was already late..."

"Oh, no. You're early. Iancu wants to have a word with you before the meeting, but he's tied up at the moment." She clenches her fists as if to design the physical meaning of 'tied up'.

The secretary leads the way up the stairs, every step offering a hypnotizing sway of her posterior. Framed awards are crammed up on the

wall in an ostentatious mosaic, making it impossible to see the color of the paint. No Clios, though.

“Iancu said you can wait for him in here,” she offers in a mysterious tone and opens a door, letting Adam in, then quickly closes it behind him.

Adam doesn’t mind getting the extra time to himself, but it feels a bit like he’s being quarantined. The room has an opulent playground vibe, pretty far from a grown-up’s office – typical for a creative, but forcefully screaming out ‘I play hard’: an eclectic collection of beanbags instead of chairs, a foosball table next to the desk, a dart board on one wall, a flat screen TV on the opposite one, Wii consoles neatly displayed on top of a small table in the middle of the room. Adam picks a less ornate beanbag to sit on – no ears sticking out of it, no tail, and no Superman logo, just plain, dark blue.

As he’s trying to make sense of the pattern on the carpet – whether it has dollar signs on it, or just a cross between the letters *I* and *S* – the door cracks open behind him: “Bună ziua,” an intriguingly hoarse, female voice startles Adam. A slender woman, shy of thirty, is standing in the doorway.

Adam stands up: “I’m sorry, I’m not Ian–”

She waves her hand for him to sit down and closes the door behind her: “I know you’re not Iancu.” She walks in like she owns the place, heads for the desk, makes room on top of it and sits up crossing her

legs. Her attire is the antithesis of the woman at reception: sneakers, jeans and a white t-shirt. Her short haircut perfectly framing her jawbone, gives her a vintage look. She's got the type of face that makes make-up redundant: clear, porcelain-like skin and naturally red lips.

"Iancu is running late..." She picks at a thread sticking out of the bottom of her t-shirt and twists it into a knot. "Or maybe he's watching you from the other room...Some sort of power play. Who knows?" She pulls up the rebel fiber and tears it out. "I'm here to keep you company, make sure you don't run away." She holds out a steady hand with long, bony fingers and wraps them around Adam's. "Cristina." Strong, firm handshake.

"Adam." Make sure he doesn't run away? Where the fuck is the man Adam came here to work for? Wasn't he waiting for him like the holy whatever? Power play? Is this some sort of test? Who is this girl? And why does she keep staring at him like he's from another planet? There is no reason whatsoever to feel testy, none aside from all the reasons dictated by Adam's easily blooming paranoia. But by the way this Cristina is studying him, he's pretty much entitled to feel like he's on display at a human menagerie.

"So you're the American," she concludes after having measured him with her brown-or-is-it-green eyes, from the end of his hairs to the soles of his boots.

"I am an American. And you—"

“I should be so lucky. Been playing the visa lottery for years and nothing,” she lets out a theatrical sigh. “I’m Romanian. Hope that’s OK—”

“We are in Romania; you’re not exactly striking the wrong note...” Adam rubs the side of his neck, hoping that the pain will diminish and he’ll be able to hold her stare. He forces himself to look up: “What I was going to ask if you’d’ve let me finish, was, no offense, but who are you?”

“Didn’t you pay attention? I’m Cristina. We shook hands like a minute ago.”

“Who are you as in what do you do? Aside from making sure the American won’t run away.”

“I’m the agency’s...How should I say...” She jumps off the table, takes a step towards Adam and lets her body drop over the Superman pillow next to him, crushing the S with her ass to make herself comfortable. “Do-all?”

The closeness enables Adam to feel her scent – an intriguing mixture of musk and fruity bubble gum or candy, plus a faint trace of tobacco. He holds his neck with his hand and lets his stare travel up and down her body, happy to payback her sass with some awkwardness of his own.

“So like a Jack of all trades,” he tries hard to sound as slimy as possible.

“Cristina of all trades. But enough about me, please. You are far more interesting. I mean, you must have asked yourself a million times by

now. Why the hell would they bring you, an American, to direct a Romanian testimonial? For a Romanian audience. In fucking Romanian.”

Adam has asked himself the same questions – in a less vile language – and they didn’t sound as drastic in his mind.

“Lack of Romanian directors, I guess.”

“You tell yourself that, American. But if you already took the time to come over to this side of the world, maybe you can take the time to look a bit underneath the surface. You know, think for yourself,” She taps her temple with two fingers, “As opposed to just believe everything they tell you,” she emphasizes the word *they* and looks around the room as if to design an invisible, maleficent force. The conspiracy theory plague has spread all the way to Romania.

“Is that sarcasm? Your accent threw me off a bit.”

“Sorry,” Cristina speaks out in a heavy, ear scratching accent. “Yes, it was. Sarcasm,” she pronounces the word in Romanian.

“Are you supposed to be testing my patience? To see if I can cope on set?” Adam crosses his arms over his chest.

Cristina does the same: “Don’t get defensive. I’m not interested in your patience. I’m testing your intelligence. See if you’ve done your homework. I hate to break it to you, but the only reason why they got you was because no Romanian would agree to smear their reputation with this campaign. Whereas an American is oblivious by definition. United States

of Oblivion. Bet you didn't even notice there are people out on the street protesting."

"You mean the people at Universitate?"

"So you're not that oblivious," Cristina nods. "But you probably have no clue that what you are about to direct will help promote what they are protesting against." Her phone starts ringing, but she ignores it and carries on talking: "This ad might make the project look like the mother of opportunities, with jobs, and mountains of gold, and money. Sure. But that's just the glitter. It's all poison underneath. Cyanide. But you wouldn't know that, would you? You're probably here for the money. What do you care about the destruction that comes with this gold mine? I bet you have Coke for breakfast, thinking it's holy water. Or worse, Diet Coke."

If this is a test Adam is not sure how he's supposed to respond. He has done plenty of homework, read all the material that has been sent to him and nothing sprang to mind. Cyanide? Poison? Protests? The brief talked about an enormously lucrative mining project in a still, somewhat underdeveloped country. Perhaps this girl is just trying to intimidate him, so he can lower his expectations of being remunerated?

"I'm not sure I follow."

"That's because of your American leader mentality. You might want to look into things before you make an informed decision. It's not just about directing something then going back to living your American

life. There are consequences to what you'll be doing." Her phone starts ringing again; she takes it out and rushes towards the door. "It was nice meeting you, though. Hope you'll enjoy your stay here."

Adam's mouth is sticky as if it's been stuffed with glue. A strange sense of shame covered guilt creeps up on him. He can feel his face on the verge of turning red; his body is giving out minor sweat signs. Who does she think she is? An intern at a Romanian agency lecturing him on being aware?

"Adam Stan?" A tall, robust man walks in the office. He's wearing a light pink salmon shirt, its lower buttons visibly struggling to contain a plenteous beer belly. By the look of his receding hairline he's in his late fifties, his face, however, devoid of wrinkles, testifies to him being younger.

"Mr. Iancu?" Adam stands up and brushes his hands on his thighs to eliminate any signs of embarrassing sweat.

"Iancu, please." The man nods and offers an inscrutable smile: "Great pronunciation, though. Glad to finally meet you." Iancu shakes Adam's hand. "Would you like a drink? I have all the good American ones, make you feel like home," he boasts as he opens the drinks cabinet. It's got the full range of Coca Cola soft drinks and a couple of half-full whisky bottles.

"Water, thanks."

He throws Adam a bottle, grabs a can of Sprite for himself then sinks into the S pillow. He taps the one next to him – for Adam to sit – the way one invites a dog to sit on the sofa. The tin vibrates as Iancu pops open his can.

“I’m glad you took our offer. We need fresh heads. This is a very important account. We’re going to make history with this ad,” he grins showing off his perfectly aligned, but somewhat yellow teeth.

Adam wouldn’t mind getting more details on the kind of history Iancu has in mind. He can come up with so many examples of severely disturbing history.

“You may wonder why I chose you,” Iancu offers and proceeds to study the can in his hand like he’s talking to and about it. “I’ve asked myself the same question and let me tell you, it was not an easy decision. After all, you are a director who doesn’t have a lot of experience, but I saw something in you. Something that fits with this campaign.” He sets the can on the floor and interlocks his fingers. “Despite any obvious signs of concern. You know, the lack of expe–”

“Surely the protests are of a bigger concern,” Adam throws in calmly as if he’s known about their connection to the campaign for months.

“The protests, of course.” Iancu is visibly surprised, licks his lips to conceal a conspicuous moue. “Let me clear that up.” He takes a sip of Sprite and lingers on the taste as if he’s trying to make sure it is authentic.

“Romania is a poor country. A country that has to work really hard to get where EU wants it to be. And this project is money in the bag.” He taps his pocket. “But some people don’t see it that way, they’re against progress. They can’t reason, they just get emotional. It’s a Balkan curse, this emotion, we just feel too much.” He touches his chest with both hands as if to demonstrate the challenge of carrying an oversized heart.

Daylight outside fades away, being replaced by the twinkling and blinking of more Christmas lights wrapped around Iancu’s windows – red, green and golden.

“So the protests are the concerns–”

“You’re in the land of concerns, my friend! I am Romanian,” Iancu proclaims, his double chin wiggles along. “Born and bred. And I love this land just as much as the next Romanian. Unlike many Romanians, I’m still here. Haven’t left. Where do you think the letter R comes from? The one in my agency name...” Adam can think of so many words that start with R, Romania is not one of them. “I want to make this a better place,” Iancu follows up with satisfaction. “By better I mean richer. With the money that this project brings in, there’s an opportunity for better roads, they’re adding to the infrastructure, better everything, you know? Just, better. Money for me...” He pauses and uses his right hand to indicate himself, his left one pointing towards Adam: “Money for you, and ultimately money for this country.” He lets his hands drop.

Adam can't help but picture the country as a person. It would most likely be a she, dressed in plain clothes, an apron tied around her waist and maybe a scarf around her head. Pious. Modest. Unable to speak for herself.

"What about the cyanide?" Adam is determined to prove that he's learned everything there is to know about the mining project.

"What about it?"

"Isn't that what the protests are—"

The phone on Iancu's desk starts bleeping; he turns his head to it revealing the back of a thick, wide neck. He presses a button and silences the ringer.

"They can protest all they want." Iancu turns back to Adam, his weight sinking back in the pillow as if it's quicksand. "The cyanide thing, it's been approved and over-approved by specialists. There's absolutely nothing to worry about." He forces himself forward and brushes Adam's knee with the tip of his fingers. "Like nothing. Listen to me..." He pauses as if trying to remember Adam's name.

"Adam."

"Adam," Iancu nods. "These people want to hold things up mainly for political reasons."

"Thought you said emotional."

"That too." Iancu stands up and sets the can victoriously on a coaster on top of the desk. "I respect young people who want to protect

something, you know, something Romanian.” He looks around the room for a symbol of his country, but there is none, other than himself. “I’ve been there, there’s always this generation ready to die for what they believe in. But what they’re missing are facts. Real, crude facts.” He weighs the real and crude in each hand as if they’re notions burdened by heavy meaning. Adam is waiting for the facts.

“The main fact is that for the good of this country, this project is...” Iancu pauses for impact: “Literally a fucking gold mine!”

A knock on the door cuts Iancu’s spiel short. The receptionist sticks her head through the door: “Mă scuzați, vă așteaptă.”

“Venim acum.” Iancu turns to Adam: “Let’s go meet the team you’ll be working with.” He takes Adam’s hand as if to engage him in an arm wrestle, and looks him dead in the eye: “I’m taking a chance on you, don’t let me down. We’re in this together now.” He pulls Adam up: “Come on!”

Iancu leads the way, making it clear that everything from the entirety of the corridor to the strategy and the campaign belongs to him.

He turns to Adam: “How’s the hotel?”

“Hotel is great, thank you.”

“Bucharest is...Special...Lots of expats live here like Gods! Can you blame them? English is a currency worth more than money!” He chuckles and elbows Adam, guiding him inside the conference room.

Iancu stays behind to talk to the secretary. Adam walks inside the empty room, a long table in the middle, surrounded by chairs. The opulence of Iancu's office is contrasted by the simple setting of the meeting room. A whiteboard covers up one wall, Roşia Montană written in red permanent marker over the top side, a glittering star crosses the *i*. Underneath the writing, big posters showing mock-ups of the village are stuck at various degrees: drawings of shiny houses, very much resembling to those in Sims, advocating the potential of the mining project.

Iancu walks in followed by his team, two women and a man.

"This is Monica," Iancu pushes one of the women forward, her tight pencil skirt forcing her to take three steps instead of one. "She's one of my client service girls, the business stamina of this place. It was her hard work that helped win the golden pitch."

Monica lets out a coy giggle and greets Adam, holding out her hand as if she's expecting it to be kissed. Adam gives it a short shake: "Charmed," he says and abstains from laughing at the sound of the word that just came out of his mouth – he doesn't remember ever using it before now.

"I'm really pleased you will be working with us," Monica proceeds to praise Adam. "Who better to understand the value of this campaign than an American." Does she mean a literal, monetary value or indeed a moral, metaphorical one? Hard to say.

“This is our art director, Andrei,” Iancu goes on with the introductions. “He will be filming as well; he’ll be your director of photography. If you want my advice,” Iancu steps between Andrei and Adam preventing them from shaking hands. “Try to keep him on a short leash, because sometimes he likes to get too creative, if you know what I mean...” He moves to the side, leaving Andrei to cover up the unmistakable humiliation with an awkward smile, one that complements his chunk of black frizzy hair that’s sticking out from under his red Starter cap. He gives Adam a sincerely warm handshake and opens his mouth to speak.

“And...” Iancu prevents Andrei from even attempting to defend himself and pushes forward the next in line: “This is Laura. She’s your own personal assistant. She’ll be translating for you in case you get stuck with all the Romanian.”

The short, preppy looking Laura takes hold of Adam’s hand as if she has no intention of ever letting go: “So happy to be working with you. I will be your shadow,” she blurts out in a swift, manic tone, making the statement sound threatening rather than consoling. “Romanian can be very difficult, but don’t worry, I will explain everything. By the end of the shoot you’ll be practically Romanian,” she concludes and looks at Iancu like a circus animal awaiting their reward. Her boss gives an approving nod and invites everyone to take a seat.

“I know most of you would have rather spent the week on the slope,” Iancu speaks up from the head of the table. “But this is one of the most, if not *the* most, important project we’ve ever had. We have an American director, Mr. Adam Stan. Sounds Romanian, right?” A buzz goes around the room, the girls in the team venturing guesses.

“He’s not,” Iancu settles it. “We conduct most of our meetings in English anyway – house rule.” He looks at Adam and belts out with pride: “For me it’s very important to be international. We had a Spanish girl working for us and last week I just hired a French art director. I like to keep it mixed.” He rubs his puffy hands together, giving a slightly perverse meaning to the notion of mixed.

Monica goes through the schedule for Monday’s shoot. Her tone excited and cheerful as if she’s announcing the end of all human plights:

“The actor will be brought to Bucharest on Monday. I am happy to say that we have found the best, best cast for –”

Iancu interrupts her and offers to Adam: “This is a real person, not an actor. Someone from Roșia Montană. We’ve managed to find a nice woman who really believes in this project. She supports it with all her heart.” He looks up around the table. “Remember what we discussed. No emotions, please. No personal judgment. We won this and we’re going to sell it, that’s what we do. We don’t question it.” Iancu locks eyes with people around the room. “If you have any concerns, now is the time to

address them. I'm sure there aren't. After today, I want you to go home, and sleep it off--"

"Sleep on it," Adam whispers towards Iancu discreetly.

"Of course they're gonna sleep on it," Iancu belts out. "How else are they gonna sleep, under?" He looks at Adam's assistant-translator for help. Her face is eager to please, but she doesn't come up with anything aside from a couple of nods. Adam wonders where Cristina is and whether she would be just as slick in standing up to Iancu as she was to him.

"Are we still concerned about the ethics problem?" Monica is happy to intervene.

Iancu frowns, giving her a why-the-hell-did-you-have-to-bring-that-up look, almost bringing tears to her eyes.

"We'll be safe. Journalism killed ethics long before it reached advertising," Iancu laughs inviting an all-around laugh from his team -- they all comply, some of the laughs less convincing than others, particularly Andrei's who looks like someone's taken hold of his body, squeezing painful laughter out of him. "There is the rational side and the populist side," Iancu announces. "The good news is we aren't on none of them." Adam feels the urge to call him out on the double negation, but he's more interested in what's coming, seeing as Iancu leans back in his chair and starts to tap his fingers on his ribcage as if he's playing an

accordion: “We...” He pauses to make eye contact with everyone at the table, “Are on the business side.”

Some Romanian words are the same as their English equivalents in both spelling and meaning – sign of some hybrid sisterhood between languages – like *rest* (with the meaning of *remainder*, *residue*) or *sarcasm*. Their pronunciation, however, is anything but related; English elegantly swerves past the ear scratching inflections while Romanian cuts straight through, its consonants refusing to renounce their right of being fully articulated.

“What side are you on?” Dad’s face freezes on the desktop as the Skype connection breaks down.

“Dad, are you there?”

“Yeah,” the voice carries on, words rendered in a slow, interrupted flow, as if uttered by an android: “Can...you...hear...me?”

“Yeah. I’m not taking sides at the moment. I’m not even sure what to make of it all.” Adam studies the freeze frame, his dad’s open mouth looks like it’s about to perform a scream of horror.

“Listen,” Dad’s voice urges. “They’re paying you to direct. That’s what you’re going to do. It’s not for you to think about any consequences unless they affect you directly. You just do a good job and come back a credited director!” The word director breaks through the laptop speakers, overcharged with unjustified pride and a heavy Romanian accent. “Tell me, they were impressed with you?” The question sounds more like a statement.

“The driver said something funny on the way to the meeting yesterday. That they’re waiting for me like the ‘holy moaşte’.” Adam can hear his mom’s shy laughter behind the still broken picture.

“Of course they are,” Dad belts out. “They’re probably amateurs.”

“Don’t say that,” Adam’s mom intervenes, showing up on the screen as the image connection is resuscitated.

“Hi, Mom!”

“Well are they amateurs?” Dad insists.

Adam shrugs. “I mean, during the meeting there was a vibe of uncertainty. But it probably has to do with these protests. It seems to be quite a—”

“I’m sure there is nothing to worry about. We haven’t heard anything yet. If it’s not reached American news it’s not happening,” Dad concludes.

“What about the city?” Mom sneaks in a question of her own. “What does it look like? Did you remember any—”

Dad grunts and starts coughing. He’s visibly displeased with the subject, Mom’s questions and her encouraging tone.

“So many things coming back from when I was a kid,” Adam replies with genuine emotion. “It’s a bit unsettling...” He gazes past the screen as if it’s made of see-through glass; his memory conjures up the figure of the intern girl. “I met this girl at the agency today, Cristina—”

“You should look for an American to hang out with. There must be some in the hotel, I’m sure!” Dad’s face takes over the screen. “Don’t waste your time with Romanians. It’s not like you’ll see them again. Has Karen called you? Did you talk to her?”

Adam ignores his father's questions – something he wouldn't even dare to contemplate doing back home – prompted by the virtual context, his abstract presence, the poor Skype connection. Truth is he hasn't given any thought to Karen and their relationship or better yet lack-there-of – not one single thought until now when Dad's brought her up. That's gotta count for something. Is there anything left to even think about?

“She called the house,” Dad carries on with conviction as if he's delivering the answer to Adam's unspoken question. “She's a nice girl. I like her. Adam? Is this still on? Can you hear—”

Both audio and video fail to Adam's relief who clicks the *Sign Out* button. There's too much long distance distraction interfering with his trip. After all this is *his* trip. Not Dad's or Karen's. He rolls out of the duvet and out of bed and walks over to the window. Outside, mismatched streetlights start to blink anticipating the first signs of dusk fall. The evening claims its rights over the city, making winter feel less grim, but somehow colder. A few cars await the green light, dispersing smog in the form of supple anorexic clouds. People are still scattered on the sidewalk, holding up signs. Adam lets the curtain slide back just as his phone lights up on the night stand.

New message:

Karen:

Been thinking about us. Lots. When are you back? What's it like?

Would I like it? XO

His thumbs hover above the touch screen as if awaiting permission, then start kissing the keys: *Why did you call my BACKSPACE Why can't you BACKSPACE You would, rabid dogs everywhere BACKSPACE There's a New Revolution, I've been taken host BACKSPACE*. Adam locks the phone and lets it drop back on the nightstand.

He reclines on the bed and turns on the TV. A news bulletin on the national channel is hosted by a middle-aged anchor woman who looks bitterly resigned, like a Hollywood wife cheated out of her divorce settlement. She talks about the protests, links them to the healthcare system. Adam has trouble following, her intonation is flat making all the words sound the same. He switches to the next channel where an effervescent anchorman belts out his opinions, something about the opposition and the people's cause, the word *circus* repeated in various intonations.

Adam takes a shower and calls room service for a coffee, a sandwich and today's papers. On the front page of Jurnalul Național, tens of slogans from the protests are lined up for him to decipher. Not all words make sense: most of them look like faces of an old family photo – familiar only by context. Out of the multitude of words, two stick out, blurring all the other letters that surround them: Roșia Montană. This gold mountain seems to generate reaction all on its own. Adam hasn't even started work yet, and he's already surrounded by it. Could Dad be right,

though? The significance of these protests, void, simply because the news hasn't made it back home...They seem pretty significant to the people freezing outside the window right this very instant. Why is Dad dismissing everything related to Romania? As if an entire country and its people don't exist. It's like he's saying that Adam himself doesn't exist, just because he's here and not there. Here...There's nothing wrong with taking a closer look at *here*.

Adam goes down to the hotel bar where he's welcomed by soft piano harmonies that seem to be coming out of nowhere. No piano man in sight and certainly no piano. He looks up, but can't make out the source of the sound, as if the walls themselves are singing.

The glass wall at the opposite end of the bar pulls Adam towards it, hypnotizing him with a bustling view. A few hundred people are still shouting, holding up their signs. He watches a couple passing a cigarette back and forth while holding up a sign that reads: *1989 revoluție, 2012 evoluție*. A dystopian scenario where the angry world has been locked out for the viewing pleasure of a very select, drunken few.

Adam makes his way back to the bar, behind which a short guy in his 20s, sporting a pair of authentic 60s sideburns, looks bored and sleepy. He confirms with a yawn he half-covers with the back of his hand. The bartender pulls out a cloth from under the cash register and starts to wipe the surface of the bar, which is already spotless, mirroring the two matching candelabras hanging from the ceiling. The bar is empty aside

from a middle-aged couple tucked in one corner, who seem to be playing footsie under the table, ‘affair’ written all over their faces. The only other customer is sitting at the opposite end of the bar. Doesn’t look like the friendly type: late thirties, shaved head, quite possibly a skinhead if removed from the 5 star hotel bar context.

Adam takes a seat and orders a whisky sour. The bartender’s face is prone to frowning. From across the bar, shaved-head looks at his shiny watch then back at Adam, twisting his head the way dogs do when addressed by humans. Adam quickly looks away, just as the bartender places the drink in front of him together with a robotic smile. Adam takes a generous sip and by the time he sets down the drink, the skinhead has left his side of the bar and is now sitting next to him. The man is wearing enough cologne to conjure up winter bees – the cheap, extra smelly kind that would kill the poor insects from a mile away.

“You’re late.” He shoves his watch in Adam’s face – big shiny Rolex, two x’s, as fake as his gangster grimace. Adam pulls back his head, offering a constipated smile.

“I don’t like to wait.” The guy drops his beer glass on the bar with a calculated bang and sits down next to Adam. Their knees touch. He’s got a firm, pointy kneecap that might easily pass for a concealed, cold weapon.

“Is this some sort of prank?” Adam pictures Cristina, the ballsy intern laughing in a corner. “Someone back at the agency–”

“Enough talk!” His accent is very strong, not necessarily Romanian. Hard to tell. “You said you meet me here at 6. It’s 6:30. What is this? I watch you. You come in, see me, pretend I’m not here, go look at the window and *then* you order the drink like we agree. 15 minutes late after you already come 15 minutes late.”

Adam tries to push back his chair, but it’s like their knees have been grafted. Perfuman moves along with him.

“Look, I don’t know what this is...” Adam looks around in a slight panic and raises his voice, hoping that someone might hear him: “I’m not who you think—”

“Shhh!” Perfuman puts his hand on Adam’s shoulder: “Don’t play games with me. You wanna play games you go to America. Here it’s my way.”

“OK. This has been fun,” Adam shakes off his hand, “But I am not the person you think I am.”

“Who are you?” The inflexion in his voice makes the question seem philosophical, despite the overtly physical language of his body: he draws even closer to inspect Adam’s face, making his breath equally felt and heard. His scent just got stronger, properly menacing, as if he’s sprayed and drunk the damn thing. It makes Adam feel like he’s about to throw up. The guy stretches his hand towards Adam’s collar, announcing an intention of abuse, but then the palm freezes in mid-air.

A tall blond guy with the face of a late bloomer geek, glasses and all, is standing between them, holding Perfuman's threatening hand, offering a generous, all-encompassing smile in return. He's wearing a leather jacket, the smell of which is very much a breath of fresh air. His red, frozen nose contrasts with an otherwise white face – clownish, but kind. The man's blatant middle-aged appearance instills a sense of calm and hope in Perfuman, respectively Adam.

“Heeeey. Sorry I'm late, man. I'm such a dick.” The newcomer unzips his jacket and removes his glasses to wipe off the steam. He's big and loud and as American as they come: “I'm fuckin' sorry!” He puts on his glasses and looks at Perfuman: “Your fuckin' taxi drivers, man...They're killin' me! Like, I know exactly what route they should take, tell 'em and they agree to it, then lie to my fucking face. Like I can't tell the difference between Magheru and Splai,” he pronounces the street names as if he's trying to speak with a giant plum stuck in his mouth.

He turns to Adam and gives him an over-friendly pat on the back:

“Hey buddy, thanks for covering for me.” He picks up Adam's drink. Smells it and takes a sip: “Whisky sour, good choice.” He nods, then offers to Perfuman: “This is my friend...Jack.” He pushes Adam forward, who feels like he's been sucked into a bad farce.

Perfuman's confidence seems to have somewhat dissipated: he's looking at Adam, then at the newcomer, then back at Adam: “Jack and what?”

“What do you mean and what? Jack, my friend—”

“Do you have a family name?” Perfuman frowns at Adam.

“Come on, man, do you know all your friends’ last names? Listen, I’m really, really sorry I’m late. For this mix up too, but I’m here now. Ready for business.” The American takes another sip of Adam’s drink, to build up confidence for his readiness.

Perfuman’s frown relaxes. A bit, “I knew it couldn’t be you. Corina said you’re old and fat. And he...” Pauses to point at Adam, “He’s young and hip.”

“Yeah, what can I say? That’s us!” The ‘friend’ elbows Adam and encourages him to nod.

“But he’s your friend, Jack? You know him, yeah?” Perfuman is determined to make absolutely sure he’s got it.

“Yeah, yeah, of course,” the American mumbles and shifts on the spot. “Me and Jacko go back a long way.”

“Back where?” The gangster glare resurfaces.

“Back in the day...Ain’t that right buddy?” He gives Adam’s shoulder a pleading squeeze.

“Yeah...I mean...Yeah.”

Perfuman stands up, releasing Adam’s knee, “OK. Let’s do this. Follow me!”

Adam doesn’t move.

“Both of you,” Perfuman insists.

“Where are we going?” Adam gives ‘his friend’ and inquisitive brow.

“To the little boys room,” offers the American along with a smile probably meant to be reassuring, but manages to have the opposite effect.

“I have a phobia of public toilets.” Adam looks at the bartender for help, but the man is engaged in a very self-absorbing toothpick trick.

“Come on, Jacky, these are 5 star toilets, man!” His back-in-the-day friend gently forces Adam to stand up.

The walk to the toilet is short – ten steps tops – yet long enough for Adam’s mind to conjure up whole series of suspicious scenarios ranging from dark to outright fatal. Like he’s gonna get robbed. Beaten. Kidnapped? Have his head shoved in a toilet. Water flushed all over his face, running up his nostrils; disinfectant burning his eyes. Death by drowning in Romanian toilet water...

As his panic intensifies, Adam is pushed inside the toilet. The door closes behind him shutting out any sign of escape. He clenches his jaw and fists, determined to defend himself against pretty much nothing: the two have left him standing by the door as they cautiously check the cubicles. Adam could and should walk out the door, but his feet fail to listen to his intention.

“Empty!” Perfuman hands a packet of squares to the friend who in return slips money in his pocket.

“Sweet!” The American nods at Adam as if he’s the one selling him the product.

“You go now. Don’t wait around the hotel,” Perfuman says and looks at his own reflection in the mirror, scratching his non-existent beard. “I’m meeting someone in the bar. When I come out, I don’t want to see you there.”

Adam is led out of the toilet, American clutched to his arm.

“Brother,” he whispers as they reach the bar, “I don’t know who you are most of the time, but tonight you’re my guardian angel.”

The praise falls flat with Adam who grabs his coat and heads for the elevator. The American takes hold of Adam’s shoulder:

“Where are you going?”

“To my room?”

Adam has had enough taste of Bucharest nightlife for one night. He reaches for the elevator button, but the American covers it with his hand.

“Listen. I’m trying to be your friend. What the fuck? We’re both Americans in a foreign land. Trust me. You don’t want him,” He winks in the direction of the bar, “To know you’re a guest here. That’s too much information...”

Adam pauses to analyze the word information with its various connotations, how each one could serve Perfuman and to what purpose.

“Listen, man,” whispers the American, all homey and mellow like the voiceover of a Thanksgiving ad: “I know we just met, but not really. Say you go up to your room without him noticing, and you go about your business as if none of this happened. Wouldn’t it have been for nothing? Come on, give me a chance to introduce myself.” He takes his hand off the elevator button and clears his throat. “Show me an American on his own and I’ll show you a target. Show me two Americans and I give you the life and soul of the party,” he concludes with a self-congratulatory smile.

Adam looks at their reflection on the elevator doors and can’t help wondering who’s what: the American the soul, Adam the life?

“Come on, let’s get out before he sees us. Trust me!” He holds out a puffy hand making Adam think of the Care Bears – trustworthy enough. It’s soft and tender, its shake reassuring: “Mike.”

Adam’s impulse to call it a night quickly fades under the spell of the American brotherhood speech, delivered by a man with the same American name as Dad’s.

“Adam.” He decides to go with the American flow and puts on his coat, following Mike towards the exit.

“You just saved my life back there,” Mike says as they walk out of the hotel. “If it weren’t for you, he would have left and I’d be out of weed for the next couple of weeks. These are tough times.” He points towards the National Theatre where the murmur of the masses is

adamantly fighting the cold. “This is a nation on the cusp of revolution. You want to be cozy and well stoned to experience it.”

“Glad to be of service.” Adam wouldn’t mind being cozy and stoned.

“I take care of the people who take care of me. Leave no man behind.” Mike lights up a cigarette and starts to walk, his bandy legs make up a generous parenthesis. “Here, smell this.” He hands Adam a small tinfoil pack – the odor is so strong that it pinches his nostrils. “Why’d you think he was wearing so much cologne? Don’t tell me you don’t want a hit of that. Where you from?”

“San Francisco.”

“I used to live on the West Coast back in the 80s, we’re practically brothers you and I. Come on, the night is young, and so are the ladies. Is this your first time to Romania? I don’t recognize you. Not that I know every American in Bucharest...But as far as the expat scene goes...” He uses his plushy fingers to quote *expat scene*. “We’re a memorable bunch and yours is a face I’ve not seen.”

“First time,” Adam says and looks at a weak streetlight casting its indigo shade on the snow-coated sidewalk.

“You’re in for a treat. I’m practically a local, my wife’s Romanian. Got our own small enterprise up and running. You here on business?”

“Mhm.”

“This way!” Mike crosses the street as a car swerves past him – a curse follows which he waves off with his hand. “Gotta know your exits as they say in heist movies,” he grins at Adam. “This here is the American Embassy. Don’t know how long you’re here for, but better remember where home is!”

Adam stops in front of the guarded fence. Dark twisted bars shield a white villa standing proud on top of battered snow. The roof may be covered in white, but Adam knows better. It’s dark green underneath. He queued here at least three times with his mom. It was their top destination the summer he came back from the mountains. He remembers the scorching heat, his mother using their papers as a fan, the old lady behind them, her dog breathing heavily, its tongue out, almost touching the asphalt. Adam had asked her if the dog was going to the States too and if he had a passport.

A guard dressed in black makes his way towards the fence; his feet crushing the snow remind Adam of the hammers in The Wall video. The sentry readjusts the gun on his shoulder, eager to show it off. Mike pulls Adam away: “No need to attract attention now. But if you get in trouble, call in. They’ve got your ass covered.”

“What trouble?”

“Never underestimate this place, man. Always second guess it. You’re an easy target. American, don’t speak the language. I’ve had my ass kicked a couple of times here,” he says and takes out his phone to read

a text. “Finally,” he declares: “Meeting my friends, two streets from here.” He slips the phone back inside his pocket and rubs his hands together.

“So what’s the deal with the protests?” Adam asks as they pass by a couple of dogs huddled over the same drain hole, as if they’re a hybrid animal with five legs and two heads. One head raises above the mass of fur, its ear pierced with a green tag – the castration ID. The dog looks up and gives Adam’s shadow a short sniff.

“Hard to grasp even for me, you know? Some sort of distraction I guess, the political scene here is a fucking mess. My wife teaches Romanian back home, so I understand a bit of Romanian, but not enough to follow what they say on the news. They talk too fast.”

“Think it’s a new revolution?”

“Nah, man, they don’t have it in them. I’ve never seen so much lack of unity...” Mike stops to kick a piece of ice with his foot, making it slide under a parked car. “Been talking about it with my Romanian friends. Speaking of Romanians, you gotta get a piece of the action here. I mean, you have to. These chicks dig Americans like their ancestors dug for gold. You feel me?” He lights up another cigarette.

“I mean, don't get me wrong, the place is a fucking dump if you ask any of them – Romanians that is. But I love it here!” Mike carries on, blowing out smoke. “It’s like America in the 70s, back when I was a kid faced with the sky high waves of possibility. As much as I like it back

home, I'm way better off here. I feel safe, you know? I've spent over twenty years of my life on a continuous work-no-play rollercoaster. Do you know I'd never taken a vacation? Like ever? Not before I came here. Time stops here somehow. Days go by here too, at the same speed, but they don't seem to weigh as much."

Adam is starting to feel the cold. Tiny needles claim the tip of his toes and he can no longer feel his cheeks.

"How long have you been here for?"

"Dunno, over five years. I come and go. But I always come back. You cold? It's freezing!" Mike holds up the lit cigarette and puts his fingers close to the orange flicker.

"Yeah, it's no San Francisco winter."

"It's like punishment, man. Like nature is punishing people."

They pass by another statue of Caragiale. Adam stops to make sure it is of him. A street lamp aimed straight at his trilby makes the brim glow above his forehead like an oversized halo.

"He was a politician," Mike says with exhaustive confidence. "President."

Playwright, but close. Actually, pretty fucking far from close, but Adam abstains from correcting him. No need to blow his cover, keep his American identity intact while holding the Romanian upper hand.

"We'll be warm soon." Mike points to a red light marking a crossroad in the distance. "Meeting my friends over there. So what's your

thing? Help a brother out. Women? Booze? Gear? I can hook you up, just say the word.”

The Romanian word for *word* is *cuvânt* – literal translation: *with-*
wind.

The car is parked in front of a shop the sign of which reads *Farmacie* in a 50s curvy font. It's too dark to tell how many people are inside as the only light on the street aims at the shop front. An ambulance siren echoes in the distance, followed by dog howls which quickly turn into fading-out barks.

"You're late!" A woman's voice makes its way out of the half-open window, along with a vague smell of cherry flavored tobacco. "Did you walk on your knees?"

"Dealer drama." Mike's chunky fingers cling to the door like a leech to wet skin: "Let us in."

"Who's this?"

"He's with me." Mike gives the handle a couple of neurotic pulls: "Unlock, please?"

"Looks like an undercover."

"Relax. He's American, OK?" Mike nudges Adam forward: "His name is—"

"Adam?" The car window rolls down completely and a dark haired head leans into view, catching a faint ray of light, enough for Adam to make out her features – the cheeky intern.

“You two know each other?” Mike takes a step back and looks at them puzzled.

“Cristina of all trades,” Adam says, trying to conceal his surprise.

“What trades?” Mike pushes him aside. “You know Christine? She’s quite the bitch at first but she’ll grow on you—”

“Like herpes on an unprotected penis! And it’s Cristina, not Christine, you—”

“Jesus woman, let us in! It’s freezing!”

Cristina finally unlocks the doors; Mike gets in the back followed by Adam. They have to make room by removing a coat and some newspapers, a water bottle, a half-full plastic shopping bag, a purse and a teddy bear. Adam quickly sinks into the space he’s managed to free up, thankful for the wave of warm air rubbing against his ankles. He can almost feel his feet again – his toes begin to sting, tingling back to life.

Cristina maneuvers the steering wheel with one hand and drives off, the silver cross hanging from the mirror sets its Jesus into a hypnotic pirouette.

“So you two know each other?” Mike asks Adam. “How come? You told me you just arrived.”

“We met at the agency,” Cristina explains. “He’s a great, how do you say, ass...et?” She asks in an innocent voice. “They brought him from America to work on a very important campaign. How did you meet him, Mike?”

“Man saved my life. If it wasn’t for him we’d be smoking dip shit tonight. Dealer thought he was me,” Mike laughs.

“Didn’t see you at the meeting today,” Adam says, grabbing Cristina’s head-rest.

“What did I miss?”

“A great speech. You would have loved it, I’m sure.”

“Are you being sarcastic? Can’t really tell with your accent.”

“Where’s Tick?” Mike asks Cristina, his question seems to tone down her sneer.

“He’s waiting for us at Bar One. We should’ve been there like an hour ago.”

“Uh, he’s gonna be mad...But he’ll get over it. We got plenty of gear to make up for being late!” Mike taps his chest pocket with confidence.

“Hope I’m not ruining your plans, but is there any chance you could drop me off at the hotel?”

“You have plans?” Cristina turns to Adam as she stops at a red light.

“The girls from the agency...” he pauses then delivers in a flawless Romanian accent: “Laura and Monica said they would like to take me out.”

“No, no, no.” Cristina honks at the car in front as the light turns to green. “They’re boring. You don’t want to hang out with them. They’re

probably taking you to some shitty expat bar. Mike can tell you all about it. If you stick with us you can get a taste of the real Romanian experience.”

“That sounds a little unsettling. Does it involve vampires?”

“No man, that’s a myth!” Mike is happy to clear things up for his fellow American.

Cristina parks the car on a dark and narrow alley: “I’ll go get Tick, you can wait in the car.”

“I want to show Adam the place!” Mike pushes him out of the car, in front of a vertical sign reading Bar One. “You gotta hang out with us, man. See what the locals are all about,” he accentuates the word *locals* as if they’re about to go cruising through the safari in search for lions. He opens the door to the bar, and walks inside, disappearing behind a curtain of smoke. As he follows Mike inside, Adam’s eyes begin to sting. Smoking kills in the West, here it’s part of the local flavor, couldn’t cut it with a wide blade.

Adam spots Cristina walking past the tables, towards the bar. She stops behind a man seated at the bar, puts her hand on his shoulder and leans in to give him a hug. He’s visibly displeased, pushing her to the side as if she’s bitten his face.

“It’s probably gonna take a while. Looks like he’s grumpy,” Mike tells Adam.

“Is he her boyfriend?”

Mike nods, “He’s a nice man, once you get to know him. Can’t really say I’ve had the chance.”

The man turns to look at them prompted by Cristina. He raises an eyebrow scanning the two Americans with disgust then turns back to her and starts gesturing.

“They look like they’re having an argument,” Adam expresses concern, but is also amused at seeing Cristina being put in her place.

“It’s how Romanians talk, don’t worry about it. Come on, let’s have a look at this menu.” Mike is anxious to show off his Romanian expertise: “Ever tasted Romanian food?”

Adam could rain on his parade with four little words – *grew up on it* – but he lets Mike talk about Romanian cuisine while he keeps staring at the bar. Cristina seems different, as if she’s left her smug manners at the door and is now an obedient puppy. It looks like she’s trying hard to persuade her boyfriend of something, to no avail – her arms crossed over her chest, shoulders hunched, her lower lip hangs low in a disappointed grimace. The boyfriend picks up his half-full beer and finishes it in one go, then stands up and walks past Adam and Mike.

“Come on guys, let’s go.” Cristina pushes them towards the exit.

“Hey man,” Mike shouts after Tick as they approach the car. “Meet my buddy.” He yanks Adam pushing him forward.

“Oh yeah, this is Mike’s American undercover friend,” Cristina’s smirk resurfaces.

Adam puts his hand forward to receive an uncertain shake, “I’m Adam, Mike’s not-undercover-friend.”

“Tick. Cristina’s boyfriend,” he declares as if that’s not a title, but his middle and last name.

The car heads down a boulevard lined with old houses. White letters on a blue background swoosh past slow enough for Adam to make out *Bulevardul Dacia*. He sticks his face against the window as brand names flash past in colors of yellow, red, white and blue: Macdonald’s, KFC, Converse, Levi’s. Cristina swerves onto a narrow street with cars parked on either side. It feels as if they’re floating above the snow, the car guided by invisible tracks.

“Where are we going?” Adam asks. He turns his head to look through the rear window as if catching a glimpse of his hotel might be enough to help him get back there.

“We’re running for our lives,” Cristina delivers in a mysterious whisper. “Thought you’d seen the protests.” She lights up a cigarette. It smells like cherry.

“Is it that bad?”

“She’s trying to mess with your head, man. Don’t pay attention to her,” Mike comes to his rescue.

They turn right, past Arcul de Triumf, heading towards Casa Scântei and out of Bucharest. A curious feeling of unease settles in the back of Adam’s neck, as if he’s been grabbed by a cold claw.

“If you don’t mind enlightening me. I’d very much like to know what to make of these protests,” he speaks up.

“And we,” Tick mutters, his English poor and insecure.

“Nobody knows, man. Not even the ones protesting.” Mike takes off his coat and sinks back in his seat. “Bet if you asked each and every one of those poor bastards freezing their asses out there what’s their purpose they’d shrug. Then they’d have to read out the signs they’re holding—”

“Sure Mike,” Cristina snaps. “Real protests only happen in the States. Here people do it to skip work.”

“Nothing’s really serious here, man,” Mike posits with a genuine American smile.

Adam knows better – he’s had plenty of *serious here*, like bullets and blood and death.

“It better be serious.” Cristina puts up her window, sealing out the cold. “I plan to join them when we get back.” She slows down as she pulls into the gas station: “Now listen, Americanos, you’re coming along for the ride. It’s a two hour drive. God willing the road is not snowed in as we’re already late. I’m not going to stop before we get there, so ease up on the beer, Mike!”

Everyone gets out except for Tick. A cold neon light hurts Adam’s eyes before they have the time to properly adjust. The car is not black as he’d first seen it, but dark green. Even Mike seems slimmer in this light,

his face servile, trustworthy: “Do you want anything from the shop?” he asks Adam.

“Do they have Hershey’s?”

“You’re funny,” Mike chuckles and walks away following Cristina inside the gas station.

Tick gets out of the car and walks towards where Adam is standing. His wide shoulders are supported by a rather thin trunk – he’s a lot shorter than Adam, but he manages to look menacing. He lifts his head as if he’s been prompted by Adam’s unspoken request to see his expression: bony and strong with the nose cast in the title role. He’s wearing a knitted sweater, dirty white lamb’s wool with a traditional pattern across the chest – close imitation of a horizontal head of wheat. The same pattern Grandma Bea would put on all of Adam’s sweaters, his beanies and his scarves.

Tick’s facial expression seems to say *Oh, well, what are we to do?* He crosses his arms around his chest and stares into thin air without saying a word. Adam can’t tell whether Tick is a nice guy, a quiet guy or a quietly devious guy.

“Do you know where we’re going?”

“At the mountain.” Tick squats down to tie the lace on his boots – double knot.

“What mountain?”

“Near Braşov. You know Braşov?”

Adam shakes his head – he might have heard of it, but the name doesn't really ring a meaningful bell. He hovers his shoe above a clear puddle, the reversed writing on his sole reading *noɾoC*. He looks up, “How long have you known Mike?”

Tick shrugs, the corners of his mouth drop in an emotionless expression: “One year...Cristina is better friend with him.” He pulls his sleeves over his hands, making his sweater look three sizes bigger.

Mike comes back, balancing two bags full of goodies on his belly. “Look at you two, friends already.” He sets the bags on the ground to free his hands so he can make up a frame with his thumbs, one that's holding up both Adam and Tick: “An American and a Romanian walk into a gas station–” Tick walks out of the frame before Mike has the time to deliver his punchline.

“Hey American, this is for you!” Cristina throws a yellow bag Adam's way. Tick waves his hand displeased and gets back in the car. “We call them ‘little puffs’,” Cristina carries on, oblivious to her boyfriend's reaction. “Ever heard of *mămăligă*?” She asks Adam. His mom used to call it *poor man's bread*. “Course you haven't. Anyway, it's made from corn, just like these.” She points at the yellow puffs pressed against the transparent plastic. “They're Romanian kids' snacks. This is what we grew up on. Go on, taste it!” Cristina is standing by his side, waiting impatiently for him to pop open the bag. He knows the taste before he can stick one in his mouth – salty, crunchy, that slightly stale

taste of dry, expanded corn – he chews on it then sticks it to the top of his mouth to let it melt there, a habit from the old days when he had to make each puff last as long as possible.

“Good, right?” she asks as they get back in the car.

“Yeah, but they stick to your mouth.”

“That’s the best part. It’s how you make them last longer. Go on Mike, have one too, it won’t kill you. Might even–”

“No thanks, I’m fine. I like my snacks American flavored.”

“Tick said we’re going to the mountains,” Adam says as Cristina drives off. “So what’s the deal? Hiking? At night?”

“You seem a bit worried.” Cristina overtakes an old van, thick grey smoke coming out of its ass.

“We’re not going to the mountains for the mountains, man. I’m wearing jeans, for fuck’s sake. Do you really see me going up a mountain?” Mike lifts up his foot with difficulty and flicks his fit-for-asphalt shoe: “These are dancing shoes, man...We...are going to...a wedding!”

“Dude, your enthusiasm is unbelievable. You make it sound like we’re going to your sister’s wedding. We’re going to the wedding party of a very good friend of mine. Her name is Irina. We used to work together and she’s getting married tonight. You two Americans will be my wedding present to her.”

“And how do you see that working out?” Mike sounds worried.

“I don’t know...You can be the two little stooges. Do a sketch, sing a song, do a little dance. Get down tonight.”

Adam can’t help being amused by the situation. Before he left the States he got into a massive argument with Karen, his-then-and probably-now-too-girlfriend, because he wouldn’t go to her sister’s wedding. He’s been in Romania for two days and he’s managed to singlehandedly station himself in a car, with two strangers and an irritating girl he’s only met once, on the way to a...Wedding. Karma, Karen?

“When I said I deliver, I meant it. You’re in for a treat!” Mike taps Adam’s thigh reassuringly. “Local party!”

“What are you delivering? What did you promise this time, you—” Cristina’s curse-delivering enthusiasm is cut short as Tick turns on the stereo. A down-tempo electric beat puts the conversation to rest; he turns the volume up, as if he’s trying to make a point. Cristina turns to him, wordless. He holds her stare for a second then turns his head to look out the window.

The road swivels ahead, covered in snow, tire tracks designing its windings. It feels like they're ascending. Far out, beyond the hills, scattered houses manifest their presence, quietly yet visibly exhaling through their horns. The black of the night envelops the empty road in an end of the world embrace.

They turn off onto a country road; trees join branches above it, burdened by the weight of snow. Adam sticks his face against the window

like he used to when he was a kid. He notices flashes of light running through the forest – he'd ask if anyone else has seen them, but the music is just too loud. Mike's sunk deep into his seat, his head resting very close to Adam's shoulder, snoozing.

“Guys!” Cristina silences the music, slows to a halt and turns off the headlights. The snow is reflecting a clear yellow moon. “Guys, look over there,” she whispers. Adam stares into the darkness, squinting as contours start to take shape: trees, heaps of snow, branches, then a massive pair of antlers. A royal stag is standing between two pine trees, watching them.

Noroc means *luck*. It is commonly used as *Cheers* along with *sănătate* (health). Both terms are also used as a reply to someone sneezing.

The sight and sound of his piss on pristine snow makes Adam think of tea. Hot chamomile tea poured out of a living kettle. Steam rises from the ground as the snow melts instantly, white turns to yellow. The liquid pierces through ice, quickly vanishing from sight. But not the color. The color stays behind, spreading out into a transient stain. The intake of traditional Romanian liquor has altered his common sense, otherwise he would have thought not twice perhaps, but at least once about peeing outside of the restaurant hosting the wedding. Weed-ing. Adam is stoned, but not really cozy – he’s not dressed for a wedding, nor in a party mood to match the Romanian zest resounding from inside.

He lets the final drops spill out, wiggles and packs up his spout, but stays put, transfixed by the stained snow.

It takes him back to this day, just after his last Romanian Christmas, when Grandma Bea walked him to the train station. He was going back to Bucharest, eager to see his mom and longing to see his dad, too – just like Bea had said. He was so excited he didn’t even care he would be travelling under the supervision of God knows who – most likely a ‘decent little madam’ who met Bea’s strict standards. They’d left the house early, and even though there was no reason to hurry, Adam was walking fast, as if his feet had a mind of their own. As he marched on the

snow, his boots letting out sounds that rhymed with *crush-crunch*, he noticed these blotches of color on the white ground: small, the size of his fist, yellow or perhaps orange, but further in the distance the stains got bigger, their color red. He felt a weakness in his knees – they became moist as if an invisible wire had cut them from behind and he was no longer able to keep his body up straight. He didn't fall, but was forced to slow down so as to keep control of his legs, without breaking contact with the pattern on the snow. Bea hadn't even noticed. She was still humming *Hora Unirii*, marching ahead like a soldier on the road to triumph. He didn't point the stains out to her, nor did he have to ask – he knew what they were.

“There you are.” Mike posts himself next to Adam. “Been looking all over for you. Everything OK? You lose something?”

“Have you ever seen blood on snow?” Adam asks without turning his head, keeps staring at the yellow blotch instead, hypnotized by its glow.

“Is that a movie? Snow White remake?”

“No, the real thing. Real blood on real snow.”

“Game blood? Like when you go hunting?”

“Not really, no. In the city, where people live...”

Mike perches his head above Adam's shoulder trying to see what he's staring at: “That's piss man, it's not blood, what are you talking about?”

Maybe it was piss, maybe all of it was piss. Pissed off blood.

“Come on, let’s go inside. What are you doing here anyway?”

Mike pulls Adam by the arm and drags him towards the restaurant.

“Came out for some air.”

“How ‘bout this Romanian wedding? I love this shit! All you can eat and all you can drink. Not too sure about the happy couple. As in they don’t seem that happy to me. Have you seen them? But how ‘bout that booze?”

Adam nods. He can still feel the liquor’s effect – tasty yet throat burning.

“Only had a couple of shots,” boasts Mike. “And I feel like I’m made of ether. Maybe I’ll do a bit of dancing.” He climbs the steps in front of the restaurant while attempting an ass-shake dance routine, but slips and almost falls over, forcing Adam to grab him by the back of his jeans to restore his balance, “Maybe not...”

The doors to the restaurant open to a fast-forwarded, sparkling reality, contrast to the still, dark night outside. The DJ has been replaced by a band. Adam can see their instruments in the far end corner: double bass, keyboard, and a xylophone. Across the dance floor, red-faced cheery couples are performing rapid square dances led by the bride and groom. The dancers swoosh past the entrance, enough for Adam to notice a visible frown on the groom’s face, fully concentrated on getting the steps right, while the bride’s frozen smile, seems to be induced by pain

rather than pleasure, her eyes immobile, sad even. The people surrounding the not-so-happy couple seem faceless – just colorful dresses holding sleeves with white shirts. From time to time the women let out cheers in the form of long, high-pitched e’s that seem to enliven the dancers, making them spin faster.

“Traditional music,” Mike shouts in Adam’s ear. “Don’t worry, Cristina said they’ll bring back the DJ once the elders have had their fun.

The two of them stand in the doorway as if they’re a pair of outlaws assessing their chances of making it out alive. Back at their table, no sign of Cristina or Tick: “Guess it’s you and me, buddy.” Mike holds up the jug of țuică, “More?”

Adam shakes his head; if there’s anything he needs it’s food. If only he’d had a taste of the appetizers before they cleared their plates. His prayers are answered as the music stops and picks up on a riveting march to which the waiters parade big silvery platters above their heads. They move around the tables performing what looks like a well-choreographed dance. A platter full of wings, ribs, sausages, breasts and briskets, lands between Adam and Mike.

“Poftă bună!” offers the waiter, along with enough food to feed five people. The sight and smell of grilled skins makes Adam’s mouth water; the meat is so tasty and tender it melts against his palate, each bite tearing at his wedding reluctance. Mike picks up a wing and munches on it, letting out grunts of pleasure.

A middle-aged man comes to their table and introduces himself as the cousin of the bride – Călin. He staggers as he pulls a chair between Adam and Mike, his face all flushed. His unbuttoned shirt allows a quick view of a thin golden chain supporting a small, Jesus-less cross trapped between black, frizzy chest hairs: “Are you Americans?” He literally spits out the question sprinkling Adam’s hand with ecstatic saliva.

The Americans nod, mouths full.

“I not believe it...Not one, two Americans, at my cousin wedding.” He puts his arms around Mike and Adam’s shoulders like a pimp claiming ownership: “I never meet two Americans before in same place. What you drink?” He picks up Adam’s glass and looks inside as if it weren’t transparent: “I want you to have wine!” He signals a waiter to bring over a couple of bottles of red wine. He fills three glasses with a dark, almost black liquor.

He stares at his own glass, twisting it as if it’s holding the essence of the Universe: “I like you!” He looks at Mike and then at Adam. “You not come here to steal...Take...How do you say, avantaj?” He grabs hold of one glass and lifts it in the air, his hand shaky, “You come to celebrate with us!”

“Thank you for having us.” Mike wipes his hands on a napkin then holds up his glass: “To the married couple and the beautiful—”

Călin raises a hand for silence: “Let me tell you what I like at you...You want to...know Romania. I’m happy when Americans come

here and we not run away to America.” He shakes his head and takes a sip of wine, blackening his lips and teeth as if he’s eaten dirt. “Before when communism was here, Romanians have to run away and now, when life is good here, they run away too,” he sighs. “That’s why I like you. You Americans, come here for traditions. Romanian people have to learn from you. Not run away. Run eating the ground.” Adam smiles at the thought of Dad being here at the table. He would have a riot talking to Călin, who prompts Mike to put up his glass then elbows Adam to do the same: “Maybe if they see Americans here, they know is good to stay home, too. Right? Noroc!”

The glasses kiss with a short clink as a couple of drops spill on the white table cloth – purple, like dry blood. Călin rubs his fingers over the stain, smearing it, making it run deeper into the fabric. A middle aged woman calls out to him from the adjoining table, her frown more visible than the sequins on her dress. Călin waves his hand displeased.

“You eat now,” he says, standing up. “Let me know if you need something, I’m over here.” He walks away just as Cristina is making her way through the crowd.

“There you are, have you seen Tick?” she asks them both, but looks at Adam.

“He wasn’t here when we came in. And neither were you,” says Mike.

She sits down between them and reaches for the platter to pick up a drumstick. She's no longer wearing her sweater, her top showing off part of her back. Enough for Adam to notice the side of a tattoo; it looks like the tip of a tongue with numbers drawn on it.

"Where is he?" She's chewing on the meat speaking mouth full: "Think he's outside?"

"No, we just came from outside and he wasn't there. Why? Is something wrong?" Adam pours her some wine.

She keeps checking her phone: "Where the fuck is he? I need him. We're supposed to do this thing."

"What thing?"

"He agreed to help me with this wedding tradition." She stares at the wine stain on the table cloth, lost.

"What tradition? What?" Mike insists.

"We have to steal the bride."

"Thought you didn't encourage stereotypes: Romanians stealing is clearly not enough... Wanna be known for stealing brides, now, too?"

"It's a tradition, dickhead."

"No wonder..." Mike pokes fun at her.

She chugs down the wine without leaving a single drop in the glass.

"I know it sounds insane, but it's a Romanian wedding tradition, I swear," she says and looks into Adam's eyes for a reassuring sign that at

least *he* believes her. “It’s kind of like. You steal the bride so that the groom can prove how much he loves his wife, how much he’s willing to pay for her. You’re not kidnapping her, nothing bad happens. It’s part of the Romanian wedding tradition.”

“Romanians have some funny traditions.” Mike nods at Adam who’s filling another glass for Cristina. She thanks him with her eyes.

“Hey, when in Rome...” She lifts her glass to Mike and takes another sip. “The wedding won’t be the same without it. And everyone wants to do it. So if you see anyone talking to the bride and then walking away with her, it means they have that in mind. What happens is you have to take the bride away from the room without anyone seeing and then hide her. And then you come back with her shoe, announce that she’s been stolen.” She pauses. “Then you ask for ransom. Don’t get your hopes up, Mike, it’s not money you ask for. Something symbolic like booze or food. Or even ask the groom to sing an embarrassing song. Whatever. The wedding would not be whole if no one steals the bride. And fucking Tick was supposed to help me out. I can’t do this on my own.”

“So you need help taking the bride against her will,” Mike concludes.

“Have you been listening at all? She’ll go willingly.”

“I’ll do it!” Adam says, to everyone’s astonishment, including his own.

“Really?” Cristina’s face lights up; she grabs him by the ears and plants a kiss on his cheek. “You are the best, American!”

Mike pulls her towards him. “I want in. What’s my part in this?”

“You distract the groom, and if possible the godparents. Be loud. Be American.” She turns back to Adam: “Do you remember the bride’s name? You met her when we came in.”

“Yeah, Irina.”

“Perfect!” Cristina brings her hands to her mouth and claps them with excitement: “Meet me in front of the ladies room in a couple of minutes. I’ll bring her over and you can take her to the car.”

Adam walks out of the restaurant into the lobby. He can feel the wine making its way to his toes, the soles of his feet tingling with warmth. The carpet is thick, mattress-like. He finds the ladies room, a small drawing of a head wearing a large brimmed hat on the door. Cristina shows up with Irina who staggers a bit, and she has to grab on to Adam’s arm in order to make a stop.

Cristina grabs her by the shoulders and helps her stand up straight as if she were a life-size bride doll: “Remember Adam?”

“Of course I remember Adam,” Irina shouts and throws her arms around his neck – her shoulders are covered in glitter. “Hi Adam! How do you do?” She pulls away to wipe a couple of sweat beads from her forehead: “I’m hot. Are you hot Adam?” She squeezes his biceps: “Mmmm, you’re hot.”

“She’s a bit tipsy.” Cristina tries to peel off the eager bride from Adam’s body. “Can you manage her?”

“She’s a bride, not a bouncer. I’ll manage.”

Irina gives him a couple of pats on the chest: “Yeah, Adam, manage me. *Ménage à moi...*” She trails off, grabs Adam by the hips and pulls him towards her.

“She might be a handful,” Cristina sighs.

“You said it’s less than half an hour, right?” Adam seizes the bride’s shoulder, keeping her at arm’s length. “We’ll be fine.” Irina keeps swaying her hips, unaware of Adam’s fair distance, looking like a dog engaged in a partner-less to-and-fro.

Cristina hands him the car keys, pointing out the unlock button on the remote. “I need her shoe. Lift her up.”

Adam picks up the bride; the dress with its layers upon layers like a generous lace cabbage, scratches his hands. Irina holds on to his neck tight, very willing to be stolen. Cristina pulls the bride’s foot from under the dress, struggling to remove a tiny white shoe laced up around her ankle. Someone tries to open the toilet door, but Adam takes hold of the handle keeping it shut: “Hurry up!”

Cristina trades him the shoe for the handle and Adam makes a run for the exit. He walks out into the cold, his nostrils sticking on the inside with every icy breath. The steps in front of the restaurant are shining in the moonlight as if they’ve been glazed with a layer of fine wax. Irina is

shivering in his arms, her nose tucked against his neck, breathing heavily or perhaps sniffing him out.

“I think I drank too much,” Irina slurs and falls over him in the car. Adam readjusts her position and sits up to look for a bottle of water. She takes a couple of swigs and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. “Adam, what kind of name is that? Are you married Adam?”

“No.”

“Good for you!” She opens the glove compartment and starts fumbling through, “This is Cristina’s car, right? Of course it is!” She takes out a flyer, smoking papers, a cigarette and some weed and starts to roll a joint. Drunk but dexterous.

“So, Adam,” she says, almost spelling out his name. “How do you like it so far?”

“The wedding?”

“That too, but,” she breathes out deeply and looks for the water bottle, takes a couple of swigs as if to clear her head. “I mean this wonderful country, Romania...How long have you been here?”

“A couple of days.”

“And?” She folds the flyer then starts to mix the green and brown shreds along its bent spine.

“It’s different.”

“Different from what?” Her eyes have a devious sparkle.

“Different from what I’ve heard.”

She runs her tongue along the strip of glue on the paper and twists it into a perfect cone: “Oh, and what have you heard?” She hands him the flyer: “Throw that out, please; the leftovers, not the flyer.”

Adam complies. He rolls down the window and gives the shiny paper a quick shake – it glints in the moonlight. He looks at the flyer: the image of a leaf split in two, the upper side green, made to look like a mountain, the lower side red, dripping blood; *Salvați Roșia Montană*, written at the top.

“I’ll take that.” Irina takes the flyer from Adam’s hand and starts to use it as a fan.

“Are you OK? Want me to open the window?”

Irina shakes her head and holds up the joint for Adam to light it. She takes a couple of puffs and relaxes, her eyes become smaller.

“What’s the deal with this stealing the bride thing?”

She shrugs. “It’s a tradition. We’ll see if they pay to get me back. My husband or the godfather.” She makes it sound life and death serious. “Did you come to our church ceremony?” She lets out thick vapors of smoke and passes him the joint. Adam shakes his head, she’s happy to take another drag. “You couldn’t understand, anyway. Do you speak Romanian?”

“Not really.”

“The service was nice.” She lets out a mournful sigh. “But we had to stand for two hours, with silver crowns on our heads. Very royal.” She

nods. “Anyway, the priest, he had white beard and blue eyes, like Santa...He says after the ceremony,” she proclaims in a solemn voice: “Marriage is hard work. Don’t think you’re coming home from work and you can rest. You have to put your union first, make time for each other...” She sneezes, “And it was supposed to be inspiring, some people cried, but all I could think about was compromis, compromis, compromis...” She pauses to wipe her nose then turns to Adam, to make sure he’s listening. “I am a horrible bride?”

“Just realistic,” Adam shrugs. “Didn’t you want to get married?”

“I did. I do.” She clutches the flyer to her chest. “But I wanted to take more time before the wedding. But a wedding is a serious business here. Once you’ve said yes the family takes over the planning and it all happens so fast you can’t go back. But what if you want to take more time?” She looks at the writing on the flyer and smiles a desolate smile: “Kind of like this mining project – make it happen quick before people can decide what they really want. Compromise!” She slips the flyer back inside the glove compartment.

“So you are this Roșia Montană everyone’s talking about...”

Irina bursts into laughter, her eyes shimmering with tears. “You’re funny!” She pushes Adam against the door and kisses him on the cheek. “Strangers are better friends than friends.” Irina gives Adam an extra hug, whispers in his ear: “Thank you!”

The door opens to a raging voice: “What the fuck, man? You have to steal her, not kiss her!” Adam is pulled out of the car so hard, it tears the neckline of his t-shirt.

Casă de piatră is the Romanian wish for newlyweds. Literal translation, *house of stone*.

“Strangers are better friends than friends...” The bride’s hopeless confession haunts Adam like the chorus of a cheesy pop song played on heavy rotation, designed to stick. It clashes with Dad’s words: *You’ll never be their friend. Ever. It’s how Romanians work. If you say you’re American they’ll befriend you only to take advantage. If you let them know you’re Romanian, they’ll hold it against you and act like you owe them because you’re better off. You’re better off staying away.*

Adam’s cheekbone still hurts from Tick’s punch, but at least there is no bruise – Cristina made sure to put ice on it. And Tick did apologize, eventually. Blamed it on the alcohol. Lame. At least he had the decency to admit he was wrong. When it happened though, the punch, there was more to it than just defending the bride’s honor. As if Tick had been holding something back for quite a while and when he was finally presented with the opportunity last night, he just took it out on Adam – less for what he’d done and more for what he represented.

All has been restored though, starting with the bride’s honor and ending with a record for how stupidly drunk people can get on țuică. It’s not hangover Adam’s feeling, but an ability to see things clearer despite of an acutely pervasive headache.

Daylight offers a new perspective on the scenery, the hotel where they spent the night is surrounded by mountains, their peaks covered in snow like ice cream cones. Mike is smoking in the parking lot, resting his ass on the hood, feet dangling above the ground. He stands up to greet Adam, the steel lets out a short sigh of relief.

“Nothing like the Sunday afternoon sun to bless us for our sins, eh?”

Adam hides his eyes behind his shades: “I am never drinking again!” he says with conviction.

“Says the young man until the next time comes round,” Mike offers in a sympathetic tone.

Adam notices Cristina and Tick as they exit the hotel, heading slowly towards the car – Cristina is carrying all the bags while Tick is conversing on the phone. “What’s the deal with him, anyway?” Adam asks Mike. “He seems a bit–”

“Part of his Romanian charm.” Mike flicks the roach and opens the door to the car. Adam follows him inside.

“My guess,” Mike adopts a secretive tone. “He’s a bit frustrated with his inability to speak English, which kinda clashes with Cristina’s desire to speak it every chance she gets. She loves that shit. Why you think she’s been hanging out with me in the first place? He’ll come around, don’t worry. Had the same problem with me when I first met

him.” He pauses. “Just needs to chill and realize you’re not out to fuck his girlfriend.”

The car shakes as Tick shuts the trunk, more like slams it shut, giving both Adam and Mike an intentional jolt.

“Good day, gentlemen.” Cristina climbs into the driver’s seat, her head covered by a hood, oversized sunglasses concealing half her face.

“Ready to head back to our lovely capital?”

“Step on it, sister!” Mike folds his jacket, turning it into a pillow, and rests his head on the door frame.

“How long to get back?” Adam asks as Tick gets inside the car, a couple of *you’re the dick* glances are quickly exchanged between them.

“Two to three hours,” Cristina reassures him. “It’s Sunday, though, the roads might be full of people coming home after the weekend.”

They drive through silent villages, their inhabitants safely tucked away from the cold. There seem to be no other cars on the road except for the odd one buried beneath a heap of snow. The houses they pass by are old, painted in pale colors, with roofs in the form of circumflex accents, seemingly oppressive; a reflection of Romanian which chastises vowels by replacing the sound of the open vocal tract with a choke. Every now and then a modern, two-story house disrupts the line of simple dwellings, screaming for attention like a golden tooth.

The scenery is majestic, mountains to the left and right supervising their passage. Nature professes ownership for miles around, willing to be tamed only by the presence of God. Churches throne on top of every hill, their glinting crosses noticeable from afar. They call attention to the sole niche of Christianity holding out in spite of an overbearing Ottoman trend. History has a short memory when it comes to its heroes.

A castle rises ahead, perched on top of a cliff as if it's coming out of it. Adam knows it; he's seen it so many times on the cover of Jules Verne's *Castelul din Carpați*, the only book he remembers from his Romanian childhood.

"Bran Castle." Cristina checks her phone. "Can try and see if it's open if you want? Maybe we can go in?"

"E Duminică seară...E închis," Tick mutters.

"Tick says it's closed," she translates.

Tick has been wrong before, but Adam decides to stay out of it.

"You could maybe work some of that șpagă magic," Mike chips in. "Romanian for bribe." He elbows Adam as if he's just let him in on a state secret. "It's like their second nature."

"It doesn't work like that," Cristina raises her voice.

"The hell it doesn't!" Mike pushes himself forward. "Slip the guy some money so he can get a bit of booze, warm himself up, he closes his eyes and we go inside." He covers his eyes as if he's playing peek-a-boo.

“My wife got us inside Peleş once, long after closing time,” he brags.

“Paid off the guide.”

“Where *is* your wife?” Adam changes the subject.

Mike lets out a grunt then takes out a tissue and blows his nose as Cristina swerves past the sign pointing towards the Castle’s car park.

“Mike’s wife?” Cristina asks bewildered as if there is no such person. “Mrs. Dumitrescu,” she proceeds to elucidate the mystery. Sounds like she’s been waiting for this opportunity for a long time. “Sorry, Mrs. Parker-Dumitrescu is living the immigrant dream back—”

“Hey, that’s a very expensive dream,” Mike sniggers. “Requires a lot of work! Being American doesn’t come easy. Back me up here,” he turns to Adam.

It certainly didn’t come easy for Adam or his parents. The moment they set foot on the plane they were new born Americans, as if their past had never existed, their memory wiped clean, with only the future to look ahead to. *English, Adam, English!* Going to bed half fed whenever he would mix up the words *chicken* and *kitchen*. And long hours of practice for him to learn how to say his name properly. *Adam Stan, not Stan Adam!* Rolling his tongue perfectly so as to polish the corners of his Romanian accent until each vowel was perfectly round.

“Easy?” Cristina raises her voice. “Sure, the woman’s working three jobs, paying the mortgage so that Mr. Smartass here can have it easy in Romania.” She lights up a cigarette as if she’s making an extra point.

“She wants to be there. She wouldn’t have shit if she stayed here!”

Mike excuses his wife, himself, their native countries.

Cristina snaps: “How come *you’re* here if it’s so bad?”

“I didn’t say it’s bad for me. I have money to live here like a king.” Mike pats his belly like some greedy boyar.

“Decât toată viața fraier, mai bine o zi rege,” Tick mutters.

“What he said,” Mike is obviously oblivious to the negative connotation of Tick’s words. “I love it here! It’s you guys who always complain about it.”

“It’s our right to complain. We are *borned* here!” Tick speaks up. “Is any beer left?” He turns to Mike who hands him a can from the shopping bag. Tick pops it open and starts to chug it down like water.

“I’m sorry you don’t get to see the castle,” Cristina apologizes. “I think you really should go see it sometime. You too smartass,” she throws at Mike.

“Why me? Why would I want to see it?”

“Certainly not for the reasons that seem to bring Americans to see it – because it’s Dracula’s castle. No, because it still holds traces of a time when Romania still had a bright future.”

Tick takes another swig of beer, as if to soothe the pain of Romania’s not so bright present, the sound of tin reverberates its metallic burp. The road is winding ahead, Adam turns to see the castle through the

rear window, the further they drive away the bigger it gets, towering over the small villages scattered at its foot.

“Picture it: 1920s.” Cristina turns off the stereo. “On this very road, no snow, just rusty leaves.” She looks wistfully in the rearview mirror. “Light brown tones and here and there a few spots of red,” she sighs. “Autumn. The river’s clapping to the side. It’s close to mid-day. The fruit’s been picked, vegetables stacked up for winter. All is quiet. Then,” she pauses dramatically. “This vuuuuuum breaks the silence. A silver Rolls fucking Royce makes its way through the castle gate and rests in the driveway. She’s home. Missy. That was her nickname. Queen Victoria’s granddaughter. Married the Romanian prince. Technically he was German. Not the most pleasant man. But she married him nonetheless. Not out of love.” She pauses, and looks towards Tick, a trace of melancholy in her voice: “Out of...” She thinks. “Duty. Royal duty. Came here when she was seventeen. Can you imagine? This woman left Edinburgh where she was a princess to come to Romania of all places.” She looks out the window as if she’s apologizing for the simple truth of her country.

“Who is this? Who are you talking about?”

“The castle’s owner. Queen Mary.”

“You said it was Dracula’s castle,” Mike says, disappointed. “Was she hot, this Mary?”

“Be respectful. She was more Romanian than many born Romanians. She learned to read and write Romanian,” Cristina praises the queen as if she were her own great-grandmother. “Everyone adored her. Not just here. All over the world. She got the castle as a gift from the citizens of Brasov. She used to call it the house where the four winds meet. Her fairytale castle.”

“You sound like my grandma reminiscing about the times of yore.” Mike lets out a bored yawn.

“Here’s an interesting fact for you, mister *my-wife-is-Romanian-but-I-can’t-speak-a-decent-Romanian-sentence*,” Cristina shouts at him. “Queen Mary was foreign, like you, native English speaker, so it wasn’t really easy for her to learn Romanian, but she did. Last time I visited the castle, years ago, I met this old man from the village who met her when he was a kid. Get this, she used to scold him for saying ‘merci’ instead of ‘mulțumesc’.”

“I never say merci, you know that,” Mike belts out with pride. “I always say *moletzamess...*” His crippled pronunciation fills up the car, only to fade away unnoticed.

They drive in silence for a while, music accompanying lightly from the speakers – instrumental jazz that seems to say they’re in a 60s French film, heavy on interior monologue. Adam sits back and leans his head to look through the rear window. Clouds run past in cartoon shapes

or even letters. Bea used to scold him too, for saying merci: *The correct form is mulțumesc, it has a deeper meaning than merci.*

The sound of Tick cracking open another beer can makes Adam aware of the guy's alcohol intake – 3 beers in 2 hours. He hopes Tick's temper will stay put tonight.

As they leave the highway, the night falls heavy like lead, covering everything around. Every now and then a solitary lamp post springs up, casting its momentary light over the confines of the car. A bolder, neon light prompts Mike to wake up from his open-mouthed, droolsome sleep.

“We there yet?”

“Just entered Bucharest.” Cristina halts at a red light when two kids jump out from nowhere and start cleaning the windshield. They're not wearing any coats or hats, just long-sleeved tops, ragged and dirty, their hands freezing over the window.

“Oh, for fucks sakes just honk your horn,” Mike shouts. “Your windows will freeze! They're washing them with water, you do know that!”

Their movements are slick, methodical almost, and very efficient: one kid throws water on the windshield while the other one wipes it off immediately before it has a chance to freeze up. They're not as thorough, though, leaving a few marks across, but the window does look cleaner than it did before.

Cristina turns to Mike: “Hand me the bag with the leftover—”

“You’re not gonna give them our wedding cake!”

“It’s food!”

“They’ll spit it in your face. All they want is money. You know that, don’t you?”

Cristina ignores him and rolls down the window. She takes out the tinfoil wrapped cake. The taller kid, his hair all tangled up, is pushing the smaller one away from the window, denying his share of the reward. He puts out his hand, but his face changes from gratitude to anger as Cristina hands him the package: “Ce vrei să fac cu ăsta?” He waves his hand in disgust and walks away to the car behind. The younger kid follows, doesn’t even look at the package.

Adam takes back the cake from Cristina’s hand.

“What did I say?” Mike rubs his belly, “I’ll have that. It’s all mine.”

One of the kids thumps his fist on the rear window, the other one starts pulling at the wiper blade.

“Little gypsies, only after the money,” Mike makes his hand into a fist and starts shaking it at them.

“Don’t say that. I told you not to use that word!” Cristina scolds Mike.

The kids laugh and put up their middle finger. “Let me out!” Mike tries to open his door. “Let me go kick heir asses. That’ll teach them.”

“No Mike, stay put.”

“You have to—”

“I don’t have to anything!”

The light switches to green, the car behind them starts to honk impatiently. Cristina has a hard time sticking the car into gear as if she’s a first time driver. The kids shout at her as the honks intensify. After a couple of failed attempts, the shifter finally obeys, setting the car in motion.

After driving in silence for a while Cristina pulls over in front of Mike’s building – its straight, vertical lines make it look like a computer server made to host tiny mechanical particles and not human beings. As if the space inside has been reduced to a minimum. The minimum of a minimum.

“You’re home Mike,” Cristina says.

Mike puts on his coat, groaning like a bear awoken from hibernation. “Nice to meet you, buddy.” He taps Adam’s shoulder. “What are you up to this week?”

“Work...” He lets out absentmindedly.

“Here’s my number in case you wanna meet up for a drink. A smoke, maybe?” Mike looks at him mischievously, handing Adam a card with big block gold letters – *Michael Parker Dumitrescu*.

“Later, guys.” He shakes Tick’s hand and taps Cristina’s shoulder. “Thanks again for the wedding.”

Cristina backs out of the car park, the headlights offer a clear view of Mike as he disappears inside his building.

“Thanks for taking me along, too” Adam offers as he moves over onto the middle of the backseat. “The wedding’s been great despite—”

“Don’t mention it,” Cristina cuts him short. “Glad we could present you with an authentic ethnic experience.” She enunciates the word ethnic, as if making sure she’s pronouncing it right. “Intercontinental Hotel?”

“Please.” Adam leans forward, holding on to her headrest. “So will I see you on the set tomorrow?”

He can see Tick’s eyebrow raising till it reaches the highest point on his forehead. Both of them are eager to hear her answer, but Cristina slows down, prompted by a police officer gesturing for her to pull over.

Tick opens the glove compartment and takes out the weed and cigarettes and shoves them under his chair: “Ai băut?”

“Nu!” She rolls down the window.

The policeman lowers his head and looks at Tic then at Adam, before speaking up: “Bună seara, vă rog să parcați. Drumul este închis.” He waves his hand a couple of times, making it look like he’s slapping Cristina’s reflection in the mirror, then walks up to the car behind.

“What’s going on?”

“He said to park here, they closed the road.” Cristina turns off the engine. “I don’t get it. It’s the main boulevard, there’s your hotel.” She points ahead.

Adam sits up, sticking his head between the front seats. He tries to make out the location of his hotel assess how long he has to walk, but his attention is soon grabbed by people running past their car, shouting.

Cristina rolls up her window: “Let’s not get out now.”

A police siren screams in the distance, followed by the sound of shattering glass. Someone bangs their fist on Tick’s window: “Hai, frate!” prompting him to unbuckle his seatbelt. Tick opens the door and gets out of the car wearing just his sweater.

“Tick, ce faci?” Cristina shouts after him. He’s doesn’t answer and runs after the man who shouted at him. The sound of an explosion makes Adam and Cristina turn away, losing sight of Tick.

“Hai!” She grabs her coat and opens her door. “Let’s go!” She gets out of the car and starts running in the direction Tick went. Adam follows her, animated by her resolve. A handful of men run past him, shouting unintelligible words. A rock the size of a beer can lands a few feet away as if it’s been dropped from the sky. Adam is carried along by a wave of people, as if the ground has wheels. Not far ahead, a boulevard-wide line of policemen advances towards them, their see-through shields beaming in the street lights like lasers.

“Cristina!” he shouts. No sign of her. In front of him, a man throws a cobble stone at the police, but the rock hits the pavement instead. The police fire a couple of rounds of teargas, the foggy, choking air quickly travels in Adam’s direction making it unbreathable. He covers his nose with his hand and tries to make his way out of the crowd. A man falls to the ground. Someone shouts.

On the sidewalk, three men are tearing down a bus shelter; one of them is smashing the Plexiglas window with a baseball bat. They’re dressed as if they’ve just walked out of a night club, the batter seems even better groomed than the groom from the wedding.

“We are fucking angry!” A voice screams in English as the crowd makes its way towards the advancing line of shiny black carapaces.

Adam finally spots Cristina, despite her being well buried in the thick of the crowd. He runs to her and grabs her arm. They are surrounded by angry men, their faces covered with scarves, shouting and cursing at the police. “Libertate! Jos nenorociții!”

“Can you see Tick?” Cristina shouts in Adam’s ear, holding on to him tight, bruise tight. Adam looks around for the cream sweater – he scans the crowd from left to right, ticking off an imaginary list every dark item of clothing he comes across until his eyes meet the cream wool pattern.

Tick has broken out of the crowd, a rock in his hand. He throws it at the line of gendarmes, its flight cut short, ricocheting against a see

through shield, its damage close to zero. The unharmed target breaks the line and starts to run after Tick. He snatches him and canes his head a few times as if he's trying to beat out dust from a carpet. Tick pulls away only to fall to the ground, swallowed back by the crowd.

Thank you in Romanian is *mulțumesc*. Its origin is found in the saying *la mulți ani*, the Romanian equivalent of *happy birthday*, which roughly translates as *more years to you*. There is the verb *a mulțumi*, which means *to thank*, but also *to please*, *to accept*, *to admit*, *to approve*, *to compensate*, *to consent*, *to yield*, *to allow*, *to permit*, *to receive* and the list goes on.

Three rectangular neon lights cast their artificial glow around the waiting room; no windows in sight, as if daylight can never be allowed to break through. Moans and heart-numbing cries of pain echo from behind blue curtains, promoting a heinous freak show. Stretchers are being wheeled in – men and women dressed in green and blue take turns attempting to assess the damage of the hurting. Adam is struck by the discrepancy between the staff’s emotionless expressions and the patients’ anguish-stricken faces. The emergency room is the last place he thought he would end up visiting. Adam is not fond of hospitals – they scare him. It’s the doctors. Just being around them presupposes ailments.

A teenager is rushed in, his arm broken down the middle, bones piercing through the skin, blood gushing all around. His elbow is black like it’s been dipped in tar. Adam turns his head away, only to be met by a woman in a wheelchair, her wax-yellow face shining, hands wrapped around her stomach. She’s in her early 20s, her eyes lifeless, too tired to even blink. A perky blonde nurse, her hair wrapped on top of her head like a beehive, looks at the girl.

“Sevraj,” she offers to a female doctor who lifts up the girl’s head, and proceeds to examine her eyes with a probing light.

The nurse turns to Adam: “Dumneavoastră?” she asks, her question expecting one single answer – sickness. He waves his hand and mouths: “Waiting, for my friends...Prieteni,” he adds and looks down hoping she’ll leave him alone. She does, takes hold of the girl’s wheelchair and pushes her away towards a sign that reads *Ambulatoriu*.

Adam can’t really tell which way Cristina and Tick went when they came in; there are doors on every wall of this room, a mandatory pit stop for every single emergency. He could have waited for them outside, sparing himself the aural and visual torture, but he can’t seem to drag himself away – like a passerby stopped in his tracks by a car crash carnage, visibly distraught by the sight of blood, but unable to look away, hypnotized by the hideousness of pain. One of the curtains is pulled apart revealing a man lying on the bed, tubes sticking out of him like extra limbs. A tall, bald doctor checks the patient with his right hand while holding a half-eaten sandwich in his left.

Adam recalls Tick’s smashed temple and the blood on his sweater which turned it from cream to violet. He can’t help thinking that he could have been hurt just as easily. Tick might have asked for it, throwing the brick at the policeman...But Adam could have been injured in the commotion. By accident. Maybe Dad is right after all. Keeping away doesn’t seem so bad a choice now. What about everyone else? What could possibly keep them here?

He notices a stain of dry blood, the size of his thumb, sunk deep inside the texture of his jeans. Adam starts to rub it, his fingernails collecting dark red residue. *You afraid you'll get your hands dirty, city boy?* Adam remembers his friend Ion shouting at him from high up the mulberry tree. He climbed all the way to the top, painting his white t-shirt with violet dots. They picked and ate mulberries until their fingers and lips turned black. Bea didn't even scold him, just laughed: *You look like you drank ink.*

As he's picking the dirt from his nails, a fat woman approaches, dragging her long flowered skirt across the floor. She's holding up a banknote, asking for change so she can get a coffee. Adam puts his hand in his pocket, mechanically, while staring at the handful of gold chains loosely hugging the woman's thick neck. He pulls out two quarters and a dime, and shakes his head, realizing he hasn't even seen Romanian money until now. The note is not what he remembers – the once blue, wrinkled paper, is now light green plastic, looking like board-game money. The woman hurries to the coffee machine where a suited young man is waiting for his espresso.

Adam leans back, closes his eyes, hoping he can get high on the scent of medicinal alcohol and with any luck, fall asleep, dream his way out of this nightmare.

“Hei!” Cristina squeezes his shoulder. She's tired, the look in her eyes almost void. Abstracted, she runs her fingers through his hair as if

she's done it many times before. She pulls back startled by a stretcher that's being wheeled behind her, and starts to rummage through her purse instead, extracting her pack of cigarettes.

“What happened? Where's Tick?” Adam follows her down the hallway. The sliding doors ceremoniously move apart allowing them free passage into the non-sick world.

“He's OK. Needs rest.”

An ambulance siren attempts its sinister cry, but is cut short, sign of sickness having changed its mind.

“Is he—”

Cristina uses her fingernail to draw six consecutive lines on Adam's temple: “Six...”

“Stitches?”

She nods and shows him her fingers, counts seven, lets one drop. “He's sleeping.”

“Are you staying overnight?”

“Nu...” She takes a deep breath. “No. Can we please...Get out?”

They stop in front of the hospital for her to light her cigarette. Five ambulances parked one behind the other instill a sense of hope – no need for them to intervene or scream.

“Are you OK?” Adam protects the flame with his palm to help light her cigarette. The quivering flicker makes her cheeks look flushed, as if she's wearing make-up.

Cristina takes a long drag while pushing her boot under a heap of dirty snow, revealing the still pristine white underneath.

“It all happened so fast...” She looks up at Adam, her eyes trembling, watery wide. “Like in an accident, you know?”

“Car crash?”

“Yeah. When the car spins fast. But inside you see it in slow motion.” She lets out the smoke along with a steaming breath. “Fucking Tick had to prove he was a man...” She shakes her head, a bitter, hopeless grin on her face.

The sound of a zealous engine breaks through the night as a car speeds across the boulevard, music booming out of its speakers. Cristina follows its trajectory. “A doctor said they cleared the street half an hour ago.” She flicks the half-smoked cigarette in a puddle; the orange flicker dies out as it comes in contact with the water.

“Come on, let’s get you home.” Adam waves down a taxi cab and puts his arm around her shoulders. She seems tiny, as if her body is outmatched by the weight of his arm.

Cristina presses her face against his neck, “No, not home,” she whispers. “Let’s have a drink close to your hotel. I know a place.” She gives his hand a pleading squeeze. Adam nods and helps her get into the car.

“La Cafeneaua Actorilor, vă rog,” she instructs the taxi driver, “În spate la Inter.”

The city is silent, resting ashamed like a drunken husband after having beaten up his wife. They pass by a couple of prostitutes claiming their territory. Nothing can prevent them from touting for business: not the biting cold, not the protests, not even the significantly reduced traffic.

The boulevard is clean as if nothing had happened. Maybe a contained organized protest, a few flyers scattered around by the wind. Adam remembers the well-dressed men smashing down the bus shelter, as they drive past the place where it happened, the melted plastic is now crouching in a tormented shape.

The taxi driver turns off his radio: “Ați auzit cine-s responsabili?” He eyes Adam in the rearview mirror.

“Cine?” asks Cristina.

“Huliganii doamnă, ULTRAS.”

She squeezes Adam’s knee prompting him to pay attention to the conversation, as if she knows he has the ability to understand what they’re saying.

“The driver said they were hooligans,” Cristina offers as they get out of the car. “Those people who were throwing rocks. He said they were football supporters,” she sighs in disbelief as she opens the door to the restaurant. “You were there!” She turns to Adam for reassurance. “They were people like me and Tick, I even recognized a few of them. The media will make this something it’s not: there’s no real danger. It wasn’t

the working, honest people getting angry, just the usual trouble makers, trashing the capital.”

Adam follows her inside the restaurant, its low ceiling makes it look like a cave. There’s hardly any light to reveal the actual size and color of the place, except for small candles faintly illuminating each table.

“Too romantic?” Cristina takes Adam by the hand and leads him towards the back, next to what looks like the kitchen – a man dressed in white is maneuvering a giant pizza dough behind a glass door. “The food is very good here, if you’re hungry.” She sits at table tucked away from the entrance, signals Adam to join her. “The place is called Actors’ Café, because it’s close to the National Theatre. And your hotel is right behind it so you’re quite close to home,” she reassures him. “I like it because it’s quiet.”

Adam enjoys the quietly mysterious turn of their evening – it feels like they’re out on a secret date. Cristina orders a bottle of wine and as they wait she lets out a long sigh and starts playing with the ring on her finger.

“Are you worried about Tick?”

“I don’t want to talk about him right now. If I was worried I would be at the hospital. But I’m here.” She takes out a pack of cigarettes from her bag, “Do you mind?”

“By all means, smoking seems to be the Romanian national sport. I may start taking it up myself.”

“Don’t.” Cristina lights up and blows the smoke to the side, making sure it goes around Adam. “Tell me something about you, but none of that bullshit adult stuff.” She reaches for the ashtray, brushing her hand against his. “What was Adam the kid like?”

“Brave,” he says and looks her in the eye. He can see the candle flame reflected in her irises, as if it’s been locked inside. “What about you?”

“Pretty much the same.”

The waiter brings over the bottle of red wine and fills their glasses. Adam raises his: “Spoiled little princess?”

“Devil dressed up as angel. Noroc!”

“Noroc!”

Adam takes a sip of wine, its fruity taste lingers on his tongue, soft and soothing – a well-deserved break. He sets down the glass and looks at Cristina as if he’s seeing her for the first time. She looks beautifully tired, her eyes twinkling with complicit mischief. Adam smiles. Cristina almost smiles back; she jumps up as if her chair has caught fire.

“Cristina?” A woman approaches the table, taking off her gloves and hat and hurries to give her a hearty hug. “Ce faci? Unde-i Tick?” She looks at Adam intrigued.

“La spital...S-a bătut cu jandarmii...” Adam looks at them, listening in, understanding. Despite her attempts to look cool, Cristina seems and sounds worried in Romanian.

“I’m sorry, Adam, this is my friend, Ana.”

“Nice to meet you.” The woman shakes Adam’s hand and drags over a chair, turning the table for two into a three-seat one. “Stau și eu cu voi până vine lumea.” Adam nods, confirming that he’s OK with her to join them.

“Do you speak Romanian?” Ana asks, several other questions queuing behind. She studies Adam with a far more piercing look than Cristina gave him the first time they met.

“No, no. I’m just intrigued by the sounds you guys make. Like you’re popping bubble wrap.”

“Adam is here to work for Radvertising. The gold mining campaign,” Cristina nods as if she’s giving him high praise. “We’re having a work drink.”

“Oh,” Ana takes a sip of Cristina’s wine. “Well, tonight’s events might change your mind. Romania is boiling at the moment.”

Adam can’t help hearing his father’s voice – the constant repetition of *things will never change here*.

“I’ve been hearing a lot of Romanian complaints lately,” Adam speaks prompted by the glass of wine he’s just finished. “Why don’t you guys leave?”

“And go where?”

“Somewhere better.”

“America?”

“It’s not that difficult. You’re smart!” He looks at Cristina. “You could go anywhere.”

“No thanks. I don’t want to leave.” Cristina takes off her sweater; the side of her tattoo sticks out from under the strap of her top.

“You never really leave this place,” offers Ana. “Even though you physically do. I lived abroad for a few years. You just end up living between worlds. No roots. Suspended...”

“Kind of like stoned,” Cristina laughs.

“More like a zombie.” Ana stands up to wave at a young man who’s just walked in. Cristina pulls her sweater over her shoulders and waves two fingers at the man.

“Are you guys eating? Do you want to join us at a bigger table?” Ana asks.

“No thanks we’re almost done,” Cristina gives Adam an inviting look. “Adam has a big day tomorrow, early start. Isn’t that—”

“Is that blood?” Ana points at Cristina’s neck.

“De la Tick,” Cristina sighs, her eyes drift into a desolate gaze, but she quickly snaps out of it. “What can we do about it now? We’ll worry about it tomorrow.” She raises the glass at Adam.

“Nice to meet you!” Ana shakes Adam’s hand. “Sună-mă,” she tells Cristina then heads for a bigger table where her friends are waiting for her.

“I’m tired. Are you tired? Should we leave?” Cristina empties her glass and signals the waiter for the check.

As they exit the restaurant she takes Adam’s arm and leads the way to the hotel as if they’re a couple on holiday. At reception, a male concierge stands up to greet them, giving Adam a proud nod as if to say *well done on the catch*. He opens his mouth to speak, but Adam directs Cristina to the elevator. They go up to his room as if they’ve been talking about it for days.

Room 983 is tidier than when he left it the previous night: the cushions on his bed, neatly aligned one on top of the other, his backpack no longer on the floor, but resting on the chair.

“Tidy room, Mr. Stan. You know I’ve never been inside The Intercontinental before?” Cristina takes off her boots and pads her red socks along the thick, brown carpet. “I guess something good came out of Tick getting his head smashed,” she laughs. “How else would I have seen what an Intercontinental room looks like?”

“It’s no big deal. Just an average hotel room.”

“To you. I’ve seen this hotel from outside since I was little. Always wanted to know what it’s like inside.” She scans the room as if she intends to buy it, then pouts disappointed: “Average.” She holds up a pack of Smoking papers, “Smoke?”

“I think it’s a non-smoking room, so...” Adam points to the ceiling. “Unless you want the fire alarms to go off—”

“They won’t.” Cristina walks to the window and pulls the curtain aside. She cracks open the door to the balcony. “We’ve been through a lot. We’ve earned the right to relax.” She sits on the armchair, takes out a small pack from her bag, “Do you have a book I can use?”

Adam takes out his notebook from his backpack. She places it on her lap, using it as support on which to mix the weed with the tobacco. “Don’t worry Adam, I’m making a very small one. Two puffs each. If the alarms go off we’ll just tell them it’s a special occasion.”

Adam sits on the floor next to her, his feet stretched out, touching the mini bar. He thinks of his mom and her special occasion smoking, her mood-saving cigarette break whenever something bad happened. He’d never seen her smoke in the States. Ever. But he did smell the scent of cigarette on her breath a few times...Now that he thinks about it, always following a Romania-related argument she’d have with Dad. They had quite a few after their big stateside reunion.

Cristina leads Adam to the window. She lights up the joint, takes a quick drag then passes it to him with a shivering hand. Adam takes a puff. His head feels animated, like a hot air balloon taking the piss out of gravity. Isn’t this some poor attempt of momentary escapism? Wasn’t the wine enough? His doubts dissipate with the second puff. It feels good, like the world pauses for him to get off and take a short but significant time out.

Cristina takes the last drag and throws the roach out the window. She rubs her arms a couple of times, “It’s cold!”

Adam wraps his coat around her shoulders, their faces close to one another he can feel her breath on his chin. He looks at the clock on the nightstand - just past midnight.

“You’ve got the shoot in the morning, don’t you?”

“Are you gonna be there?”

Cristina shakes her head.

“Then I’m not going either. United we stand.” He puts his hand in the air.

Cristina gives him a hug. “You’re a good one. Thanks for sticking around.” She gives him an extra squeeze, her perfume travels up his nostrils. “For letting me stay.” She lets go just as he’s about to hug her back. “We should rest. You especially. You may be the savior Roșia Montană has been waiting for.”

Adam removes the cushions off the bed and pulls the duvet to the side to make room for her to get in.

“So, tell me. Is this Roșia Montană the Romanian Hannah Montana?”

“Yeah, kind of...” She laughs and pulls him onto the bed. “Are you funny all over?” She tugs at his t-shirt, drawing him closer to her.

Adam takes her head in his hands, holding it still, and stares at her, lingering on the details of her face. First the eyes, he observes all

their lines and dots and waves of color, their green explosions, fading out brown and yellow; then her nose, small and pointy, with its scattered freckles as if they randomly fell out of some drunken fairy's pocket; then the dent above her lip, a perfect fit for his fingertip; and finally her lips, slightly parted, full and flushed.

Cristina puckers her lips and blows air on his face, making him blink twice. He pulls her close to him in one rapid move, their breaths embrace. Must be the high, or the post-adrenaline rush, or the wine, or a combination of all, or none of them, maybe it's just Adam riding out his impulse, but he goes for it. He kisses her without letting go of her head, holding it effortlessly as if it's been sewn to his palms. She lets out a consenting moan and seals the deal with her tongue. It should feel wrong for everyone else involved like Tick and even Karen, but it feels just right for the two of them. The only ones here, anyway. *We'll worry about it tomorrow*, Cristina's words still very much alive in the back of his head. What are consequences anyway? Conning sequences linking the past to the future. Where does the *now* fit in all of this? Nowhere. Now here.

They pull the clothes off each other as if they're burning through their skin, preventing an excruciating combustion. Cristina parts her legs, her bent knees look like wings about to extend for propulsion. She pulls him inside her. Her lips brush against his ear: "You're my first..." She pauses waiting for him to pause. Adam can hear her smile – tiny bubbles of saliva trapped between her lips and teeth, pop under the full stretch of

her mouth. "American," she whispers, restoring his heart-breath for a second.

His passport may testify to Adam being an American, his dick however, is as Romanian as they come.

The Romanian equivalent of *coming* is *a-ți da drumul*. Literal translation, *letting yourself go*.

“I didn’t think you’re *that kind* of American,” Peter ponders as the car indicator tick-tocks his intention to make a right turn.

Adam sinks back into the passenger seat, wondering how many kinds of Americans there are and whether he’s met any of them. He rubs his eyes, his hands still impregnated with Cristina’s smell, “What kind is that?”

“You know, the tourist kind...The kind who gets excited to see a shitty monument like People’s House.”

Adam has known it as the Republic’s House. He was five when he first heard about the great communist building, the building to outmatch all buildings – quite possibly the first sketch Dad had ever shown him. Now with the Republic gone, the house went back to the people. At least by name.

The car heads down the boulevard, steam rising from the drain holes, as if the concrete is letting out visible sighs of pain.

“Why do you want to see it?” Peter won’t let it rest.

“Curious, I guess.”

They were supposed to be on set at 8, but Iancu postponed the shoot till midday on account of the actor’s train being delayed, thus giving Adam a few hours to do whatever he pleases. It’s not just *curiosity*

urging him to see the People's House – more like an unspoken commitment to his child self, his family, their past.

The massive construction raises ahead, fat and opulent, taking over the horizon. Adam tugs at his seatbelt to lean closer to the windshield. He's hypnotized by the epic mass of marble and stone. Its cacophonous architecture makes it look like a three tier wedding cake ordered by an indecisive bride who went ahead and contracted three different head chefs, giving each one full control over their respective layer.

"It's ugly," Peter concludes as if he's seeing it for the first time.

"Just big."

"And ugly. He really went for it."

"Ceaușescu?"

"Who else? Look at it!" He points at the never ending fence surrounding the marble colossus. "You heard of the small dick syndrome? When men get expensive cars to compensate for a small dick? This is the small dick dictator syndrome."

Peter pulls in the driveway and hands a guard a couple of banknotes to let them in the parking lot. "You don't want to walk all the way to the entrance – it would take us three days. I don't think you'll have time to visit it all."

"I don't mind; just want to have a look."

The closer they get to the entrance the bigger the façade gets – it's not a building, it's the entrance to a city, a modern day fort.

“What is it with Americans and People's House?” Peter asks as he turns off the ignition. “Everyone wants to see it. I know, I know, it's the second largest building in the world after your Pentagon, but trust me, it's no big deal. I mean it's big, huge. But that's about it. Americans go crazy about it. Like it was built by their relatives or something,” he laughs and opens the door to the car. “Do you want a guide?”

“One that's better than you?”

Peter straightens his back as he walks up the steps, clears his throat and speaks up in a serious voice: “Here it is in all its glory. People's House or the Palace of the Parliament. Today it houses the Romanian Senate. It took about 7 or 8 years to build, over 700 architects worked on it, tens of thousands of builders did 24 hour shifts, seven days a week and if I am not mistaken, in order to build it, our illustrious leader had to destroy about 30 streets, tearing down churches, synagogues and roughly 30 thousand houses.” Peter shrugs and waves his hand at the numbers he's just uttered, “Small price to pay for such a glorious edifice!” He spits on the last step and opens the door to the entrance inviting Adam inside.

They go past the security check and head over to one of the grand reception rooms. A greedy display of marble and gold, chandeliers the size of jeeps are hanging from the ceiling. Adam looks up, his head

arched back, mouth half open, like a child faced with the enormity of a colossus.

“I got it!” Peter rushes over from across the room. “It’s not the history that makes Americans want to come here. They just like big things, am I right?” He sticks a flyer under Adam’s nose. “Look, check out the numbers!” He begins to read out loud: “1 million cubic meters of marble – all from Transylvania, 3500 metric tons of crystal used for the 480 chandeliers, 700 000 tons of steel and bronze, 900 000 cubic meters of wood and 200 000 square meters of carpets, many of which were spun right here, they brought in the weaving machines. And people think Romania is a poor country...” He pauses to look at Adam: “Who do you think paid for all this?”

“The people?”

“Exactly. All those power cuts, food rationing, three hours of hot water a day. But it was all worth it. Michael Jackson visited the People’s House in the 90s. He waved at us from this balcony.” Peter points at a row of windows overlooking the main boulevard. “He waved and said: I love you Budapest! And we cried and waved back. Boy we love them Americans,” he laughs and elbows Adam. “If only they loved us back.”

Peter’s words remind Adam of a day out, one of his first memories of his American childhood. Dad had taken him to see a baseball match and they went for hot dogs afterwards. The vendor asked Dad about his accent, asked if he was Romanian. It made Dad turn red with shame. He

blushed all the way to the tip of his ears, as if the man had told him his fly was open.

“I don’t mean you.” Peter taps Adam’s shoulder. “You’re not a typical American.”

“Even if I wanted to see the People’s House?”

“I guess it makes up for all the sacrifice.” Peter checks his watch. “We should go. Iancu said to be there before 12. I can bring you back another time if you want. But you should know the real deal is underground.”

“Tunnels?”

“And safe rooms. I don’t know if it’s true, but apparently the house is even bigger underground. Stretches on for miles and miles.”

Adam wonders what was Dad’s exact contribution and how many of the 700 architects had fled the country while working on the People’s House. He wonders if Dad had ever seen it finished and what he thought about it.

As they walk outside, Adam notices cracks in one of the columns supporting the main floor: “It’s starting to crumble,” he tells Peter.

“I hope it traps all the Parliament inside when it does. The people should live and work here, not the greedy rulers. I would turn it into a brothel, or a house for the homeless,” he boasts. “Or even better, they should sell it to the mining company. There’s plenty of gold inside. I’ll suggest it to Iancu.”

It's the first time Adam has heard Peter talk about work, about the actual work of the agency.

“What do you think about this campaign?” Adam asks as they get back in the car.

“What do I think? I think I'm the driver. I don't have to think about this campaign. Or any other campaign. And that makes me very happy.”

The Romanian equivalent of *ignorance is bliss* is *fericiți cei săraci cu duhul*. Literal translation, *happy are those who are poor in spirit*.

“ACȚIUNE!”

Brando said it: *Just because someone shouts ACTION doesn't mean you have to do anything.* Being in front of the camera can make people go crazy, they act like they've just caught a direct line to God and they're adamant to give him everything they've got.

The set is improvised inside a depot, fake walls erected to create the illusion of a small, modest room with a table and chair, where this supposedly poor woman from Roșia Montană, is barely making ends meet. She rubs her hands together, frets, her voice all moist, infused with various degrees of pain, from soap opera to macabre and even grand opera.

Adam has a hard time focusing on the monitor, as it's being covered almost entirely by Iancu's thick neck. He manages to squeeze through by giving the big man a subtle nudge to the side.

“Cut! Cut!” Iancu shouts making everyone freeze. He turns to Adam: “You're leaning on me? Are you tired? Do you want a coffee?”

Adam shakes his head, but Iancu raises his puffy hand, signaling Laura, the eager assistant-translator to bring over some coffee. “I like you,” Iancu offers to Adam in a fatherly tone. “You're the kind of person who gets me, I like that about you. And you've got vision, but above all

you've got this..." He puts his thumb, forefinger and middle finger together like a pious Christian about to cross himself, only to end up shaking his hand like an Italian mobster: "You've got this quiet intelligence. Today's gonna be a hard one. I need you to focus!" His pronunciation of 'focus' sounds a lot like 'fuck us.'

What does he mean by quiet? Is this Iancu's way of telling Adam he should keep any and all opinions to himself? With every take he is finding it harder and harder to keep quiet. As much as he's trying to, Adam can't disregard what the woman in front of the camera is saying. Although his assistant has been translating everything but the text of the testimonial, Adam is fully aware of what's being said in Romanian and he can't just shut himself out from being irritated by the exaggerated drama, the ridiculousness of it all.

Behind the camera, the art-director Andrei seems concerned with visibly overstating the woman's desperation. He is struggling to widen the shot without Iancu's knowledge – an impossible task seeing as the boss-man is already on his third coffee which seems to be giving him ubiquitous powers. Iancu walks back and forth between the monitor and the set, fidgeting like a compulsive gambler watching a race.

Adam takes a sip of coffee and decides to speak up, prompted by a now or never moment of clarity. He walks up to Iancu, almost bumping into him: "Why don't we adjust the pace? I think it might be a bit too—"

Iancu lets out a hopeless sigh, “I know! It’s this fucking art-director.” He complains about the man he’s hired himself, a man who’s only two feet away, clearly hearing what’s being said about him.

“Ce te uiți, bă?” Iancu barks at Andrei, directing him in Romanian with a sentence sprinkled with the word dick, something along the lines of: *you dick, you are not sticking your dick up my message for your dick art wank!*

Andrei pulls his cap over his eyes in a childish attempt to render himself invisible. He keeps tugging at the visor until he succeeds to cover two thirds of his face. Before he has the time to react to Andrei’s reaction with a few more curses, Iancu’s phone rings.

“Do you want to know what he’s saying?” Laura shows up next to Adam, giggling. He shakes his head wishing he could shake her off as well, but his personal translator is unshakeable: “Everyone is talking about you.” Adam already knows what she’s going to say, mainly because he can understand everything everyone says. He’s still amused at how they all refer to him as *The American* – sounds quite flattering in English, as if he’s a mysterious character from an Altman film, but the way they’re saying it in Romanian, in a hurry, no consideration for the definite article: *Americanu’* instead of *Americanul* makes it sound like they’re talking about a scummy gangster.

“They do not call you by your name,” she laughs. “They say—”

“This is what I have to deal with!” Iancu pushes Laura aside and points at his phone, as if all of his problems are embodied in it. “This is how things work in Romania, we have smart people, but sometimes, God help me. I told them this woman is babbling her words, she can’t even speak Romanian properly. It’s good, makes her seem desperate, but we want her to...” He makes a fist, puts it in front of his mouth, then stretches out his fingers as if he’s miming the action of throwing up. “She has to enunciate, and now they’re calling me on the day of the shoot to ask if I want them to send someone to replace her.” Adam pictures a dresser full of people, waiting to be picked out to be sent to Bucharest for their once in a lifetime chance in front of the camera. “I don’t fucking want them to find me another one!” Iancu shouts. “They should have gotten off their dicks and found me a good one from the start. I’m not paying studio time with money from their mother’s cunt!” He gently taps Adam’s shoulder. “Come on, let’s have a bite.”

They walk to the other side of the set towards a big table laid out for lunch. The woman slash actor slash worried citizen takes small, uncertain steps, following them from behind.

Adam picks up a sandwich and a Coke, Iancu pulls him aside. “Be honest. What do you think?” He points at the woman, who’s taken a sandwich and is now looking around before opening it as if to ask for permission. As nobody pays her any attention, she starts to take small

bites like a squirrel holding on to a well-earned nut for as long as possible.

“She seems a bit too...Eager, and desperate, is this what you really—”

“I don’t see it,” Iancu shakes his head. “I can’t feel the pain. There’s no pain there,” he proclaims with desolation. “I just want to go there and pinch her. I don’t want her to cry from physical pain, God forbid! We don’t want this to be fake. But I need to see desperation. It has to be more of it. Her life and the life of her children depend on this project to go through. She’s just too relaxed. As if the money and the jobs are already there. Well they’re not, are they?”

“I think you’re trying too hard. If anything, she seems too into it.”

“Into it, my ass. She thinks it’s some fucking star system, like she’s here to film a movie. And she hasn’t even learned the fucking lines. I knew we should have brought in a professional.”

“The brief was for real people—”

“Real people my dick. It’s advertising. Even journalists make up people for their stories nowadays. We have no problem pretending, it’s what we do best.” He gives Adam a complicit wink, a sort of ‘welcome to the club’ sign. The woman smiles shyly from the other end of the table, as if she’s in it too. She’s clearly out of place with her modest haircut and despairing face, but the avid twinkle in her eye confirms this is the biggest moment of her life, one guaranteed to either make or break her.

“She needs to look even more desperate. Maybe make-up can help,” Iancu ponders while ripping the meat off a chicken leg, with a barbarian zest.

“Look,” Adam puts his hand on Iancu’s shoulder and adopts a calm and soothing tone: “How about we let her do her own thing, you know? After all, we’re shooting a testimonial. Why not let her talk about the mining project in her own words. See what she comes up with. You might be surprised. It could be natural and believable, not—”

“Are you high?” Iancu’s upper lip lets out a twitch showing off his horsey teeth, a bit of burned chicken skin stuck between them. “Did you hear her talk with her own words? No. She’s worse than Elena Ceaușescu. Listen, we want this project to go through, not kill it before it takes off the ground.”

“Thought it was about shooting a strong testimonial. You can’t control its outcome. Who cares what happens to the mining project?”

Iancu shrugs off Adam’s hand so he can put his imposing palm on Adam’s shoulder: “Let me take you through this whole thing again, because I think you’re missing the point of this campaign. I’ll put it in a story so you can understand better. Say you have a house, yeah? It’s been in the family for generations. But you don’t give a shit about the state of the house because you’re not a builder, nor an architect. You have your job, decent, but not very well paid, enough for you to live your life.”

“Am I Romanian?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Iancu sighs. “Romanian. Then your house starts falling down. You can still live in it, but it’s not like it used to be. And then the economic crash comes and you lose your job. Then this company comes over...”

“A Romanian company or a foreign one?” Adam asks wearily, prompted by his latent Romanian-ness.

“Foreign, even better. They say: hey, your house is falling down, but you know, those windows and door frames and all the woodwork, that’s actually valuable. They offer to take out everything that’s of value; you even get paid for the fucking paint on the walls. They get part of the share and you get the most. Let’s say 70 – 30, wouldn’t you want this deal to go through? Wouldn’t you be really desperate to get on board?”

“I’m not sure the parity is—”

“Wouldn’t you rather know that you’re leaving your kids with some decent money instead of a house that’s falling apart? Not only that, but this company offers to give you money to move out, money for a new home, and they give you a job as a supervisor to manage the works they’re doing on your old house. So you’re basically getting paid to watch how they make you money. Would you say no to that? Wouldn’t you listen to an expert like myself to help you get the best out of this deal?”

“What I’m trying to say is that the situation is bad enough with the protests plenty of people who seem to be against it. Why not offer them

an honest perspective – let the woman speak in her own words. Let her fine tune the level of her desperation.”

Iancu snorts and waves his hand dismissively, “You keep bringing up the fucking protests.” He shakes his head: “The investors have been extracting gold all over the world. Why didn’t other countries protest? Why? Because they’re happy to be part of such a lucrative deal. I don’t know what’s gotten into you. Maybe you spent too much time looking outside your hotel window and you got scared by those people at Universitate. That’s not the majority! You just relax and do your job. It’s what I’m paying you for.” Iancu closes his eyes and takes a deep, calming-himself breath. “Is Laura doing her job? Has she been telling you everything that’s going on in front of the camera?”

Adam shrugs.

“Of course you’re confused. You don’t know what everyone’s saying!” Iancu is raging red again. “Laura?” he shouts in between short, heavy breaths – less than a heartbeat away from heart attack. The girl scurries over, trips on some cables, but restores her balance just in time. Iancu puts his arm around her shoulders and starts decanting instructions in her ear; Laura’s eyes widen and widen to the point where they could easily burst apart. She lets out a series of manic nods which seem to have a calming effect on Iancu. He looks around the room: “Gata toată lumea?”

“He’s asking if everyone’s ready,” Laura whispers in Adam’s ear.

“Hai, oameni buni, hai!” Iancu announces a new round of filming prompting everyone to drop their half-eaten sandwiches and resume positions.

The makeup artist gives the woman’s face one final touch up, wiggles a thick brush over her simple, wrinkled cheeks, making them look alive.

“I’m telling her we’re rehearsing first, but you let the camera roll,” Iancu instructs Andrei.

The woman takes her seat on the chair, looks at the camera and starts to speak in a faint, death-approaching voice.

“CUT!” Iancu walks on set almost knocking down one of the walls. He grabs the woman’s arms, giving her a short, confident shake, and then proceeds to whisper something in her ear. Adam asks Andrei to zoom in on her face – she’s like a virgin treading the line between laughing and crying, her eyes widen with horror, her lips pucker with excitement.

“Liniște!” Iancu turns to Adam like a pitcher on his first day on the mound: “Let’s go, I can feel it this time!” He claps his hands like a villain who’s uncovered the perfect weapon to destroy the world.

The woman closes her eyes, breathes in and turns her face to the camera. *Fuck you Norma Desmond, I’m ready for my close up, too.* Iancu screams: “ACȚIUNE!” After a brief pause, the woman begins to talk in a heartbreaking voice, her eyes moist; the end of each word coming out of

her mouth seems to be a repressed cry. She patiently explains how there is no other hope for her to get work and live her life unless the mining starts. How this project saves lives and brings wealth back to her village and how the entire country will end up making money – Iancu’s speech reloaded, with a female (em)pathetic twist.

Iancu’s eyes are glinting from behind the monitor. He’s got it, right there at the limit between affecting and mawkish, tipping slightly more towards the latter. He approaches Adam, nodding satisfied, and shakes his hand. “Golden. Just golden. That was it!”

“Let’s try one more take using my suggestion. See what she can offer by herself.”

“What? Why? No, it was perfect.”

“It was still a bit too much. She was good, but too vaudeville if you ask me. Too much melodrama. You want to keep this real and believable.”

Iancu scratches his head, mesmerized by the word believable. “This is melodrama, we need tears. Reality is not all make-up and smiles. It’s snot, and tears of desperation. We want the people watching to feel what she’s feeling.”

Adam looks at the woman who is chatting to the make-up artist, all giddy like a high school girl on prom night. “She’s feeling great. She doesn’t give fuck.”

Iancu puts his hand over his mouth and lets it drop, holding on to his chin. “What are you saying exactly?”

“Let’s tone it down.” Adam feels involved in this ad for the very first time.

“What the fuck are you talking about? Tone what down?” Iancu is not his friend anymore.

“Listen!” Adam takes hold of Iancu’s arm only to release it, prompted by a furious nostril flare. “I didn’t mean to—”

“You didn’t mean what?” Iancu straightens his sleeve, wiping off any trace of Adam. “I thought we were on the same page.” He makes a book with his hands.

“We were. We are,” Adam speaks up. “It’s all about the work, isn’t it? Don’t you want what’s best?”

“That was best. Better than best,” Iancu brags. “I think you’re a bit confused because we got it all in one take. We Romanians are productive.”

“Efficiency speaks very little of quality. Why not try just one more take. Let her use her own words. Make it less...Directed. Too much acting.”

“Do you think the fact that she can’t feed her children is an act?” Iancu’s face turns red.

“All I’m saying is—”

“Your job is not to say. It’s to listen to what I say. You did a very good job so far and you don’t need to get involved more than you already have.” Iancu pinches Adam’s cheek as if he’s a cheeky five year old, who’s trying to outsmart a gangster. “Don’t you tell me what tone to use in my commercial. You don’t even speak Romanian! And at the end of the day, I’m paying you. Not the other way around.” He lets go of Adam’s cheek. “When I said we got it, we got it. And that’s a wrap.” Iancu turns to the rest of the team and shouts: “GATA! Acasă toată lumea!”

Adam grabs his backpack and heads for the exit. Peter is leaning on his car, playing Diamond Mine on his phone: “Finished?”

“Yeah, take me back please.”

“Iancu said he wants to go, too. Will drive you both—”

“He said you should drop me off first and then come back for him.” Adam gets in the front. Peter drives off, his phone ringing underneath Adam’s butt: “How about that Paraziții?” Adam turns on the stereo loud, the phone’s insisting ring tone covered by a hoarse voice belting out: *Sunt făcut de-așa natură să te fut în gură.*

“My nature is to fuck you in the mouth,” Peter translates with pride as the phone stops ringing.

That’s a wrap! Adam clenches his fists – he hasn’t felt this much fury against one man since his father left without a word. Same as then the truth has carefully and systematically passed him by, turning him into

a mere pawn, his will too weak to matter. He wishes he could get a hold of Cristina – she’s the only one who can empathize with his indignation.

“Do you have Cristina’s number?” Adam asks as the car pulls in front of The Intercontinental Hotel.

“Who?”

“Cristina, from the agency. I think she’s an intern.” He hands Peter his phone and takes out his, waiting for the number.

“Ten missed calls from Iancu,” Peter grunts. “What Cristina? I don’t know any Cristina. Are you sure she’s with the agency? Maybe she’s a client.”

“No, she definitely works for Iancu. She’s got medium short hair, and this tattoo on her back of a–”

“Melting clock?”

Adam’s face animates, he proceeds to turn on his phone. “Yes! Yes! That’s her.”

“Cristina doesn’t work for Iancu,” Peter laughs showing Adam the full sky of his mouth. “No, no, she’s his daughter.”

Cer means *sky*. As well as *I ask*. Skyesque.

“Answer me, Adam!” Dad’s voice breaks through the laptop speakers in short, high-pitched squeals: “Why did you have to argue with him? He’s your employer!” The lines on his face twitch with anger and disappointment. “Can you answer me?” Dad doesn’t give up. “Can you?”

Adam clears his throat: “What?” he sighs, the question directed more at himself than at his father. What’s there to say? That he’s been having second thoughts? That he’s learned to spot the lies and he doesn’t want to be a part of them?

“Can you answer me, Adam? What is wrong with you?”

Adam has reached a point where his father’s words no longer dig inside him. He feels immune to his demands and he’s no longer willing to follow them religiously to help shape up Dad’s personal Adam or American Adam or work Adam. Always *something* or *someone’s* Adam. Never just Adam.

“So what if he’s my employer? He’s been feeding me a bunch of lies.”

“That’s not up to—”

“Me to question?” Adam lets out a pitiful smile. He wants to shout *you’ve always been a scared rabbit*, to Dad’s face, but he swallows his words instead, fully aware that his father’s outlook is too old and too rigid

to change. He recalls every word in Dad's fiery speech about Romania's caged animals and their odious master, the one he ran away from, only to blindly obey several other masters – his employers. "I went to see your Republic House. They call it People's House now. You would be proud. It's colossal and sad..." Adam pauses, his gaze focused on the Skype window, Dad's jaw trembling with disbelief. "Maybe if you had questioned your employer--"

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Maybe. But I intend to find out. Been thinking about extending my stay--"

"Extend your what?"

"My stay."

"Why would you do that? This was not part of the plan, Adam. Do the job and come back home. Remember?"

Adam takes a deep breath but says nothing. It would be like talking to a wall. Dad could never understand that this work trip has inevitably brought back memories about his family. His Romanian family. That being here makes him want to go out and find them. *What for?* To make up for 22 lost years. *To what purpose?* Just to be able to say *I'm sorry*. To be told *you're forgiven*.

There's a knock on the door, short, as if unwilling to disturb. Adam looks up from his desktop, another knock follows for confirmation.

“Hold on.” He walks to the door in his underwear, struggling to put on his jeans. Cristina is standing in the doorway, a welcome-me smile on her face.

“Who’s there?” Dad wants to know.

“My driver, I have to go. Talk to you later.” He closes the laptop, cutting off Dad before he has the time to react.

Cristina walks in the room, her bag across her chest like a newspaper boy. She takes off her red beanie, the hair on the top of her head unwilling to let go, stretching up its electrified attraction. Her cheeks are flushed, light pink, as if they’ve been gently but repeatedly pinched by cold fingers. She’s beautiful even now with her cracked lips and fuzzy hair. Is that enough to trust her? Why did she lie?

“Driver?” Cristina nods, letting her bag drop on the floor – it touches the carpet, and then slouches into rest. “Is that what I am?” She sinks into the armchair and removes her coat, allowing her shoulders to breathe. The white fur reminds Adam of the sheepskin coats worn by Romanian shepherds, “*Your* driver?”

“Sorry.” He points at the laptop: “That was–”

“I don’t need to know. Don’t worry, I mean it. I’m not pretending to be cool. I really am.” She stands up as if pulled by an invisible hand, takes Adam’s coat from the chair and hands it to him: “Come on, I’m taking you out.”

“Where to?”

“You’ll see.” She helps him put on his coat and zips it up for him as if he were a child. “We’re gonna have some fun.”

They walk out of the hotel into the daylight, Universitate Square is empty and clean, as if the protests never took place. The cold January sun envelops the buildings, light glinting off the windows here and there in what looks like a secret code. Cristina takes Adam’s arm to cross the street, but he pulls back reluctant. “There is no need to worry,” she reassures him. “I am not after marriage, or children, or a relationship. You are safe.” She attempts to touch him again, this time succeeding to trap his hand: “And I’m not curious at all about your personal life. Not one bit. You are your own man, Adam Stan.”

Maybe she’s being honest. She sounds honest. Then why not tell the truth about Iancu? What if it’s all just a game? All of it! Her and Tick, the injury, last night, her now...She’s talking *to* him and *about* him as if she’s uncovered a gem-stone which she’s now polishing, bringing it to light.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Patience, American,” she enunciates the word *American*, traces of spite and malice reverberate in her voice.

As they reach the other side of the boulevard Adam steps into some dog shit. He starts to rub his sole on snow, but the white can’t seem to wipe out all the brown, as if it’s been glued to his foot.

Cristina starts laughing: “Don’t get rid of it! That’s good luck. I mean, at least in Romania. If you step in shit here, you should go and buy a lottery ticket.”

Adam recalls all the silly superstitions grandma Bea was so hung up on, like not taking the trash out after the sun has set, or the three bad hours on Tuesdays which she avoided by not leaving her flat, or not whistling inside. He smiles and keeps wiping his foot on snow.

“What happened last night?”

“You don’t remember?” Cristina puts her head on his shoulder and starts caressing his arm, letting out a demonstrative moan.

“I mean after–”

“So you remember the before?”

“Yeah, of course I remember the before.” He inspects his sole, satisfied with its cleanliness – all traces of Romanian good luck gone. He looks at her victoriously: “Do you?”

“I’ve had better.” She starts inspecting her nails as if she’s looking for proofs of better. “That was mean and not true.”

“Then why disappear without a sign?”

“You’ve been here what? Three days?” Cristina speeds up, dragging Adam after her.

“Four.”

“And you’ve already caught the Balkan drama. I just went home. I didn’t...” She pauses to enunciate: “Disappear! How was your day? Was your shoot a roaring success?”

Adam shrugs, “Why don’t you ask your dad?”

“I would, but he’s been caught up in meetings all day.” She takes out a cigarette from her purse and lights it up.

Adam waits for her to react to the fact that he knows she’s Iancu’s daughter. He’s waiting for her to apologize.

“Look!” Cristina points at a McDonalds across the street. “That’s where we used to hang out in the 90s. Back when McDonalds was cool.” She laughs and looks at Adam, inviting him to join her.

He’s dead serious: “Why did you lie?”

“About what?” Her face turns red. Not pink. Red.

“You didn’t tell me Iancu is your dad.”

“Does it matter?”

Adam stares at the pattern on her shoes, a maze of curved and straight lines. “Of course it matters,” he mumbles.

“Why?”

“Because I work with him? Because I slept with you? Because he drives me mad?” He clears his throat after having uttered the word *mad*, aware of his overdone performance. “You should have told me,” he offers in a calm, low voice. “Why didn’t you?”

“Did you have fun with him today?” Cristina procrastinates giving him a straight answer.

“He’s an asshole.”

“Huge one, sometimes,” she offers apologetically. “But he’s a good father. Did he at least have the decency not to turn it into a freak show?”

“You will love it. It’s full of drama. A successful tear jerker. Stop changing the subject!”

“Here we are.” Cristina points at the entrance into Cișmigiu Park. “I know you’re off in a couple of days so I wanted to show you one of the oldest parks in Bucharest. It’s one of the few places where you can find good, clean snow.”

Adam remembers coming here with Dad one winter. They’d built a tunnel next to the skating rink.

“Come on!” Cristina jumps over a small fence and runs towards a half-built fort.

“I’m still mad at you!” Adam shouts, his words echo in the park, scaring off a couple of crows who fly out of the bushes.

“Good. Then you can fight me.” Cristina hides behind the fort and throws a snowball in Adam’s direction. “With snow!”

“I’d rather hear you say you’re sorry.”

“For what? That my dad is Iancu? I’m not sorry. I wouldn’t have existed otherwise.” She puts on her gloves and starts to strengthen the

wall of her fort. “Thanks for asking about Tick, though,” she throws at him, a hint of vitriol emanating from the tone in her voice. “He’s getting better, in case you were wondering.”

“I wasn’t, but I’m glad to hear it. So why didn’t you tell me?” Adam kneels in front of her, the fort between them. He moves his hand along the wall of snow and tears up a chunk the size of his fist to make a snow ball. “What’s the catch? Some sick father-daughter plan?”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Adam.” Cristina covers the hole left by Adam’s greedy hand. “What’s with the paranoia? It may surprise you but not everything revolves around you.”

His left eyelid twitches as if all the anger inside his body has been stored in this one little place, about to break free.

“I just didn’t think it was important. I still don’t.” She sits up to look at him: “There’s this Zen proverb I really love...” She pauses to think and takes a deep breath, “What is your original face before your mother and father were born?”

Adam can see his tiny reflection in her eyes, his head with his ruffled hair and his hands by his side like a helpless child.

“We’re not defined by our parents,” Cristina whispers. “Designed, maybe...” She looks for the word: “Genetically. But that’s all.”

Adam crosses his arms. He can see his dad at the dinner table, performing the exact same action, left hand over right, whenever Adam and his mom would disagree with him.

“Why did you say he was an asshole, though? What did he do? Shout at you? Embarrass you?”

“Advertising and ethics don’t really team up well, do they?” Adam delivers a spot on Iancu accent making her laugh. “Commercials are not supposed to make people happy, we’re just telling them they’re gonna be happy.”

“Yeah but this is not butter you’re selling now, or detergent to trusting housewives. Maybe if you were Romanian, you would understand.”

Adam looks at his perfectly round snowball and starts throwing it from one hand to the other: “Iancu’s Romanian, and so are you. You had no problem lecturing me. Why don’t you lecture him, too? Change his mind about the campaign if you think it’s so bad. You’re his daughter.”

“I can’t change his mind *because* I’m his daughter. And I’m a hypocrite. I’m still taking his money. What do you have to lose?”

“Sorry, but I’m not here to help you get what you want.”

“It’s not about what I want.” Cristina puts her fist through the fort, breaking it down the middle. “It’s about what’s right. It’s not even about the gold. Romanian gold has been sold and given away for so many years it almost feels like a tradition. Ceaușescu did it, sold massive parts of it to England at a fucking auction. It’s about what they’re going to do to the land. They’ll poison nature.”

Adam shrugs, “I didn’t come here to make Romania a better place. I’m not the hero you were waiting for.” He lies on his back, a couple of wrens pierce through the blue-grey sky.

Cristina sits down next to him: “I didn’t want to tell you Iancu was my father because I was ashamed,” her voice trembles under the burden of truth. “You know why I love Bucharest? Why I could never leave? It’s such an honest city. The people who live here, myself included, are all liars and hypocrites. But Bucharest doesn’t pretend. It wears its scars with honor and dignity, like a rape victim that completely came to terms with its past.”

Adam touches her hand, and starts playing with the ring on her thumb. He rubs his finger against the silver pattern, a line of Xs holding hands. “I want to tell you something,” he says, and pauses, trying to assess the effect his words might have, not on her, but on himself.

“Oh, let me tell you something first.” Cristina sits up and goes through her bag. “Actually, give you something.” She takes out Adam’s notebook from her bag: “This ended up in my bag after I rolled the joint last night. By accident, I swear.”

Adam reaches out for the notebook, but he drops it on the snow. Dad’s postcard falls out, landing in front of him, the writing facing up. He turns to Cristina, eyes closed, hoping that he’ll make it out unharmed, like a thread sliding through the needle’s eye: “Sunt român.”

The term for *needle's eye* in Romanian is *urechea acului*, literal translation, *needle's ear*.

It's been over four months since Adam has first seen the testimonial on TV – *testimoanial* as Cristina calls it, more heartbreaking than the climax of a Greek tragedy. Popular, too. There seems to be no commercial break without it: not only on prime time national television, but aggressively broadcast on at least twenty other channels. Makes Adam cringe every time it comes on. If only they'd tone it down a bit, but Radvertising went for it full on. They've made use of the cheesiest, most sickening takes; the woman, one inch away from pulling her hair out, begging for support from the Romanian people in Iancu's melodramatic words. If the project fails she'll definitely have a shot at a career in the soap opera industry. Sex sells? Try tears.

Despite it all, the ad has actually served Adam well. He has decided to extend his stay in Romania after having missed his flight – on purpose – using the money earned from the job to rent a studio next to Cișmigiu. Cristina managed to secure him the coziest pad with a big balcony overlooking the park, right above the spot where his *Romanian confession* took place. A mere coincidence bound to remind Adam of his new-found integrity? There's no going back now; he's ripped off the twenty-year old band aid of forgetfulness revealing the deep open wound of family history, one he's now determined to help heal. Something Dad

fully disapproves of. He even threatened Adam with coming to Bucharest himself to bring him back home. As if that's ever gonna happen. Mom however, is very supportive, eager to receive secret Skype updates whenever she has the house to herself.

Romanian Adam has been quite the loner over the past couple of months, seeing Cristina less and less after she decided to patch things up with Tick; with Mike out of the picture too, who headed back to the States for some relationship managing of his own. Left to his own devices, Adam has had no choice but to work out the courage to get in touch with his cousin through his Facebook profile. Matei hasn't changed a lot from the pictures, same wavy hair like a poodle, same mischievous eyes. He seems thrilled at the thought of a reunion and he's invited Adam to his birthday party in a café close to Old Town.

There is something oddly familiar about summertime Bucharest. It speaks out to Adam enticing him; even the choking dust and the heat burning through the pavement, as if it's hiding hell underneath and not being ignited from above. The city feels less bleak than in winter, more hopeful, despite the stuffy, barely breathable air.

Adam leaves his flat two hours earlier to find the most suitable present for the cousin he hardly remembers, heading for Cristina's favorite bookshop. After walking around it, ground floor to top level, browsing through the piles of Romanian books, foreign literature, and the comics section, the question arises – does Matei even read? Before he can

think of an answer, a title in red letters catches his eye *ION* by Liviu Rebreanu. Adam wonders whatever happened to his childhood friend, whether he's left the mountains. Matei might know something about him. The thought of seeing his cousin after twenty two years is both exciting and unsettling.

Adam finally walks out of the shop with two DVDs: *The Deer Hunter* and *Once Upon a Time in America*, guaranteed to strike Matei's childhood chord. He cuts across Universitate Boulevard, heading over to the Old Town, the newly restored part of Bucharest, still bearing the signs of a picturesque 19th century architecture. Most of the tradesmen's old houses have been turned into small posh cafes, restaurants and by the sound of it, clubs.

The café where he's meeting Matei is tucked behind one of the main streets, the skeleton of a giant bike, hangs above the door, both of its wheels branded with the letter M. As soon as Adam sticks his head inside, he's pulled in by a man one head taller than him.

"Adam!" Matei gives him a massive bear hug and kisses his cheeks, his beard all soft and cushiony.

"Ce faci?" he asks out of breath from the tight embrace.

Matei shushes him: "Don't speak Romanian. Everyone knows you're my..." He pauses then barks out with pride: "American cousin." He brings Adam to a table full of people. "You don't speak Romanian.

You're too cool for that," Matei whispers in his ear and gives him a conspiratorial wink. "Meet my friends!"

Adam proceeds to shake all the hands around the table, instantly forgetting everyone's name – three men, about the same age as his cousin and their respective girlfriends.

"Come on, what are you drinking?" Matei squeezes Adam's bicep the way uncle D used to do. "Look at you, all grown up." He pulls him towards the bar. "What are you having? I can make you a dry Martini. Give you an extra olive?" He elbows Adam and points at the bottles shelved above the bar, "This is my little business," he chuckles puffing out his chest like a rooster. "I left school when I started it. Keeps me going." He walks behind the bar to wash his hands. "Some months better than others, but I'm making a decent living!" He rubs his hands together with pride. "What should I make you? Have a seat," he instructs Adam and pulls out a bottle of Absolut Pepper. "Bloody Mary?"

Adam nods, "La mulți ani!" He hands his cousin the present.

"English!" Matei puts down the bottle, wipes his palms on his jeans and takes the parcel with both hands. "What did you get me?" He tears at the wrapping uncovering the DVDs. His face lights up, he's like an old man looking at pictures from his glorious youth. "I haven't seen these since—"

"That summer?"

Matei nods and holds up *Once Upon A Time in America*.
“Remember that kid who looked like you? The one with the cake?” he laughs that same old brazen laughter; makes Adam feel like nothing has changed.

“When did you come back?” Matei proceeds to mix the vodka with tomato juice.

“January.”

“And you didn’t call?”

“I couldn’t.”

“Strange.” Matei shrugs and holds up the shaker in midair. “Did you know that phones work in Romania, too? We even have smart phones.” He takes out his iPhone and shoves it in Adam’s face.

“I came with work. I didn’t think I’d be here longer than two weeks.”

“So what made you change your mind?” Matei sets the drink in front of him. “Romania?” he sniggers.

“You could say that.” Adam takes out the straw and drinks from the glass, holding back a stinging cough.

“Too spicy?”

He shakes his head and reaches for a bottle of water.

“Let’s go sit down. More girls should be here any minute now.” Matei raises his eyebrows just like he used to do when they were kids, whenever he proposed something adventurous.

At the table, Matei sits Adam next to him and leans back on his chair, as if he's inviting envious looks from his friends: "You didn't believe me when I said I have an American cousin," he speaks up.

One of the girls, her hair pulled back in a tight pony tail, studies Adam as if he's an expensive item on the sales rack. "You were born in America?" she asks.

"Romanian born," boasts Matei. "He grew up here until he was six. Seven?"

"Seven."

"He was such a crier when we were kids." Matei puts his hand on Adam's shoulder. "Am I right? Where is Dad? I want to find Dad," he snorts out a malicious laughter. "His dad ran away to America. My uncle went a bit crazy when he left," he declares in a mysterious voice. "He didn't tell anyone he was leaving. One day he disappeared and nobody knew where he was for months."

Matei collects a few gasps of admiration from around the table. Adam nods embarrassed. He's not comfortable with having this conversation in front of strangers.

"That's brave." A spectacled middle-aged man raises his glass at Adam.

"People who commit suicide are brave!" shouts Matei. "I'm joking. He was kind of a hero. Had to hide in a barrel, went over to Greece, walked across the border, got to Israel and asked for political

asylum then he traveled to America.” He reaches for his glass and takes a generous gulp. He lets out a burp and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “Then he took my little cousin away and I haven’t seen him since.” He ruffles Adam’s hair as if he were a seven-year-old.

“So this is the first time you’re seeing each other?” asks one of Matei’s male friends in a husky voice.

“First time in 22 years...” Adam nods and takes another sip of his very Bloody Mary.

“Who wants to come back here after they’ve gone to New York?” Matei stresses, as if New York is some distant planet populated by aliens. He lights up his cigarette without taking his eyes off the flame, just like he used to do when he first took up smoking.

“You still haven’t quit,” Adam smiles.

“Smokers can’t be quitters, Adam. Wish I had the same addiction to optimism.”

“About?”

“Where I live. Have you had time to notice the state of this country? I wouldn’t mind living in America,” he adds, a trace of spite in his eyes.

“You don’t know that.”

“One man’s misfortune, another man’s dream.”

“I’m not exactly singing with joy.” Adam finishes the drink and starts to crunch an ice cube.

“You’re better off,” Dad’s words uttered by Matei have the same sad, hopeless resonance. “We’re happy to carry shit after shit like always. Cum e mă vorba aia?” he asks one of his guests, the oldest, quietest one. “Nu da Doamne—”

“Nu-i da Doamne omului cât poa’ să ducă,” says the man without lifting his eyes from his glass.

“God, don’t give man as much as he can carry,” Matei translates. “Means us Romanians, we’re trained. We can carry anything.”

The wise man stands up: “I’m going to carry my ass to the toilet.”

“We can take it. Resignation is our second nature.” Matei lets out a couple of smoke circles then blows a fume arrow through the middle.

“You sound like Dad.” Adam clears his throat to belt out in a broken English accent: “Nobody changes anything here. Change is a myth. Just like the big Romania. This place is doomed and redemption has long set sail.”

“Romanians are born poets,” offers one of the girls.

“Who die unpublished,” Matei puts out his cigarette, a feisty ember pinches his finger.

The heavy smoke starts hurting Adam’s eyes, he presses his fingers on his eyelids, but the pain cuts through deep as if he’s rubbed an onion over his eyes. “I’m going out for some air.”

“Western snob, you don’t like our smoking inside policy?” Matei stands up. “I’ll join you.”

As soon as his vision is restored, Adam takes a couple of steps on the street and looks at the night-time sky. A single star blinks shyly in the distance. “Do you remember the mountains?” he asks his cousin who’s sitting cross-legged on the ground in front of his café. “Think the village is still the same? Ion?”

“Who knows?” Matei puts up his finger to examine his blister and starts to blow air over it, speaking in between blows. “Life outside the city is pretty shit. But then again, peasants have always been less traumatized by life. Maybe Ion has his own farm now. Or maybe he’s left Romania, too.”

“He wouldn’t. Would he?”

“Sometimes, Adam, people don’t have a choice...” Matei exhales through his mouth, half breathing, and half sighing.

“I think they do. I had a choice. I came back,” he declares as if he’s giving a solemn yet heartbreaking speech to his welcoming nation.

“Good for you. What do you want? A fucking medal?”

“It hasn’t been easy—”

“Oh poor Adam,” Matei whines in an irritating voice. “It’s been so hard for you. All this time living in New York. Fuck you!” He stands up and walks towards him, slightly staggering, his strut threatening. “Why didn’t you call? All these years? Why?” he spits out, his alcohol infused breath pierces Adam’s nostrils.

“I couldn’t.”

“Bullshit.”

“Dad didn’t–”

Matei grunts with disgust. “The same scared Adam, hiding behind Dad.”

“I wanted to come back sooner. To find you and D.”

“Unfortunately Adam, there’s not much left of him,” Matei’s voice trembles with regret only to resume in his usual smug tone: “If you hurry up you might still catch him. Most of him. Minus a kidney and a lung.” He clenches his fists and looks up at the sky, his eyes cast bitter sparks.

“And you waited all night to tell me? Why?” Adam shouts, his words shouted back at him by the empty street. “Why?” He grabs his cousin’s arm giving it a short shake.

Matei yanks out of the grip, his still-clenched fist kisses Adam’s cheek.

The Romanian equivalent of *unfortunately* is *din păcate*. It has nothing to do with fortune – the literal translation is *because of sins*.

The train slows down, making its way towards the tunnel; the engine lets out a lazy whistle, as if it's too tired, too hot to even bother. Adam's face reflected in the window shows a tiny, yellow-purple bruise right under his left eye. In the exact same spot he had his very first bruise back when he was seven.

"You can't make it go away just by staring at it." Matei reclines on his seat, a brand new pack of cigarettes in his hand. "They don't have any coffee left," he says and hands Adam a bottle of water. He tears up the plastic seal from his cigarette pack and holds up the fresh, soon-to-be-butts: "Want one? Just like the old times. We can fully enjoy them now that D is not here to catch us."

Adam would give anything to have his uncle here on the train. He'd even trade in his cousin. In a heartbeat.

"Think we'll be late?" he asks out loud, unable to restrain his pessimistic thoughts.

"I sure hope so. He won't even talk to us if we show up before the surgery. Such a stubborn man!" Matei shakes his head and lets out a sigh. "At least he picked a lovely city. Can't wait to see what Cluj looks like!" He starts to fidget with excitement as if they're going on a field trip.

"How can you think about that now?"

“When do you want me to think about it? On our way back to Bucharest?” He gives Adam a scornful look. “You’re too serious. Lighten up!” He attempts to ignite his lighter but only manages to make it cough up a faint spark. “Are all Americans this sad?” He stands up prompted by the train’s sudden halt. “We’re here!”

The weather in Cluj-Napoca should be way cooler than down South, but not even the surrounding mountains dare to take on the merciless July sun. The city is situated at a fairly equal distance from Bucharest, Budapest and Belgrade, the *C* in the center of a *B* triangle.

As he follows his cousin off the train, Adam’s skin starts to weep out sweat, adding up to a wide range of odors that counts, among others, hot asphalt, local pastries and human perspiration. A taxi takes them to the hospital, not before giving Matei a short tour of the center. Cluj boasts much more of a history than Bucharest, at least from an initial drive through, the medieval architecture attests to a strong Saxon presence. “Used to be part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire,” Matei informs Adam with pride as if his own lineage is either Austrian or Hungarian or both.

The hospital is tucked behind two big, old tilla trees, their smell calming like a sedative. The entrance is quiet, making the building seem derelict. They take the elevator up to the third floor looking for the reception, but all the doors are closed. Matei reads out from a poster stuck on the wall: “Visiting hours Monday to Wednesday from 10am to 12pm.” They’re hardly on schedule – it’s three pm, Friday.

Matei finds a cabinet, forces open its door and takes out two blue robes: “Come on Doctor Stan, time for our rounds.” He sticks his head in every salon, asking for D until he finally finds someone who’s able to help. The man is sitting on a bed, perched on top of three pillows, eating watermelon. He informs Matei that D is up on the fifth floor, then carries on spitting the seeds in a tin bowl, making it sound as if he’s shooting bullets in an army helmet.

They take the elevator up to the 5th floor heading for Bloc Operator, but they can’t make it past the locked door. A bald doctor in his 60s sees them struggling to open door.

“Da vă rog...”

“Bună ziua, suntem nepoții domnului Stan. El a venit tocmai din America.” Matei pushes Adam forward.

“Adam?” The doctor shakes his hand. “Doctorul Albert,” he offers a kind, but stern smile. “Your uncle told me about you. American, right?” Same as every other Romanian he’s met, the doctor too seems to take pride in speaking English. Iancu was right – it’s worth more than foreign currency. “Let’s go to my office.” Albert directs them away from *Terapie Intensivă*, towards a better looking hospital wing where the austere cement has been replaced with shiny new tiles, imitating marble; the lights are brighter, walls cleaner.

Albert opens a door with his name on it. His office looks nothing like an examining room – it’s got proper furniture, the kind Romanian

living rooms have, a massive wooden desk and a chair on each side. Albert takes the big, rotating, leather one, Matei sits on the plain, shorter one while Adam keeps standing.

“Thank you for seeing us.”

“Sure!” Albert waves his hand. “Thank you for coming.” He nods.

“How is he?”

“Well...” Albert pauses to wipe his glasses.

“Is it worse than the first one? That was a big success,” Matei congratulates the doctor.

“Is there the risk of—”

“Death?” The sound of the word lingers around the room for a second before it settles into silence. Adam hadn’t even thought of the possibility, as if uncle D was meant to live forever, his will strong enough to keep him alive across continents, across time.

“No! He’s a fighter,” Albert replies and rests his glasses on his nose. “And he has me.” He taps his chest with his hand, his modesty far from existent. “The first surgery was indeed easier. Very brave man your uncle,” he shakes his head and puts his hands together like doctors do when preparing to deliver their diagnosis. “Since he learned of the disease he’s been very optimistic.”

Learn? Is one really able to learn of illness? How do you do it? Do you just repeat it to yourself like you do when you’re studying for an

exam? Or when you learn a foreign language – speak it, use it all the time till it becomes a part of you?

“And he wasn’t afraid of surgery. He said he’s always trusted tailors and surgeons. Men who have a fine eye for the cut,” Albert laughs. “I did a lot of cutting,” he says with astonishment as if he’s recollecting a fellow surgeon’s performance.

“Is that a joke? How can you joke?”

“What else are we going to do?” Albert stands up. “Pull out our hair?” He points at his shiny head, laughing. “Kill ourselves? We’ll get over it, with laughter and skill.” He wiggles his fingers. “Like always. Everyone else can–”

“Run away?”

Albert pauses to think as if Adam’s question were an academic one. “Visit,” he replies, his eyes widening behind the glasses. “Everyone else can visit. And be supportive. Come on, I’ll take you to see him.”

Albert leads them to Intensive Care, “I’ll give you 5 minutes.” Matei walks in and tiptoes around the bed. He lowers his head to look at D, “He’s unconscious.” He walks up to the machines and starts to inspect the readings as if he’s a resident or a med student.

“What are you doing?”

“Having a look. See how bad it is.”

“Can you tell?”

“I don’t know, but I can try.”

Matei lifts the cover, pointing at D who is resting on his side unaware, two drains sticking out of him, collecting blood and residue.

“Are you allowed to do this?”

“Stop worrying. I just want to see what they did to him.” Matei points at a bandage covering D’s ribs, “This is the new one, where they cut his lung.” He switches sides with Adam to move closer to D’s feet. “Yeah, see the old one? Come see!” He pulls Adam closer. “He showed me this one after he got it. They removed his right kidney. All of it.”

Adam doesn’t have the stomach for it, nor the wit to say something meaningful. He can feel his eyes filling up with tears.

“Stop getting emotional, Adam. He got out of bed three hours after this surgery. He was walking on the halls of the hospital when Mom came to see him. Even made a little poem: *If I can pee and shit and stride, then I’m not dead, I’m still alive.*”

Adam laughs, but he can’t hold back his tears.

“He would make fun of you if he was awake, you know that, right? What you crying for? Are you scared?” Matei shakes his head and imitates D’s voice: “Only rabbits are scared.” He belts out, hiccups of laughter echoing in the room. “I’ll go bring us some water. Do you want anything?”

“No I’m fine.”

Silence creeps inside the room as the door closes behind Matei, leaving only the sound of machines, puffing and clicking and D’s weak

breath. Adam leans closer to see his uncle's face – his laughter lines are intact, deeper, but still kind, caressing his face. His right arm is hanging low, the tag on his hand reading *Stan Alexandru*. Adam holds out his finger to touch the writing but he draws back, D's full name unfamiliar to him. He kneels by the bed and holds his uncle's hand almost the same size as his, but much heavier, rough from all the mine work. Adam kisses it and starts to pray out loud: "Tatăl nostru care ești în ceruri..."

The Romanian equivalents for *uncle* and *angle* are *unchi* and *unghi*.

Adam picks up the 50 bani coin and stares at the date engraved on the side of the brass. 2005. He rubs his thumb over the piece, its gold too old to shine; matted by time, scarred by fingers. He tries to picture the first person to have ever owned it, wondering what it was they bought with it. Can 50 bani even buy something? How deep runs the history of this little coin? Does it even have one? Has it ever left Romania? Maybe it was forgotten at the bottom of a suitcase, carried and left abroad, abandoned on the floor of a hotel room, only to find its way back years later by some unlikely coincidence. Money must be better travelled than people. Even Romanian coins. The number of hands it must have touched...Bea herself might have held this 50 bani at one point. Adam lets his find drop inside his small change pocket, and carries on walking.

His intention to hurry soon falters, each step sticking to the sidewalk, as if the concrete has been turned to bubble gum. Summer in southern Romania can be such a show off, its sweltering, inescapable ruling leaves no choice but to surrender. Adam slows down as he crosses the main boulevard guarded by modest buildings, four floors tall – Grandma Bea’s hometown displays the same linear, post 60s architecture as parts of Bucharest, but shrunken in size.

The coins rattle in his pocket, reminding Adam of the 50 bani piece. What was he up to back in 2005? He was 22, on his way to receiving the much awaited letter of acceptance into grad school. Happy times, soon to be turned into pressure-fuelled times. Later that year, on the day he left home and the state for the first time, Dad made sure his uncalled for advice was evermore present, ready to rend Adam's yet unabashed immigrant creed:

“Grad school is a big step up, Adam. These years will define you. How do you want to be remembered? Certainly not as *the Romanian*, am I right?”

“What's wrong with being Romanian?”

“Nothing. There's nothing wrong with being Romanian. But there's nothing right with it either.”

The sound of the word *Romanian*, as uttered by his father, still gives Adam the chills. Four little syllables overcharged with a wide range of feelings: like contempt and spite and powerlessness, rage and remorse, pain and shame. Too much shame...

Adam wonders whether national shame stems from the same place as national pride. Are the two cocooned together at birth inside your unripe brain, in some tucked-away chamber labelled national identity, with 50/50 odds of taking over, either one's success merely left to chance? Until recently, Adam never even dared to think about questioning his father's words, the intention behind them. How could he? By what

right? Dads know more. Dads know better. Dads know period. Parents always do, don't they? They were here first. At what point are you, the offspring, supposed to make up your own narrative? In your own voice. When you turn eighteen? When you're financially responsible? When you do better than they have ever done? When you become a parent yourself? When your parents cease to exist? When? But more importantly, how? Does it show up on your face like puberty? The owning yourself wrinkles...Do you negotiate your release terms with your parents, get out from under their tutelage and never look back? Has anyone come up with a victim-less procedure? Can you judge—

Adam's thoughts quiet on the spot as his feet head towards the socle of a familiar statue. The bust of Mihai Viteazul he'd last seen over twenty two years ago is still watching over the street with his merciless stare. Traces of Grandma Bea are tucked behind the features of the just ruler, as if she's of his lineage, having inherited his stern, dignified presence. The black, veiny marble is no longer towering over him, Adam is now tall enough to touch it, something he was never able to do as a child. It feels gratifyingly cold.

He advances down the street to the accelerating beats of his heart – he's getting closer, he knows it. His feet feel it, few more blocks and he'll be there. On either side of the road, cars are parked in uninterrupted rows, very much unlike his childhood years when only two families on

the entire street owned a car. Adam had spent the last night of the Romanian Revolution in one of them.

Poplar trees grace the sidewalk quietly, as if they're painted, their leaves immobile, frozen inside the windless heat. White fluffs have fallen out of them, and are now aligning the curb, making it look like winter all over again. No sight of Bea's building just yet, but Adam's mind map has the location on lock. Third block on the right. A shiver runs through the back of his neck.

The brick block that housed him for the first six winters of his life looks infinitely small. A miniature of what it used to be, as if it grew smaller over the years, or Adam has grown into a giant. The three steps leading the way to the front door are each barely bigger than his foot. There was a time when his tiny back would recline on one of these steps as one does in an armchair. He climbs the first two and sits down on the third. He needs to take a moment before heading up. His palms are sweaty; he studies them as if they're someone else's.

All this time, the thought of seeing Grandma Bea had been just that: a thought and nothing more, relentlessly envisioned by his mind, utterly far from reality. Will she know him? Are there enough traces of seven year old Adam in him for her to recognize her grandson? She should be happy to meet an American. The long running Romanian hope-turned-to-joke that *The Americans are coming*, is finally becoming true. Sort of true. Although really it just proves that there are no Americans,

not ones interested in Romania anyway. Romanians themselves had to go to the States and forge their own Americans for them to come (back).

The door to the building opens behind him and a boy runs out holding a red ball clutched to his chest.

“Scuzeeee!” He shouts back at Adam for having startled him.

Adam follows the kid with his stare all the way across the street as if he knows him. He remembers a time when he was fearless, when nothing could stop him from asking questions, from searching, from trying to understand. But then it all stopped, like a habit that one grows out of. The cloud-less sky stretches above him, its sun-lit white too painful to look at. He wipes his hands on his jeans as he stands up, and walks to the door.

Grandma Bea’s flat is exactly how he remembers it. To the very last detail. It’s like time decided to rest here, tired of having passed by someplace else. The hybrid smell of vinegar carpets, stale water, Bea’s leather bags – same ones: one brown and big, the other smaller, lacquered black – and the unmissable cozonac aroma. She’s sitting by the kitchen window, her back hunched. Her robe looks new, velvet crimson with red stitches.

“She likes at the window,” says her caretaker, a young girl in her twenties with curly long hair and rosy cheeks. Her chunky lips testify to her goodness. Can always tell a person’s soul by their lips, Bea used to say. “She never gets visits,” offers the girl. “I come every day. My mom

went to school with her son.” Adam wants to ask which one, but abstains – it’s him and Bea now, no middle men.

He takes off his trainers and walks inside the kitchen all the way to the chair Bea’s sitting on. He kneels in front of her and puts his hand on her knee. She pulls back her hand to make room for his, almost as if she’s acknowledging his gesture, but her face lacks emotion, just like a wax statue. She is humming one of her songs. Her pitch is still spot on, not missing a single note. The liver spots on her hands have multiplied – as if the old ones had children and grandchildren.

“Bea, eu sunt, Adam...” he pauses for her reaction which fails to arrive. She resumes her humming, this time even uses words – she incorporates his name into her song: *ah dam, tah dam, tah dam, ah dam*. He squints. It looks like she’s looking at him. Almost.

“Bea?” He stands up to give her a hug, but she pulls away threatened. His hands are left hovering in the air, as if they’re trying to comfort her aura. Bea’s singing intensifies, making his presence less and less noticeable.

Adam’s mouth feels prickly dry. He walks up to the sink. It’s cracked, but not leaking, barely holding up against the wall. He fills a glass of water and takes it with him into the living room.

Bea’s caretaker is sitting on a chair next to the photos on the old radio. There’s three of them, black and white with their margins cut-out in a pointy pattern – the kind that makes Adam want to brush the tips of his

fingers alongside it. The smallest of the three looks like the oldest: two boys wearing matching shorts and white tank tops are staring into the camera, the shorter one using his hand to shade his eyes from the sun. The paper is old and crumpled, but the typical boy bruises are still visible on the legs of the older kid, like badges of honor – time-proof. Adam knows these legs, it's like seeing his own toothpick pins; same curves below the knees, same straight, knife-like calf bones.

Behind it, a photo of Adam and Bea in the mountains. Spitting image of Dad. Even the bruises are in the same place.

He picks up the third photo, the only one that's framed, the only one he remembers.

“That's my grandpa,” he declares.

The girl looks at the portrait, “You look like him.” She nods. “The mouth?”

“Can't really tell.” Adam gazes at the man in the picture, a stranger with cheekbones just like his dad's, much like his own. “Last time I saw this photo I broke it. The glass shattered on the floor. You can still see a scratch here.” He points at his grandfather's chest. “I haven't really thought about this place. It's funny how it feels like I last saw it yesterday. It hasn't changed at all.” He sets the photo back with the others and drinks his water.

He walks to the window, letting the glass rest on the table. The table, Adam's and Bea's outpost during the shootings. He touches the

surface from one end to the other, the wood swollen in places, callused by the passing years.

Adam opens the door to the balcony and steps out. The high school outside the window has been repainted yellow. It looks tiny, almost like a Lego piece. His grandparents' farm once stretched as far as the high school, its courtyard and all the way to the train station. The communists seized it all and gave them this one bedroom apartment in exchange. They'd lost their house, their animals, everything, but still managed to make a life out of the little they were left with and raised their two boys. Perhaps running away was not a desirable option back then.

A half a meter tall jar is resting on the floor of the balcony. Adam picks it up; surprised he can lift it with just two fingers. He holds up the jar in front of his head, and looks through it, recalling it full of pickles. Bea was the queen of pickles. Pickled everything, even watermelons. His mouth waters, he used to love pickled watermelon. He walks back inside the living room, the floor creaks underneath his steps.

“She recognize you?” The girl asks.

Adam shakes his head.

“Some days she is...lucidă?” her voice picks up a faint enthusiasm. “You have to try more.” She stands up and puts her hand in her pocket. “Go try. I go out to smoke a cigarette.” She heads for the door and lets herself out.

Adam straightens his back and walks towards the kitchen. His sock nearly gets stuck on a nail as he walks past the living room doorstep. Same one. He bends to touch it. The head is so fine, like a stone scrubbed by the wind.

He makes his way back to Bea and takes her by the hand, prompting her to stand up. She complies, and moves like a ghost, gazing past him. Adam takes her into the living room and sits her on the couch. On the wall behind her hangs the old painting he had forgotten about – the insides of a cave with three men in a boat, rowing towards a yellow light. Bea and her neighbor had sat down in front of it on that late December night, their shadows projected inside the cave, reaching out for the yellow light too.

Adam walks to the table and squats down. The space underneath looks so small, he can barely fit in there, but he is determined to make room. He pulls each chair aside, every time looking back at Bea, waiting for her reaction. Her body is present, her mind is not.

“Bea,” he speaks from under the table as he lies on his belly, head resting on his hands. She’s looking at the floor, inches away from him. “Mai ții minte? Când am mâncat pe jos?” His questions settle back into silence, unanswered. He sits up and covers his mouth with his hand: “Dum-dum-dum.” Bea is trapped in her droning world, too far to be reached even by the haunting memory of bullets.

Adam crawls out from under the table. He has come too far to give up. He starts to spin around the table, making up lyrics to *Hora Unirii* as he goes along – he belts out words in Romglish, shout-singing to bring her back. He circles the table five times; he’s dizzy, but fearless, a child again with no sense of propriety. His breaths intensify, pulse rising – he can feel his cheeks turning red. He sits down in front of Bea, but carries on singing, his arms in the air as if he’s holding hands inside the hora.

Bea stops her humming and blinks, her irises change color from brown to green. The inert old woman’s body in front of him seems to be brought to life, once again inhabited by his Grandma Bea. Her eyes cast gentle, lucid flickers, her shoulders sad from all that living. She notices Adam and puts out her hand to touch his face, “Cine ești?”

Adam takes her hand in his, her sheer, pale skin reveals violet-blue veins like roads on a treasure map for him to decipher.

“Adam,” he replies. “Adam!”

“Adam?”

The sound of his name, an enchanting lullaby, inspires him to draw nearer. He fights the impulse to hug his grandmother, for fear of tampering with her moment of presence. He nods in answer to her question.

Bea smiles and squeezes his thumb, too big to fit in her palm like it once used to. She looks at him, “Dragul de Adam...” A serene teardrop

caresses her wrinkled face, like a life-delivering river bedding down in a barren groove. “Să-i spui că îl iubesc.” She taps his hand gently as if to reinforce an unfaltering faith that *he* will deliver the message to her Adam.

Romanian has 2 words for *love*: *iubire* and *dragoste*. The latter being derived from *dear* (drag) and used to express falling/being in love (*îndrăgostit*) as well as a love classifier (love song – *cântec de dragoste*, although *cântec de iubire* is also correct). The former is more powerful, the only of the two to be used as an active, declarative verb.

Words & Pictures

The Miracle of Artistic Lending and Borrowing

Abstract

Seeing comes before words. (John Berger)

Even if we see first and articulate after, it is through words that we give meaning to our reality. But in the case of collaboration, where does the image interpretation end and that of the text begin? Literature can emulate the space-art quality of a drawing through its spirit of the place. An image without words is open to interpretation, whereas one accompanied by words becomes a point of view. In the shared space of their encounter, each of the two art forms mirrors the other by engaging in a continuous lending and borrowing relationship, ultimately creating what can only be defined as a miracle – a remarkable event that is not explicable by natural or scientific laws and which brings very welcome consequences.¹

¹ Definition adapted from the Oxford British Dictionary, Origin Middle English: via Old French from Latin *miraculous* 'object of wonder,' from *mirror* 'to wonder,' from *mires* 'wonderful'

This paper aims to look at the epistemological transfer between writer and artist collaborating with equal status. By closely analysing a set of texts accompanying illustrations (Irina Nedelcu, Writer/Via Fang, Illustrator), I will investigate and redefine the process and implications of a textual response to an image; I will observe how the two art forms engage in a dialogue which ultimately transforms the words and the artwork, both individually and as a whole. Drawing on the functions of image and text, I will look at *how*, as well as *what*, words borrow from the artwork and vice versa, but more importantly how this act of transference affects the meaning of seeing and reading within a shared space.

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Introduction

Ceci n'est pas (seulement) une texte

In my attempts to theorise the act of creation, particularly writing, I have always encountered this elusive, inexplicable factor of an almost miraculous nature, without which there would be no final or for that matter, initial product. This is even more apparent in the case of collaboration, especially between two different art forms – the equivalent of two foreigners having a conversation in their respective native tongues, neither of whom speaks the other’s language and yet both manage to understand the other and communicate effectively.

Before taking on the status of research, this text is first and foremost a search: a practitioner's incursion into the setting out, workings and final product as generated by the process of artistic lending and borrowing between writer and artist. This quest and its subsequent questions have been prompted by practice and experience: having produced text for illustrations, having developed and nurtured a working relationship with an illustrator, having found the apparently subliminal

textual path into a psychology of the image, having interpreted visual codes then having used these interpretations to decode a narrative, inevitably led to a series of questions about the seemingly mysterious working ways of text reading image.

Dwelling between the two statements: “seeing comes before words” (John Berger) and “I have a disease, I *see* language,” (Roland Barthes) has had a peculiar effect on my way of perceiving the two art forms. It simultaneously deepened and narrowed the gap between the two, marking them both as distinct as well as one combined and discrete entity. When merged, the miracle incessantly occurs: an intangible to and fro that creates a three-dimensional meaning – that of the text, that of the image, and that of their shared space. But which informs which? Where is the lending and where is the borrowing? There are no quantifiable measurements, and so the questions should not be how much, to what degree, in what way. What then are the *right*² questions?

Without aiming to make theories out of my own practice, this incursion into the world of text and image with a careful observation of my own experience, will inevitably inform my conclusions. The personal quest and questions at the core of my research are: What does the text achieve by reproducing/accompanying an image? What are the visible

² *Right* used with both connotations of *appropriate* and *entitlement*.

changes, what does it gain from this relationship and how or better yet, into what does it evolve? And how does the viewer/reader experience the unity of the two forms?

I will begin by anchoring the two concepts, understanding text and image separately, then move on to investigating their joint working mechanisms as well as their flexibility and support of one another, observing through their various types of interaction, subtle or obvious, from concrete poetry to ekphrasis, to illustration, and finally conclude by examining my own writing experience, over the past three years, of producing text to accompany visual images.

There are striking similarities between the commercial message, the unity of text and image so clear and persuasive of the almighty ad, and that of a literary text accompanying an illustration. Even the working relationship between a writer and an illustrator, if stripped of its artistic noblesse, closely resembles the copywriter/art director partnership. Because of this I have frequently turned to Barthes for theoretical guidance when analysing and distinguishing between the two art forms. Hence the first chapter of this study will look closely at text and image as separate identities, separate languages. What is the function of the text? How do we read a text and why? What is the function of the image? How do we read an image? Why?

This initial chapter will also have a transitional role as it will identify convergence points, by concrete examples of text as image and image as text, with the goal of establishing the connections between the two. By revealing the similarities which will become evident, both in theory and structure as well as in practice and craft, this chapter will eventually ground the undeniable attraction between image and text, a relationship of an ultimately mirror effect.

The second chapter will observe the acknowledged relationship between the two, with a closer focus on ekphrasis, or the translation of image into words. The term ekphrasis originates in Ancient Greece, being defined as a rhetorical device used in a literary text to describe a work of art. Ever since, there has been a struggle for power and dominance between the art of the image and that of language, though each has the capacity – to a greater or lesser extent – to substitute and define the other. Constantly changing and reinventing its parameters, the relationship between the two arts, as embodied in ekphrasis, gives life to a new form of art. A closer look at words vs. space and time as referred to in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's essay *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, and his clear distinction between painting, which defines the object/subject in space, and poetry, which defines the object/subject in time, sets the two arts on opposing ground. In more recent studies, Murray Krieger and Stephen Cheeke observe the interdependence of the

two, the greater extent of their mutually reproductive capabilities, their dual “miracle and mirage” (Krieger, p. xvi).

The third chapter will focus on bringing the two art forms together: text + image seen as an independent, distinctive art. A closer look at children’s literature, picture books as well as Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, will endeavour to investigate the following questions: Who cares about the text? Who cares about the illustration? Does the picture inform the narrative/characterisation? Is the image fluid or static? Can it determine the temporal aspect of the story in the same way as the text? Does the writing inform the drawing? What about vice versa?

The fourth and final chapter will focus on the development of my own writing with respect to its encounter with illustration: from the initial form of collaboration – creating a textual response to an image without input from the illustrator – to writing a series of vignettes for a collection of animal portraits, to writing text for an illustrated novel. This chapter will map out the linear and temporal evolution of my writing in relation to and collaboration with the image, with the ultimate goal of grasping and defining – albeit subjectively – the *miracle* of the end result.

Chapter I Words versus Pictures

An accurate understanding of the relationship between the two art forms requires a clear, theoretical awareness of each as an independent entity. By looking at text and image separately, in the first instance, I resolve to lay out their differences and similarities in terms of scope and effect, which I will then use as the foundation for their various points of convergence, leading up to their inevitable union.

Barthes wrote extensively on the workings and semiotics of the two – whether analysing literary or commercial discourse, painting, photography or film. I shall appeal to his views with great interest, particularly for his examination of both text and visual art, but nonetheless *cum grano salis* in the context of my own writing.

This chapter aims to ground text and image as discrete art forms while making note of the obvious connections between the two, their interdependence when it comes to assigning meaning.

I. 1 Parole Parole

In the beginning was the word (John 1:1)

One could argue that by speculating on the nature of the text, by dissecting it in order to anchor its impact, to determine what exactly creates meaning and how, might detract from that miraculous feature sought by this very search. As the analysis of specific literary texts will show, understanding the mechanics of the text will not only highlight some of its wondrous features, but will help create a shared space with the image.

In his essay *From Work to Text*, Barthes identifies a significantly unique trait of the written discourse, in the form of a constant movement, its ability to “cut across the work, several works” (Barthes, 157). The text has an almost ubiquitous quality manifested in its fluidity, its capacity to tap simultaneously into a collective frame of reference as well as an individual schema. The following piece illustrates the experience of the text through its “activity of production” (Barthes, 157):

Father says being young is a temporary gift. Like the prey. And not to capture it constitutes a capital crime. His exact words. I tend to agree with Father. Most of the time. To his face at least. Surely there are greater crimes...I find suits to be a crime. And punishment. For one thing they tend to make the young look old. In my defence, I chose this one myself. With Father's guidance, of course.³ (*Unlike Father Like Owl*, 2010)

This text has been produced through, and produces in its turn, that fluidity of meaning: within five lines it glides from a basic human reality evoked by notions like *Father*, *young* and *gift* to a specific animal reality (that of predator, defined by capturing the *prey*) to a distinct fashion: *suits*, then by adding on a literary dimension through meta-referencing Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, to finally define the mechanisms of a patriarchal bond. Without the indication of the title there is no clear way of assigning the voice. Who is this character? What is...it/he? And yet despite that uncertainty, the five lines still manage to bring forth the ambiguous, almost-but-not-quite-yet rebelliousness of youth.

But before even attempting to elicit layer upon layer of nuance, words are mere servants in the enterprise of language. There is an intrinsic division of an almost cellular nature that one can apply to the text: body, chapters, paragraphs, sentences, words, and letters. All these units make up the form, which in its turn is destined to create meaning:

³ This is a complete piece, my response to an illustration – part of a series that I will refer to in the final chapter, but for the purpose of this subchapter I shall treat it as a stand-alone written work.

Language [*langue*] proper can be defined by the concurrence of two fundamental processes: articulation, or segmentation which produces units (this being what [Émile] Benveniste calls *form*), and integration, which gathers these units into units of a higher rank (this being *meaning*). This dual process can be found in the language of narrative [*la langue du récit*] which also has an articulation and an integration, a form and a meaning (Barthes, 117).

The language of the narrative (or better yet the tongue of discourse⁴) can be fully experienced through both form and meaning – the two are part of a chicken and egg correspondence.

The basic unit of the text is the letter – is this divisible as well? If we look at the ideographic Japanese alphabet, the letter/sign can be traced to somewhere between writing and painting. We could say to some extent that at the core of the text lays its atom – the sign, which is in fact an image. This very set of images creates meaning, but words are not as easy to decode. The convention of the language, the knowledge of which confers the ability to *read*, to connect the signs into precise words and sentences, determines meaning. Therefore, the understanding of words, the capacity in which one attributes sense, is conditioned by the ability to read. Seeing is not enough.

But even reading is not enough when it comes to text: there are layers of meaning, which can be peeled off. Barthes identifies two main traits of the narrative form: distortion and expansion on one side, mimesis

⁴ *Langue*, the French word for *language* also has the meaning of *tongue* whereas *récit*, as used in modern narratology refers to the actual narrative text, as opposed both to story and to its narration.

and meaning on the other. “The form of the narrative is essentially characterised by two powers: that of distending its signs over the length of the story and that of inserting unforeseeable expansions into these distortions” (Barthes, 117). The most conclusive example is the use of time in a narrative: actions and their succession seem to exist outside of *real* time. The power of the text is therefore supernatural, like that of a time machine: there is the actual passing of time that the reader is experiencing when exposed to a text and the time within the text which expands and contracts according to its own laws.⁵ Paul Valéry asserted the novel to be as “close to the dream; both can be defined by consideration of this curious property: *all their deviations form part of them*” (As quoted in Barthes, 117). The text has its own flow made up of various other flows, moving backwards and forwards on a timeline that runs parallel to that of the act of reading, and yet both of these timelines converge in the reader simultaneously.⁶

⁵ Narrative time has the ability to bring the reader into the past, presenting her with events that have already occurred, or to keep the reader in the historical time, making her witness the story as it unfolds, or even to transport the reader into a prophetic future. Similar to our perception of time in extreme situations – which activate our survival instinct – when time has the capacity to ‘stand still,’ the narrative can freeze or let time elapse independently of any conventional units of minutes, hours, etc. A notable literary example is Marcel Proust’s *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* – its reader has to go through almost 200 pages of writing to learn about a three hour long party, while the passing of a decade is rendered in one sentence.

⁶ This can be attributed to this very text as well, despite its lack of conventional storyline – the reader experiences the timeline of the act of reading concurrently with that of the content.

The other two elements of the narrative are mimesis and meaning. Mimesis refers to the text's ability to imitate life, but as Quintilian remarked, the "imitation operates always with less force than the object imitated" (Inft. 1. 10. C. 2). And yet it is in the very act of mimesis, that a proper miracle occurs, very much similar to the act of producing life. "The most finished imitation hath only an artificial existence, or a borrowed life; whereas the force and activity of nature meet in the object imitated. We are influenced by the real object, by virtue of the power which it hath received for that end from nature" (Abbé Du Bos, 23). The imitating text automatically becomes a reflection of "God created man in his [own] image" (Genesis 1:27).

Moving on to meaning and quoting Stephane Mallarmé, Barthes concludes that "what takes place in a narrative is from the referential (reality) point of view, literally *nothing*; what happens is language alone, the adventure of language, the unceasing celebration of its coming" (Barthes, 124). The same applies to the process, that *production* of the text. It is language and its form that determine the narrative, which in turn gives birth to all the other elements, such as storyline, characterisation, themes and motifs or subtext. A text starts with language and is read as language, through language. But still, this nothingness manages to construct meaning in an effortless way and I will use the same narrative quoted previously (*Unlike Father, Like Owl*) to exemplify the five

narrative codes as determined by Barthes: hermeneutic, proairetic, semic, symbolic and referential.

The hermeneutic code, or the voice of the truth, refers to the enigmas of the written word and encompasses the entire narrative. What is the text about? Why is the reader reading in the first place? What keeps the reader reading? What is the main story? In the case of the previous literary example, the hermeneutic code comes in the form of an adolescent's discourse as he tries to break away from the tutelage of a parent, but is very much unable to. This code is both crucial and irreversible – once knowledge has been revealed to the reader this cannot be undone. The character's discourse begins with *Father says* – an inescapable reality for both the character and the reader.

The proairetic code concerns actions, small sequences of the narrative. This code designs what Barthes calls the “readerly” text, which is the reader's ability to create the actions of the literary discourse, by assimilating distinct pieces of information in a prescribed order. Thus the reader operates with the main currency of the text: that which she pieces together and turns into events. The proairetic code refers to the spatial and temporal dimensions afforded to the reader within and by the text, whether it is in the form of an interior monologue or an actual event/action; in the case of the above literary example, a monologue

musings on aspects of youth set against the authoritative rigidity of old age.

The semic code, or the voice, refers to that desirable ability of the text to *show* rather than *tell*, to tap into the abstract by use of concrete imagery. In semantics, the *seme*⁷ is the smallest unit of meaning; that which enables one to operate with words multilingually. The author of the text uses these *semes* to convey additional meaning, as evidenced in the literary example by the association of *suits* with the notion of *crime*.⁸

The symbolic code or the voice of the symbols is the enablement of the text to transgress ‘taboos’ whether these are rhetorical, sexual, economic, and so on. The symbolic code is the main point of convergence of different meanings which in turn define and emphasize the plural meanings of the text: *I tend to agree with Father....To his face at least.*

Finally, the referential code or the voice of science consists of the text’s dependence on the schemata, that flow and fluctuation of the text, making appeal to the experience (of wearing suits, or that of an overshadowing father figure) in order to create that unique connection between the reader and the content.

⁷ The term was introduced in 1930s by Eric Buysens.

⁸ One could extrapolate the association of *suits* with *crime* to the legal notion of *law suit*, thus investing the image with yet another layer of meaning.

These codes invest the text with openness for interpretation, and there would be no text to talk of without its destination: the reader. “In a story there is always a reader and this reader is a fundamental ingredient not only of the process of storytelling, but also of the tale itself” (Umberto Eco, 7). It is ultimately the reader who imposes meaning, who cradles the written word after its birth, nurtures it and gives it scope through interpretations, subjective ways of assigning meaning.

How much power does the reader have? Can the text exist outside of the reader’s perception of it? Eco makes a clear distinction between the model reader and the empirical one:

The empirical reader is you, me, anyone when we read a text. Empirical readers can read in many ways, and there is no law that tells them how to read, because they often use the text as a container of their own passions, which may come from outside the text or which the text may arouse by chance (Eco, 8).

Could it be that the chance which favours the production of words in the first place, and the chance of attributing personal meaning to those same words by an empirical reader, are somewhat related? Is the meaning aroused by chance, separate from the text that has produced it?

The model reader on the other hand is the ultimate reader, the one for whom the text has been produced, “a sort of ideal type whom the text not only foresees as a collaborator, but also tries to create” (Eco, 9). The model reader does not exist per se, and yet she determines the existence

of the text to some extent – once more a relationship with no distinct boundaries between cause and effect.

In brief, the written word is not accessible only through the act of seeing. The understanding of language and attributing connotations to the text can depend on the cultural and personal experience of the reader, on her ability to identify narrative codes and engage in the *activity of production* through which a text can be experienced. Furthermore, recent studies in neuroscience have confirmed that the act of reading has multiple effects on the brain, affecting other areas aside from Broca's and Wernicke's which are directly responsible for the production of speech and understanding of language. In fact, fiction with its propensity for story, teaches the brain valuable lessons about life, reality and theory of the mind.⁹

⁹ Dr. Keith Oatley, an emeritus professor of Cognitive Psychology at the University of Toronto compares fiction reading to a lifelike simulation of reality, one that the brain actually perceives as real: [...] a particularly useful simulation because negotiating the social world effectively is extremely tricky, requiring us to weigh up myriad interacting instances of cause and effect. Just as computer simulations can help us get to grips with complex problems such as flying a plane or forecasting the weather, so novels, stories and dramas can help us understand the complexities of social life (As quoted by Annie Murphy Paul in her New York Times opinion editorial *Your Brain on Fiction*).

I. 2 Picture this

Everything we see is a perspective, not the truth. (Marcus Aurelius, AD 121-180)

The word *image* is derived from the root of *imitari*. “An image is a sight which has been recreated or reproduced. It is an appearance, a set of appearances which has been detached from the place and time in which it first made its appearance and preserved – for a few moments or a few centuries” (Berger, 2). The image has a mimetic quality as well as openness to interpretation – a way of seeing/ways of being seen. And just as text is derived from language, image has a semiotics of its own:

[...] some believe that the image is a very rudimentary system in relation to language, and others that signification cannot exhaust the ineffable wealth of the image. Now, even and especially if the image is somehow the *limit* of meaning, it permits us to return to a veritable ontology of signification. How does meaning come to the image? Where does meaning end? And if it ends, what is there *beyond*? (Barthes, 21-22)

In his *Rhetoric of Image*, Barthes argues for a linguistic message, one that is contained within, beneath or around the image. But to be able to decode this message one has to *read* the image, and he identifies the following

levels of reading: “an informational level and a symbolic level – the obvious meaning and the obtuse meaning,” (44) and a third level which he calls the “third meaning”, the process of experiencing an image sensorially.

I shall analyse these levels of interpretation by appealing to Van Gogh’s third version of *Tournesols*. The viewer’s experience defines the informational level, that set of codes and conventions allowing us to agree that Van Gogh’s painting depicts sunflowers and not roses.



Fig. 1 Vincent Van Gogh, *Vase with 12 sunflowers*, Neue Pinakothek, Munich

The symbolic level goes beyond the surface, attributing meaning to the flowers’ withering; their bowed heads are reminiscent of resignation, sickness and eventually death. The third meaning deviates from what we

see and can easily engage with our other senses, provided there is enough of a spark to call forth the involuntary memory of taste, smell, sound or touch. In the case of the *Vase with 12 Sunflowers*, I admit to be intrigued by the withering petals: I can almost hear their dry swoosh in the eventuality of someone moving the vase. The same goes for touch – the texture of the sharp and pointy lines, particularly of that one low, heavily bowed sunflower, turns on my haptic memory, and simply by looking at the painting, my fingertips can imagine what those petals would feel like to the touch.

Erwin Panofsky also distinguishes three levels of perception when exposed to an image. The first one is identified through familiarity – similar to Barthes' informational level – and the viewer makes *factual* and *expressional* inferences. For instance looking at a painting depicting a battle scene, the viewer can only make out the objects which she is familiar with, but can also relate to the expressions of anguish and fear on the soldiers' faces even if she has never been exposed to combat. It is that particular ability of the image to arrest a moment which heightens whatever is being pictured, eliciting empathic reaction. As performance artist Marina Abramović simply stated in relation to photography, but equally applicable to painting: "In stillness everything becomes so visible and so important" (*The Artist is Present Photographer is Present*).

The second level of perception as identified by Panofsky, deals with iconography – linking themes with artistic motifs. For instance, Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, is the representation of a New Testament episode as well as an allegory of doubt.

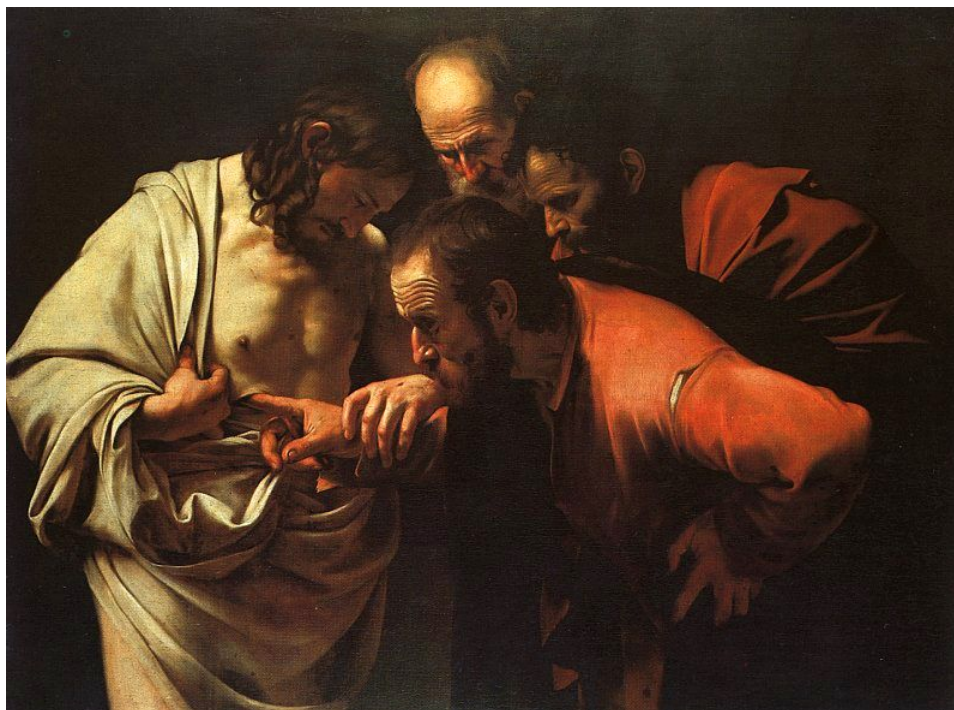


Fig. 2 Michelangelo Merisi or Amerighi da Caravaggio, *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, Sanssouci, Potsdam

For someone completely oblivious to Christian narrative, the painting depicts four men: one of whom is wounded; the other three are examining his wounds. The image is effective without knowing that the half-naked, wounded man is the resurrected Son of God. And yet, there is one particular element in Caravaggio's painting which requires the knowledge of Christian religion. For a non-Christian viewer, the pointing hand clutched by the wounded man's hand, could perhaps be interpreted as a

sign of resistance and pain. But to a viewer steeped in Christian narrative, it is obvious that Thomas's hand is guided by Jesus himself, to reinforce His disciple's belief. This is conveyed by Jesus's calm expression in opposition to the tense, wrinkled foreheads of the other three. In fact, in the Christian reading, the resistance and pain seem to come from the other three, rather than from the Son of God.

The third level of reading the image, according to Panofsky, relates to the iconological interpretation: "*It is apprehended by ascertaining those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion - qualified by one personality and condensed into one work*" (7). This level of reading relies heavily on what he calls "synthetic intuition", a familiarity with specific cultural beliefs engrained in the human mind, the collective subconscious which acts as an invisible voice of reason, by assigning a default, unquestionable meaning. Since there are different levels of reading an image, what exactly is there to read? Is painting a language? Jean-Louis Schefer expands this question to: "What is the connection between the picture and the language inevitably used in order to read it – i.e. in order (implicitly) to write it? *Is not this connection the picture itself?*" (As quoted in Barthes, 150)

I would like to briefly analyse the following illustration, for which I wrote the vignette *Unlike Father, Like Owl*¹⁰:



Fig. 3 Via Fang, *Unlike Father, Like Owl*, Edinburgh (part of the collection *Animalbum* exhibited at Edinburgh College of Art, 2011)

The informational level tells us that the picture depicts an owl, dressed in human clothes, carrying books. The symbolic level allows associations with a certain time and class (Victorian upper class as exemplified by the attire) as well as with the burden of going to school. The third meaning comes in the form of tension as emphasized by the position of the claws,

¹⁰ For this chapter I will look at the illustration as separate from the text I have produced for it.

the almost tiptoeing of the little owl, as if it is ‘walking on eggshells,’ careful not to disturb/upset an authority in absentia.

Although it operates with different signs, the language of image and its capacity to generate meaning is very similar to that of the text. As I will demonstrate in the following subchapter, the elements which (apparently) set the two arts apart are those which bring them even closer.

I. 3 Words like Pictures like Words

The representation of both text and image has been subjected to a constant process of evolution and reinvention, leading up to instances where the two art forms intertwine, sometimes up to the point of no distinction. The commercial logo comes to mind, which can be both a word/letter and an image, as is the case with the two examples below. In the first image each letter seems to be ‘carved’ into parts of the figure 8, making up the name of the brand – the word *eight*;



Fig. 4 Logo created by Stylo Design, U.K.

meanwhile in the second image a plane is ‘cutting up’ the initials of City Direct onto a black oval.



Fig. 5 Logo created by Logomotive, US

Typography, the art of the letterform, is skillfully used by logo designers who manipulate not just the symbols/letters, but also the counter space (the negative space). Readers and viewers often ignore the counter space because it does not contain letters/words for them to read. One of the most famous examples is the logo for FedEx which turns the space between letters E and x into an arrow.



Fig. 6 Logo created by Landor Associates, US

This section will analyse the blending of words and pictures, their juxtaposition, and the effects that such an inextricable encounter has on meaning.

Poetry, more so than fiction, can be concomitantly visual and aural. Poets have been experimenting with the shape of the text ever since Ancient Greece, simply by increasing or decreasing the number of metrical feet in a line. As Carole Ann Taylor remarks, “virtually no formal divisions of poetry (stazaic, linear, metrical and so on) remain unaffected by visual junctures” (6). The content of poetry operates with imagery, but its form can also make use of distinctive visual means – like enjambment, which, according to John Hollander cannot occur in “oracular poetry” (As quoted in Taylor, 6).

Calligrammes and concrete poetry make use of the words as text, but also as image – the poem is invested with an actual physical shape, that relates either to its title or the subject/theme. This presentation conveys an extra meaning, a meta-meaning, which is no longer just informed by language, but also by an image, informed by a convention of signs – bell, leaf, hour glass or indeed empty space.

In her essay *Experimental, Visual, and Concrete Poetry: Context and Concepts*, Johanna Drucker identifies what she calls *superficial* elements of Concrete poetry:

...the work has a distinct shape on the page and loses a part of its meaning if it is rearranged or printed without the attention to the typeface and form which were part of the poet's original work. Whether contemplating a vase-shaped ode or staring at the space in the center of Eugen Gomringer's famous poem 'Silencio,' one is aware that visual presentation is key to the meaning of the work" (40).

**silencio silencio silencio
silencio silencio silencio
silencio silencio
silencio silencio silencio
silencio silencio silencio**

Fig. 7 Eugen Gomringer, *Silencio*

Drucker uses notions like *space* and *visual representation* in relation to the work of poets, concepts that we normally associate with painting. In concrete poetry, the page becomes a canvas on which the poet paints with words, making use of the atomic element of the word – the letter – for what it means, as well as what it can represent figuratively. Concrete poetry relies equally on words and on the spaces between them.

While there have been other examples of shape poetry in the past, like George Herbert's poem *The Altar* (1633) which made the text appear like an altar, a significant emphasis on visual experimentation with poetic

form can be attributed to twentieth-century poets in Russia and France; it is interesting to note the very different approaches.

The Russians were drawn to sound symbolism and a reinvention of the language, as described by poet Aleksei Kruchenykh in his definition of *Zaum*¹¹: “a language which does not have any definite meaning, a transrational language allowing for fuller expression” unlike the common language which “binds” (Janecek, 2). Russians were also interested in letterpress technology – writer Ilia Zdanevich experimented with typographic representation as is the case with the title for his play *Easter Island*, as illustrated in Fig. 8:



Fig. 8 Ilia Zdanevich, *Easter Island*

¹¹ The word *zaum* has been roughly translated by Paul Schmidt as: *transreason*, *transration* or *beyonsense* (Gerald Janecek, 1)

Meanwhile in Paris, Guillaume Apollinaire relies heavily on a recognisable pictorial form in the arrangement of the words on the page. His poem *Il pleut* (It Is Raining) testifies to the iconic representation of the verbal content of the poem: the words drip from the page; letters become raindrops.

The title – written as a title: horizontally, indented – announces matter-of-factly that *it is raining* which is visually supported by the way the poem is displayed on the page. The words are invested with a vertical physicality and they fall diagonally as if guided by a subtle wind – in the same way raindrops look like lines when claimed by gravity.

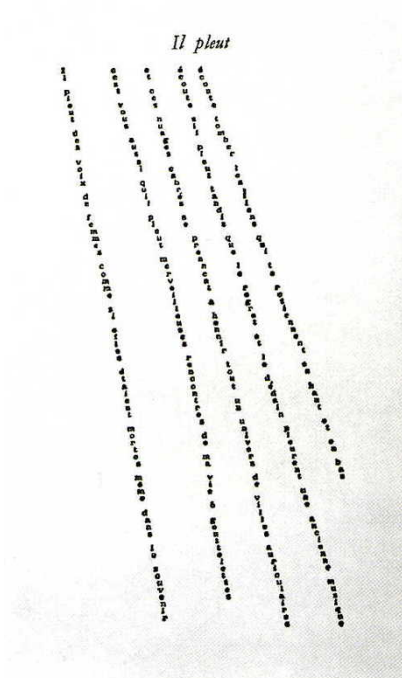
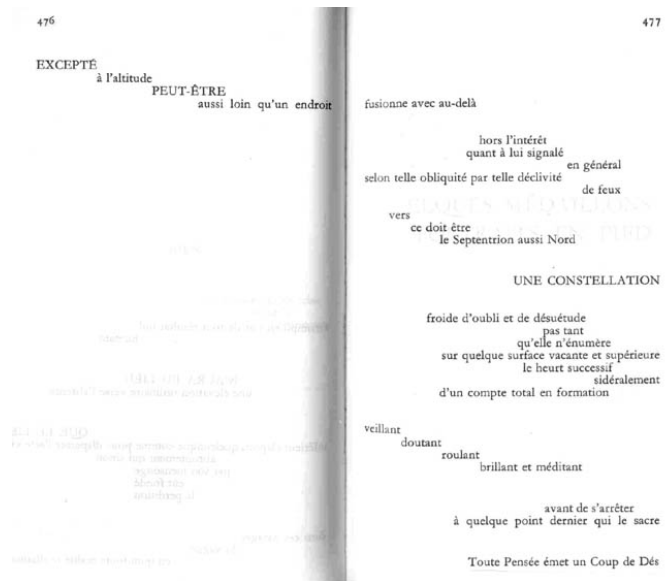


Fig. 9 Guillaume Apollinaire, *Il pleut*

The text literally rains down from the title – perhaps there is no need to even read the words, we can see what they do and they rain. But Apollinaire plays with the meaning of the words, by turning this visual rain into an aural one: *il pleut des voix de femmes* (it is raining [with] the voices of women). Thus the words attempt to communicate a double message: they drip, they are fluid, they rain while at the same time they tell us to listen – *écoute s'il pleut / écoute tomber les liens* (listen if it rains / listen to the falling of the bonds).

Without a doubt, the greatest influence on the evolution of Concrete poetry has been the work of Stéphane Mallarmé, in particular his poem *Un Coup de Dés*, conceived in 1886, but published posthumously in 1914.



Mallarmé uses the space on the page, the arrangement of the words, to convey abstract notions like fear, anxiety or relief. As Drucker remarks: “Variously described as a constellation, an open work, an image of a shipwreck, and a complex hieroglyphic, Mallarmé's poem uses a variety of type sizes and styles to create a poem intended to approach the condition of pure thought” (42). In a graphic sense, separate from what these words literally convey, the poet shows us ‘the condition of pure thought’ – the visual representation of the literary device known as stream of consciousness. Each line has its own individual representation in the same way synapses and thoughts occur and alter in one’s mind. The space is elusive in the same way as language is, the imagery is both suggestive and fleeting – everything is an impression, like a dream that feels real or a dream-like reality.

The reader experiences a certain physicality of the poem, for instance the lines: *veillant, doutant, roulant, brillant et méditant*, at the bottom of the page which take the form of steps, invite the reader to a physical descent in the very act of reading; then before reaching the bottom (*avant de s’arreter* / before stopping) they announce the poem’s conclusion. As Drucker asserts:

Mallarmé's poetic sophistication and his theoretical investigation of the concept of the book, of language, and of symbolic value thus serve as a cornerstone of twentieth-century visual poetics. Not least of all, he made a work whose graphic and visual presentation are indisputably integral to its poetic meaning – thus making the exemplary visual poetic text (42).

Not only does this type of poetry change the perspective of the text, but it also changes the way we read. The letter suddenly becomes just as important as the word, if not more so: it becomes a discrete, visually meaningful part of the text – it acts as a line, as a curve as well as a component of the word. Barthes claims that: “the polysemic (we would be able to say *pansemic*) nature of the image-sign: freed from its linguistic role (participation in a particular word), a letter can say everything: in this baroque region where meaning is destroyed beneath symbol, one and the same letter can signify two contraries” (100). The unit of the text thus becomes synonymous with the unit of the image and the word takes on a second function, that of graphical representation within the context of a line, and without.

Just as the text can successfully borrow the line and shape from the image, taking the form of an object, but still presenting the readable, understandable and meaning-infused quality of the text, the image too can make use of figurative aspects of literary texts such as the metaphor, synonymy or metonymy. A prime example to illustrate this is the work of 16th century mannerist, Giuseppe Arcimboldo.

What Arcimboldo achieves is a double symbolism, worthy of poetry – he imagines a portrait of Autumn personified, he creates a real character using the generally accepted symbols of Autumn, its seasonal fruit and vegetables, while turning each and every fruit into a recognizable feature of a human face: nose, eyes, ears, etc.



Fig. 11 Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *Autumn*, Louvre, Paris

As Barthes notes:

In the figure *Autumn*, the (terrible) eye consists of a little prune. In other words – in French, at least – the botanic *prunella* becomes the ocular *prunelle*, our word¹² for eyeball. It is as if like a baroque poet, Arcimboldo exploits the “curiosities” of language, plays on synonymy

¹² Barthes refers in this section to the French word *prunelle* which translates into both *eyeball* and *pupil*. An interesting observation, pertaining to the illogical to some extent, sense of language, springs out here: The French equivalent of the British idiom *apple of one's eye*, is: *la prunelle de ses yeux*.

and homonymy. His painting has a linguistic basis, his imagination is, strictly speaking, poetic: it does not create signs, it combines them, permutes them, deflects them – precisely what the practitioner of language does (Barthes, pp. 130-131).

Arcimboldo even retains a logical hierarchy – the lower part of the portrait is composed of root vegetables gradually moving towards fruit and vegetables growing above ground and/or in trees.

Arcimboldo goes as far as to employ analogy to the point where comparison becomes transformative metaphor, as is the case with his painting *Cook*.



Fig. 12 Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *Cook*, Civic Museum, Cremona

By making use of a writer's technique – that of continuously exploiting the literal meaning of an ordinary metaphor – he manages to create and

operate with a double level of meaning. By taking the common perception that a metal bowl looks like a helmet or that the helmet looks like a bowl, he presents the subject of the portrait as a producer of endless meanings: the helmet is a dish if we reverse the image and remains a helmet when the position is restored. We know that the portrait is that of a cook, as the title suggests, but also by inferring that the helmet/dish is in fact the main utensil a cook works with. Barthes goes even further with the meaning, identifying another repercussion – turning the symbols into a somewhat Escherian representation:

...why does this cook have the fierce expression of a copper-complexioned old soldier? Because the metal of the dish necessitates armor, helmet and the cooking of meats requires the swarthy red of open-air professions. A singular old soldier, moreover, whose helmet brim is embellished with a delicate slice of lemon. And so on: the metaphor turns on itself, but according to a centrifugal movement: the backwash of meaning never stops (Barthes 132).

Same as a soldier, a cook can become a killer. Arcimboldo could have chosen a variety of other dishes to make up his cook's face, but instead he makes use exclusively of dead, fried animals. The portrait of the cook becomes a grotesque spectacle, his nose a whole fried chicken, his forehead a piglet, his hair the pig's tail – a comment perhaps on the pigtail hairdo. Barthes' remark of 'a singular old soldier' is even more pertinent in the context of the decrepit features of the cook – the face is wrinkled, sad and even scary: the position of the head as if he's looking over his shoulder surprised could be seen as both threatening and threatened.

Thus, Arcimboldo becomes more than a painter, he is a storyteller, who does not use words; and yet we know exactly the vocabulary he would use just by looking at his paintings – he reinvents word play by turning it into visual play/pun.

Moving on from these examples of technique lending and borrowing, which clearly demonstrate that both visual and verbal representation can successfully make use of each other's tools, I shall look at the instances in which the two engage in an actual dialogue, wherein they come together as separate parts of a single whole, their union a self-contained form of art, something more than the sum of the parts.

I. 4 Hybrids

The child looks and recognizes before it can speak....It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it (Berger, cover).

In the Middle Ages there was a certain perceived superiority of the text over the image. Even though both image and text in that era were often used as religious tools, the image was used as a support to the (biblical) texts. What church frescos did was a reverse ekphrasis: they would visually represent the stories in the Bible, making these accessible to illiterate worshippers. It can be said that the image acted as a servant to the text, but even so, one required a certain knowledge to invest that which could be seen, with meaning. In order to decode the picture within a semiotic system, one had to be familiar with a series of elements that ranged from the characters depicted and their attributes – details such as the position of the hand, the covered or uncovered head, bare feet, aspects

of dress (especially in the representation of Virgin Mary¹³) and so on. But still, the written word would be viewed as superior to the painted image, mainly because of its restricted accessibility.

It was during the Renaissance that visual artists would claim equal rights. Cennino D'Andrea Cennini, one of Giotto's successors, gives in his *Il libro dell'arte (The Craftsman's Handbook)* the following definition of painting as an occupation:

[it] calls for imagination and skill of hand, in order to discover things not seen, hiding themselves under the shadow of natural objects, and to fix them with the hand, presenting to plain sight what does not actually exist. And it justly deserves to be enthroned next to theory, and to be crowned with poetry. The justice lies in this: that the poet, with his theory, though he have but one, it makes him worthy, is free to compose and bind together, or not, as he pleases, according to his inclination. In the same way, the painter is given freedom to compose a figure, standing, seated, half-man, half-horse, as he pleases according to his imagination (pp. 1-2).

Pictures became records of perception, of how "X had seen Y" (Berger, 3), representations of both reality and non-reality: "No other kind of relic or text from the past can offer such a direct testimony about the world which surrounded other people at other times. In this respect images are more precise and richer than literature" (Berger, 3).

¹³ According to the Third Session of the Council of Ephesus in 431, Virgin Mary was to be called *Theotokos* (God-bearer) and her visual representation should always denote her Perpetual Virginity (before, during and after the birth of Jesus) by placing three stars on her attire: one on the head and one on each shoulder.

The Renaissance marked another important historical moment in the common life of image and text: the birth of narrative painting. Art no longer reproduced the story in multiple narrative hubs, as was customary with frescoes, but instead started to focus on one specific episode, also known as *punctum temporis*. Themes included antic literature,¹⁴ mainly myths, and more so than ever before, painters looked to history for their inspiration, giving birth to the genre of historical painting. Seventeenth century French painter and art theoretician Charles Le Brun considered historic painting to be the only genre capable of narration, of telling a story; it therefore deserved, he surmised, the highest aesthetic value. It was at this point that visual representation began to borrow and make use of the terms until now associated with literature and rhetoric. This is why, if we look at any of the French paintings of the Classical period we can identify – without requiring a thorough knowledge of art history¹⁵ – a certain grammar of gestures and an alphabet of physiognomies, both capable of storytelling.

It can be argued, that from a linguistic point of view, the relationship between a painting and its title is what determines the

¹⁴ Note how *inspiration* travels back and forth from the art of word to that of painting, their constant support on each other makes it almost impossible to see them as separate arts.

¹⁵ Anyone can perceive victory or defeat, regardless of their education, these are essentially human traits/ambitions.

narrative interpretation of that visual work of art. Yet paintings haven't always been given titles. The medieval frescoes contained *tituli*, fragments of the sacred texts, which had an educative function. However, the general belief – both in Medieval and Renaissance painting – was that the subject of the painting would already be known to the viewer and so the title could be omitted.

From the Renaissance to the Neo-Classical period, and continuing with Impressionism, whenever it accompanies a painting, the title has the same function as a label – denoting the producer, the production date and in some instances the materials/techniques used for the product/painting. From the 20th century, the title appears to no longer identify the subject; the label clearly refers to the plastic nature of the work of art. The main focus is now on the self-referentiality of the painting or of the title.

Perhaps the most playful and exaggerated example of the connection between image and its title comes from the currents labelled by art historians as Surrealism and Dadaism. The early twentieth century sees a blending of the two languages (words within the title and the visual representation which they designate) up to the point of no recognition/dis-figuration.¹⁶ The best example is René Magritte's *Ceci*

¹⁶ The term of *convulsive beauty*, as it appears in André Breton's *First Surrealist Manifesto*, comes to illustrate this new art, language, way of writing where decoding meaning is no longer an end, but a means of relating/understanding – the reality on top of reality (*sur-real*).

n'est pas une pipe – words are no longer used to add a verbal code to something that can obviously be seen:



Fig. 13 René Magritte, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*

Magritte is offering a meditation on the strangeness of representation, of this apparently natural (and yet in fact not natural) chain of signs linking the idea of the pipe in the viewer's mind to the 'real' pipe being represented. It is perhaps a lame joke, but one with an ancient philosophical context; and the lameness of the joke is part of the point: we live, perceive, communicate, we are stranded, within this illusionary chain of signification (Cheeke, 25).

Magritte proceeds to redefine meaning by unmasking the double treachery of words and images, their dual elusiveness when it comes to representation: both are mere 'stand-ins' for the 'real'.

There are several versions of *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, different paintings as well as reproductions, the image-text becoming so familiar that its verbal image has been enlisted not only to make points about language and representation, but even about marketing and branding.



Fig. 14 Marty Neumeier, *The Brand Gap: How to Bridge the Distance Between Business Strategy and Design*

In the introduction to *The Brand Gap*, Neumeier makes use of the above image to define the brand by what it is not:

A brand is not a logo....a brand is not a corporate identity....a brand is not a product....A brand is a person's gut feeling about a product, service, or company....In other words, a brand is not what you say it is. It's what THEY say it is....an approximate – yet distinct – understanding of a product, service, or company. (pp. 1-3)

Thus, Magritte's brilliance proves to be an infinite source of meaning, particularly in the case of branding, which stretches far beyond the visual representation of a logo – it is a set of perceptions and visual

¹⁷ The English term *brand* is translated in French as *la marque*, a feminine noun, hence the use of the feminine article *une* (*brand*) – perhaps an undoubtful resonance to Magritte's *une pipe*, but also to the Nike symbol/logo, originally inspired by the 2nd-century BC marble sculpture of the Greek goddess Nike of Samothrace, better known as *Winged Victory*.

representations that define a product, company or service – in the same way as Magritte's pipe is a representation of a real pipe.

When analysing the relationship between text and image one cannot overlook illustration, an art that is not necessarily narrative, if removed from the context of the literary work it accompanies. The illustration makes use of a specific visual code (as instructed by the text) thus becoming an ornamental adjuvant for the understanding of the words.

But it is not enough for an image simply to find inspiration in a literary text in order for it to become an illustration. One should not disregard, when defining an illustration, the relationship between the author of the text and that of the image, as I will demonstrate with the support of secular illustration. There are writers who choose to illustrate their own writing – William Blake, Marcel Proust and Franz Kafka to name a few – and writers who choose to work with illustrators, as is the case of Lewis Carroll.

An illustration is both decorative and interpretative; each aspect determines the type of visual narration which the reader will encounter. One could say that illustration is a form of reversed ekphrasis, the visual interpretation of the written word, the representation of the content of the text in a visual form. Illustration has evolved from its main function of

underlining and adorning the sacred text to claiming its own literary and visual genres such as the graphic novel or cartoon strips.

Before moving on to the abundant realm of collaboration, of the mutual support of words and pictures as exemplified by ekphrasis, it is worth considering the effect which words have on the visual message.

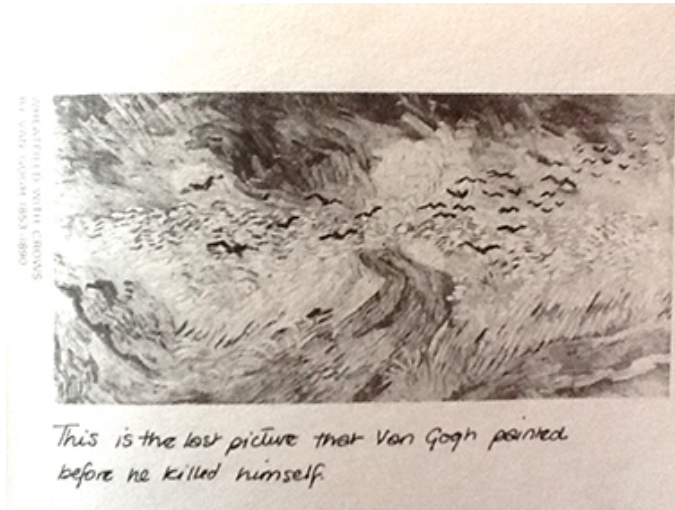


Fig. 15 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (21)

The sentence below Van Gogh's *Wheatfield with Crows* is a perfect example of the power words can claim over an image and our perception of it. "It is hard to define exactly how the words have changed the image but undoubtedly they have. The image now illustrates the sentence." (Berger, 21) It is not a title, simply a statement, a *legend* similar to that required for decoding a map, but its message is irreversible. An image without words is open to interpretation, whereas one accompanied by words acquires much more insight and even ends up illustrating the

words. In the above example, the viewer will – provided she has the capacity to read the text – undoubtedly invest the image with the inexorable meaning of the words. Thus, it is no longer about what we are seeing but about how the text underneath determines and affects that which we are seeing.

The invention of the camera changed the way people saw and Dziga Vertov, one of the first visionaries of the moving picture, claims in his 1923 Manifesto:

I am an eye. A mechanical eye. I, the machine, show you a world the way only I can see it. I free myself for today and forever from human immobility. I'm in constant movement. I approach and pull away from objects. I creep under them. I move alongside a running horse's mouth. I fall and rise with the falling and rising bodies. This is I, the machine, manoeuvring in the chaotic movements, recording one movement after another in the most complex combinations. Freed from the boundaries of time and space, I co-ordinate any and all points of the universe, wherever I want them to be. My way leads towards the creation of a fresh perception of the world. Thus I explain in a new way the world unknown to you (as quoted in Berger, 10).

This is exactly what ekphrasis does: on the primary level it offers to the image-maker an interpretation of her own interpretation, allowing for a new, uncharted meaning to expand that of the work itself; and on a secondary level it offers the reader/viewer a unique and word-anchored point of view from which a personal, subjectively informed interpretation may depart.

Barthes identifies two distinct functions of the text when accompanying an image – *anchoring* and *relaying*: “Every image is polysemous; it implies, subjacent to its signifiers, a ‘floating chain’ of signifieds of which the reader can select some and ignore the rest” (28). Therefore the text comes in aid of the message, it fixes the meaning by answering clearly and unequivocally the *What is it?* Question:

Language helps identify purely and simply the elements of the scene and the scene itself: it is a matter of a denoted description of the image (a decryption that is often partial)...The denominative function corresponds nicely to an *anchoring* of every possible (denoted) meaning of the object, by recourse to a nomenclature. (pp. 27-28)

Through the anchoring function, words ground the meaning of an image; they exert an authoritative voice through both connotation and denotation, laying out a trail of signs which the reader can follow in order to reach a meaningful destination.

The relaying function is specific to cartoons and comic strips – it refers to a particular moment in the narrative, which relies on dialogue/communication:

Here language (generally a fragment of dialogue) and image are in complementary relation; the words are then fragments of a more general syntagm, as are the images, and the message’s unity occurs on a higher level: that of the story, the anecdote, the diegesis (which confirms that the diegesis must be treated as an autonomous system). (Cf Claude Bremond, “Le Message Naratif,” *Communications* 4, 1964 as quoted in Barthes, 30)

The relay function of the word is essential in comic strips where the text, the dialogue offers new meanings and story codes which are not necessarily to be found in the visual representation they accompany.

Whatever the reason for allowing text into an image paradigm despite the ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’ cliché, there are plenty of visual artists who seem to have an innate understanding of the power words have: not over the image, but in relationship to it. When brought together successfully, words and pictures become a power couple reveling in subtext and meta-meaning, like two chemical reactants transforming in relationship to each other, ultimately yielding a new element with new and different properties.

Sir Roland Penrose’s *Portrait* illustrates the ‘hybrid’ concept perfectly:



Fig. 16 Sir Ronald Penrose, *Portrait*, Tate Modern, London

We are contemplating a watercolour painting, a poem, an exercise in surrealism, a canvas on which words show up to challenge our perception of colours, shapes and conventional portraiture – by managing to convey a complex character through text on top of abstract forms. An in-depth analysis would require a chapter of its own, having to cover the text, its layout, font, and finally its meaning, all in relation to the colours and visual forms which support the words, or perhaps which the words themselves come in support of. Penrose's words are painted in upward or downward curves, vertical or horizontal; and they attribute concrete imagery to the subject of his portrait. When reading the handwritten text we learn specific details about 'his hand,' 'his hair,' 'his teeth,' 'his thighs' and even 'his lungs,' all of which are meant to define and crystallise the image of this 'he' in the viewer-reader's mind.

I would like to point out one fascinating element of the painting which truly stands out visually and symbolically. Although the writing is diverse in colour and size, the handwriting style is predominant except for two words: 'a needle' which are written in printed, black block letters to design 'his eye'. Perhaps the vertical print letters are meant to mirror the object they design – instead of drawing a line to look like a needle Penrose makes use of the word written as if it were a needle, the words 'his eye' going through the letter D, like a thread. This particular choice offers various interpretations: on a primary level, one could read this as

the needle's eye – a graphic and literal comment on the dimension of the eye, then there's the metaphorical Christian reading of “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:23-26) a comment on the character's *character*, then there is a third and concrete reading, more in tune with the rest of the text, that of ‘his eye, a needle’ – sign of a piercing, scrutinising look.

In the above example, the painted words gain a concrete visual quality, while their meaning designs concrete imagery in order to support abstract painted forms. Thus the connection between text and image becomes unquestionable – the two forms engage in a continuous process of lending and borrowing when it comes to assigning meaning, a relationship I will explore more closely in the forthcoming chapters.

II. (so *this* is) Ekphrasis

The process of collaboration between the two art forms is born out of a necessity – it is precisely their core difference which elicits their connection – as Leonardo Da Vinci asserted that painting is *mute poetry* and poetry *blind painting*. Their dialogue arises from the inability of each to fully achieve what the other does. It is, therefore, only natural for painters to turn to text and writers to (either moving or still) pictures as a form of inspiration for their craft:

To help write a scene, at times I watch a silent movie with a similar subject, and describe what happens in the silence. I find it very provocative, especially because they over-act, which allows me to describe how they bring their hands to their lips, grasp a banister, etc.
(Hugh Hothem)

Until fairly recently, my writing was rarely stimulated by pictures. For me the words themselves provoked the interest to express myself in writing. Perhaps having English as a second language, an endless well of wonder and creative insight, I did not feel the need for visual inspiration when producing a literary text. This however changed while I was writing a novella for my dissertation for the MSc in

Creative Writing. I was halfway through the text and had everything planned to the very last details: characters, settings, scenes. I had no plan to insert any description of a visual work of art into my narrative whatsoever, let alone one by an unknown artist. I would have probably – had this been a conscious choice – referred to a famous painting to draw upon its prestige. But the image I used for my first interaction with ekphrasis (as I would later come to know it to be) prompted my desire to write about it. It was the image itself that called for my writing response, which is what I think the process should be: an organic dialogue between the two arts. The image should awaken in the writer her need to speak/write about it.

For me it was the image in a crosshatching style, depicting a baby owl, dressed in Victorian clothes – quite far from the subject and setting of my novella (a dystopian near future world where people die on their thirtieth birthday).



Fig. 17 Via Fang, *Unlike Father, Like Owl*, Edinburgh (part of the collection *Animalbum* exhibited at Edinburgh College of Art, 2011)

Something in this image was asking me to describe it, to find a place for it in my narrative, to link it to one of my characters. If anything it was the look of helplessness on the owl's face that made the connection between what I was writing and the image:

Vincent looks around the room for something to distract him. He can feel his heart beating in his stomach. Something grabs his attention, a painting above the fireplace: the portrait of a baby owl wearing a Victorian school uniform.

"I love animal portraits," Gus says. "Much more honest than human ones. Look at that little guy. Displaying the exact set of emotions one feels on their first day of school. He's not posing." (Irina Nedelcu, *Summer a.m.*)

Little did I know at the time, that I was practising ekphrasis. In a way it was ekphrasis that found its way to me, prompting my desire for further exploration both in theory and practice.

II 1. Definitions

In truth, ekphrasis may be both a selfless, generous project, and a self-serving and diabolical one. (Grant F. Scott, as quoted in Cheeke, 29)

One of the main themes that preoccupied Ancient philosophers and poets was the distinction between visual and lyrical art and how one worked in relation to the other. Aristotle saw poetry and painting as both being imitating arts, Horace's *ut pictura poesis* put poetry and painting in the same paradigm, Himerius believed that words turned ears into eyes, and Simonides of Ceos defined painting as silent poetry and poetry as a picture that speaks. This latter interpretation is strikingly similar to da Vinci's painting as mute poetry and poetry as blind painting; and I believe we can extract a potent definition of poetry, and ultimately of any literary text, by combining the two: a blind picture that speaks.

The struggle for power and dominance between the art of the image and that of the word is traceable in both the history of art and

of literature, even though each has the capacity to more or less define and act as a substitute for the other. It is through ekphrasis that the two forms of art begin to fully coexist.

The most common definition of ekphrasis is provided by the Merriam Webster Dictionary: “a literary description of or commentary on a visual work of art”. In essence it is the writer’s interpretation of an opus – work of art – whether it is painting, drawing, sculpture, music, extant or fictional. James A. Heffernan sees ekphrasis as “the verbal representation of visual representation” (Heffernan, 3). We are actually dealing with a third form of language, contrived from the two languages of literature and visual art. But in essence, this language is nothing more than a representation of another representation, where the verbal allows the visual to speak.

Although the term is universal and has lately been extended to cover notions and literary genres such as notional ekphrasis or the ekphrastic novel, it is not the only word that describes the literary response to a visual work of art. *Bildgedicht* is a German term – with no correspondent in English – roughly translated as ‘iconic poem’ or at times as ‘ekphrastic poem’ or ‘poem on a picture’. The poem can be either descriptive or interpretative, or sometimes even both and is not limited to pictures/paintings; works of sculpture and architecture have been often used as ‘models’ for bildgedicht. I note this term for

its specific association to poetry as opposed to ekphrasis which makes no particular distinction between literary forms. This brings us back to *ut pictura poesis* and the strong, mimetic relationship between poetry and painting.

One of the first to differentiate between the two was Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in his *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* written in 1766, a text still cited in the study of ekphrasis. The main difference Lessing makes is between poetry as an art of conventional signs depicted in time and painting as an art of would-be 'natural' signs deployed in space. He analysed the sculpture *Laocoon and His Sons* as a philosopher of aesthetics and used it as a case study to identify the time-space dimensions essential to the narrative (visual or verbal). He considered the literary work to be absorbed in time, acting through conventional signs such as letters and words which had no separate meaning in themselves. Where the visual arts are concerned, the dimension of time is merely nonexistent according to Lessing, and the means of representation were similar to what they represented. He even asserts that literature can describe terrible things without necessarily making use of vile words whereas representational arts are forced to actually show the unpleasant when representing it. And yet, it is this very quality of accuracy that makes us respond to a work of art, for according to

Aristotle, regardless of how unpleasant the subject: “we gaze on those very objects with pleasure when copied by painters; and the better they are copied, the more satisfaction we have in beholding them.” (4) To some extent one can associate the effect of visual art with Deleuze’s definition of literature as an “enterprise of health”: both arts (of representation) are in essence superior to the reality which they represent, through their long(er)standing effect.

In his essay “Ekphrasis and the Still Movement of Poetry; or, *Laocoon Revisited*” first published in 1967 which reappeared as an appendix to his extended 1992 study *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*, Murray Krieger refers to the “still movement of ekphrasis.” A poem has the capacity to move easily and at the same time on the space-time scale. For Krieger every poem is a unique contextual system, with its very own laws, “an organic whole”, “a sovereign, living object” and it is the bi-dimensional aspect of its “time-space powers” coupled with the lyrical representation of a visual work of art, that makes ekphrasis a genre of its own (Krieger, 285).

Krieger applies the term ekphrasis to any and all descriptions of visual objects and not just to examples of visual art, turning the activity into an exercise in illusion: “every attempt, within an art of words, to work toward the illusion that it is performing a task we

usually associate with an art of natural signs” (9). He argues that the need for representation, the ekphrastic impulse originates from a longing for an “immediacy of the picture”, an impulse toward the illusion of painting with words. Because in truth, language has the capacity to create *images* in the mind’s eye; while there can be no consensus as to what those images really are, all the same language holds this *power*:

But if language is able to produce imagery, and images have a privileged connection to perception and sense experience, then it is easy to see how the art of poetry could be assumed to have as direct a connection to the ‘real thing’ as a painting is supposed to have. Perhaps more so, since a painting may produce a mere resemblance or likeness of a thing, whereas through the combinatory power of language, the figurative aspect whereby images are woven¹⁸ into other images, my idea or sense of a thing in the world as a result of a verbal description of that thing may be more ‘real’, more vivid and alive to me, brought closer to my comprehension, than either the thing itself, or a painting of the thing. The Greek word for this effect of language was *enargeia*: ‘the capacity of words to describe with a vividness that, in effect, reproduces an object before our very eyes (i.e. before the eyes of the mind) (Kreiger, 28)

Hollander provides another definition, one infused with visceral meaning, especially because it contains the active voice of a ‘silent work of art,’ the voice which I have endlessly heard myself, which prompted my writing from and in aid of illustrations: “Poems addressed to silent works of art, questioning them; describing them as

¹⁸ I would like to highlight Kreiger’s use of the verb *to weave* in relation to verbal images, and make note of the etymology of the word *text*: derived from the Latin *textus* which meant structure, pattern of weaving, texture (of cloth); equivalent to *tex(ere)* which meant *to weave*.

they could never describe – but merely present – themselves; speaking for them; making them speak out or speak up” (130). The emphasis should be on both ‘speak out’ and ‘speak up,’ which happen almost simultaneously whenever language takes control of what is being seen. The subject comes to life in the poet’s mind, through her eye, and makes its way through the land of words, dressing itself in imagery.

As Cheeke notes: “[W.J.T.] Mitchell draws our attention to the numbing fact that the phrase ‘verbal imagery...seems to be metaphor for metaphor itself’, though...it [is not] clear whether a ‘mental picture’ is what is produced in the mind as we read” (28). Indeed, that production itself is now verifiable through functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) – words have this miraculous effect of triggering images in the mind’s eye and recent studies in neuroscience show clear evidence that concrete imagery makes our brain ‘act’ as if we’re experiencing first hand that which we are in fact reading:

[...] researchers from Emory University reported in *Brain & Language* that when subjects in their laboratory read a metaphor involving texture, the sensory cortex, responsible for perceiving texture through touch, became active. Metaphors like “The singer had a velvet voice” and “He had leathery hands” roused the sensory cortex, while phrases matched for meaning, like “The singer had a pleasing voice” and “He had strong hands,” did not (Ann Murphy Paul, *Your Brain on Fiction*, opinion editorial in *The New York Times*, 2012).

In his essay *Ekphrasis Reconsidered, On Verbal Representations of Non-Verbal Texts*, Claus Clüver elaborates on Heffernan's definition of ekphrasis by inserting the word *text* as used in semiotic discourse: "Ekphrasis is the verbal representation of real or fictitious text composed in a non-verbal sign system" (26). Furthermore, he extends the objects of ekphrasis to "architecture, as well as absolute music and non-narrative dance" (26). Clüver makes a clear distinction between written text and visual text, stating that in the end, what matters is whether the work of art is represented as a *text* or as an *object*. He also notes that it is ultimately up to the reader whether to "read such a verbalization as ekphrasis, a decision determined in part by the critical use he will make of the verbal text" (26). Again the reader comes up as authoritative figure who attributes meaning, but also who decides – if she is interested in the mechanics of the message – whether what she is exposed to can be considered ekphrasis or not.

For me as a practitioner, ekphrasis is the means by which the art of the word and that of the image (re)define each other. Very much similar to a ritual, a prayer designed to link the profane to the sacred; the process of ekphrasis is instrumental in grounding the various layers of visual and textual meaning by making these simultaneously accessible to the reader/viewer.

Nonetheless, a better understanding of the process as well as its generous provision of artistic exchange is achieved only by the power of example:

[...] specific examples of ekphrasis [...] are rarely straightforward allegories of the relationship between poetry and painting, or between word and image. Instead, as is often the case in literary studies, each example of a generic type (each poem-about-a-painting) seems to complicate the broader definitions of the genre. What is most complex and interesting about these encounters may not be the abstract dynamics or modalities of a general theory of ekphrasis then, but the larger, more compelling aesthetic and moral questions which take a particular form, an individual shape, in the specific encounter. (Cheeke, 36)

The following examples of ekphrasis will endeavour to show in what ways a poem/text helps the viewer *see* the picture it describes? What exactly does it make visible? Can the text change the viewer's (initial) perception of the image? And does the image really *need* the text?

II. 2 Ekphrasis in action

*If You See Something, Say Something*TM (Public Awareness Campaign for Metropolitan Transportation Authority, New York, 2010)

What prompts the textual response to pictures? Does it occur independently of the artist's will? Are perhaps the two arts themselves conspiring to be united? Does some sort of competition develop between them, insofar as they want to use each other's means of expression? And how much of this 'struggle' for supremacy has been fuelled by critics and practitioners and how much is actually visible in the craft itself?

Mitchell attributes human emotions to the process of ekphrasis, offering three stages of the verbal response to a work of art: ekphrastic *indifference*, *hope* and *fear*. Ekphrastic 'indifference' refers to the "commonsense [sic] perception that ekphrasis is impossible," prompted by the illogical association of two radically different forms of expression. Ekphrastic 'hope,' that is "when the impossibility of

ekphrasis is overcome in imagination or metaphor,” translates in the practitioner’s attempt to interpret that to which she is exposed, expressed through her own medium/language. The third stage, that of ‘ekphrastic fear’ is the “moment of resistance or counter desire...when the difference between visual and verbal mediation becomes a moral, aesthetic imperative” (Mitchell, as quoted in Cheeke 28).

I would extend Mitchell’s list by adding *ekphrastic responsibility*, which could be seen as a derivative of fear to some extent, but my personal experience with ekphrasis suggests that this element is paramount to an honest dialogue between the two media. In fact, there is a double responsibility: that towards the original medium and its message as well as the responsibility of staying true to the form of the text while interpreting the visual. Ekphrasis is very much an act of interpreting.¹⁹ The act of a writer putting in words that which is presented visually by another artist, incurs a great deal of responsibility towards both media.

In his *The Rhetoric of Dilation* G. F. Scott sees ekphrasis as:

a gift which writing bestows on images, a way of helping the statue say that which it can only suggest (Simonides’s speaking picture), as well as a way of demonstrating dominance and power. The motivations of ekphrasis are thus much more divided than most critics have acknowledged, and far more ambivalent. (Scott, 302)

¹⁹ As is the case of wars and their consequent treaties relying heavily on interpreters: who is to say that they did a good, true to language job?

The “way of helping” combined with the “way of demonstrating dominance and power” can serve as arguments for the interpreter analogy, and furthermore Scott’s point on the motivations of ekphrasis, their ambivalence, their duality, might very well inspire a question of gender politics if we were to consider that the ‘male’ active word pursues and sets out to confront the ‘female,’ passive image:

The contest it [ekphrasis] stages is often powerfully gendered: the expression of a duel between male and female gazes, the voice of male speech striving to control a female image that is both alluring and threatening, of male narrative striving to overcome the fixating impact of beauty poised in space (Heffernan, 1).

The words will inevitably infuse the image with action, moving beyond the stillness, making it both move and speak, as is best exemplified in Robert Browning’s poem *Eurydice to Orpheus*, written in response to Frederic Leighton’s *Orpheus and Eurydice*.



Fig. 18 Frederic Leighton, *Orpheus and Eurydice*, Leighton House Museum, Kensington & Chelsea, London, UK

But give them me, the mouth, the eyes, the brow!

Defied, – no past is mine, no future: look at me!

(Browning, 938 lines 1-8)

Browning makes use of lyrical poetry to allow the image to speak out, giving voice to Eurydice's desire: "...that moment before the final moment of loss. In doing so the poem does not attempt to describe what Leighton has painted; instead it is written for a figure inside the silent picture, whose desire is simply allowed to speak out" (Cheeke, 13).

The words give voice to the stillness of the image, they make it sensitive to time, and they bring it to life. This is not to say that the image cannot present a scene as informed by time – as is the case with Leighton's Orpheus and Eurydice, the painting is fluid and active, it is the freeze-frame of a moment, which is not in fact, devoid of time; precisely because of its arrest of the two lovers, it very much brings forth the memory of the past as well as the possibility of the future. The visual embrace seems to stretch between a moment in the past and what should and would happen if their eyes met: "Hold me but safe again within the bond / Of one immortal look!" (Browning, 938, lines 5-6) Browning's 'immortal look' mirrors Leighton's decision not to

allow the lovers' eyes to meet on the canvas, although the painting strongly emphasises this possibility, thus making the potential 'look' immortal, precisely by concealing it – we as viewers can feel the looming presence of that potential future moment, and so does Eurydice who is wrapped around Orpheus with both arms forcing him to push her away, turn his head and close his eyes. In fact Orpheus's reluctance says more about what could and would happen should he open his eyes than Eurydice's ardent desire – he knows the implications of that 'immortal look' and so do we, as viewers/readers.

To paraphrase Keats and his "touch has a memory" one could therefore infer that image has a memory too: in its arresting of time it manages to contain the past and the future. Thus, a painted scene is not just a moment frozen in time, but holds within the moment that led to it along with the countless possibilities deriving from it. Simply because the time-flow cannot be visually expressed in a still picture, it does not mean that it is not there to be perceived. This is when and why the picture speaks, demanding a voice. This is where words come into play:

Expression, and all that belongs to words, is that in a poem which colouring is in a picture. The colours were chosen in their proper places, together with the lights and shadows which belong to them, lighten the design, and make it pleasing to the eye. The words, the expressions, the tropes and figures, the versifications, and all the other elegancies of sound, as cadences, turns of word upon the thought, and many other things which are all parts of expression, perform exactly

the same office both in dramatic and epic poetry (John Dryden, as quoted in Cheeke, 22).

To some extent, the ekphrastic process is similar to that of film directing – which is in a way a reversal of the languages – the film starts from words, in the form of a script, which are then turned into moving pictures. But the process of the director is similar to that of the practitioner of ekphrasis, both rely on an individual vision, both respond to an external agent – a script for the director, a work of art for the writer – which they address in their own way. If we were to have ten poets respond to the same work of art we would obtain ten different responses in both form and content, and ten directors would make ten different films from the same script.

It should be noted that the written response to a visual work of art can also address the unsaid, the unseen, that which has “been left out, excluded or banished” (Alpers as quoted in Cheeke, 22). The satisfaction is much greater – the writer is actually using the image to create the story world, and in turn allowing the visual to speak up, to tell everything it wants to say but cannot, because of its limitations (what you see is what you get). The following example of my own work, illustrates this:



Fig. 19 Via Fang, *The Demise of the Royal Hunting Flush*, Edinburgh (part of the collection *Animalbum* exhibited at Edinburgh College of Art)

The text I produced in response to the above illustration was inspired by that which is not seen, by an absence in the picture, a literal one, which demanded voicing:

It was supposed to be a happy day, that Glorious Twelfth, and yet we could not find it in our hearts to even try and look happy. For the portrait, at least. But how could we? Each of us knew Bagby was missing from our renowned Royal Hunting Flush and worst of all, it was permanent. Every single one of our haunting thoughts was painted on our faces: no more trophies, no more running, no more being on top of our five-piece game and no more Bagby. Not in the flesh, anyway. What was left of him was this hat; Trent could not be separated from it. He carried it around for days, as if Bagby was somehow attached to it. He wasn't.

If anything, it gave us a sense of his absence. (Irina Nedelcu, *The Demise of the Royal Hunting Flush*)

The four dogs in the above illustration have a rather solemn air – it might be the suits that they're wearing, but to me, their postures spoke of an absence, an inexorable loss, but I had no clue as to what that loss was. Coming up with the title first, *The Demise of The Royal*

Hunting Flush, provided a valuable insight into the image's 'before.' A playful association of the hunting term 'flush' with the poker game nomenclature gave the illustration a new meaning – the four dogs were in fact five and their visible loss is not that of a trophy, but that of a friend. Thus the text allows the image to express that which it cannot, that which its characters literally miss. As Krieger concludes:

what is being described in ekphrasis is both a miracle and a mirage: a miracle because a sequence of actions filled with before and afters, such as language alone can trace, seems frozen into an instant's vision, but a mirage because only the illusion of such an impossible picture can be suggested by the poem's words. (xvi-xvii)

In the case of my above response, the words tap into those "befores," which the picture cannot represent.

Contemporary literature brings back the ancient form of ekphrasis: Tracy Chevalier's *Girl With a Pearl Earring* or Emili Rosales's *The Invisible City*. What is striking about contemporary ekphrasis is that by describing a work of art inside a literary discourse, the work of art can sometimes turn into a symbol of the mass-market. A well-known example is that of Raphael's (Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino) Sistine Madonna which has become an icon, a cultural star endowed with an aura of prestige. Frequently used as the main model for the cultural prototype of "the Virgin," the image is

now being used as an authoritative source for the angels covering various brands of cheese, soap or even condoms.

But ekphrasis – through its communication of meaning and value that derive from a writer’s fascination with a painting, a fresco, or an entire oeuvre of art – marks first and foremost a transfer of prestige. Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* comes to mind and Humbert’s description of her, comparing her beauty to Botticelli’s famous Venus, not an ekphrastic moment per se, but a simile that hinges up the reader’s familiarity with the painting: “I definitely realised...how much she looked – had always looked – like Botticelli’s russet Venus – the same soft nose, the same blurred beauty.” (Nabokov, 254)



Fig. 20 Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, Uffizzi Gallery, Florence

Nabokov's description of Lolita counts on the reader's familiarity with Botticelli's Venus: that 'same blurred beauty,' is meant to awaken in the reader's mind, the image of the fair haired Venus, the innocent features of her face, as if she has only just awoken from a deep, peaceful sleep.

When analysing ekphrasis as a writer a few questions come to mind. Why choose to insert the description of a work of art into a literary text, even though this technique risks making the reading and deciphering of the narrative more difficult? If the readers are not familiar with the work of art being described, they could end up losing the narrative thread, precisely because of an association that was initially aimed at clarifying it. But not all attempts at ekphrasis make use of famous works of art. What is then the purpose of this mediated, indirect representation of a representation? This question will be further explored through examples of my own work, in the final chapter.

III. What is Illustration and Why

“...what’s the use of a book,” thought Alice, “without pictures...?” (Carroll, 11)

In the previous chapter I have primarily explored how words serve pictures, how they provide a voice to the still image, allowing it to speak out and/or speak up about what is there and about what is not. It is now time to delve into the reverse process, in which the image supports the words, as exemplified by illustration.

There can be a perceived element of redundancy to the illustrated text – what can the pictures achieve that the words haven’t already? And how powerful is the visual image compared to the multitude of images created by the text in the reader’s mind? Edward Hodnett remarks in his *Studies in the illustration of English literature*:

An illustration is a distraction that interposes a precise image for the unfretted suggestions of words. The artist uses a different medium and is, with rare exceptions, a different person from the author. What then is the function and justification of illustrating works of imagination? (Hodnett, 12)

Illustrated texts used to be more common than those lacking illustration. In order to establish the functions, and ultimately the effects of pictures accompanying words, a clear understanding of the mechanics of illustration is required by addressing the levels of an artist's involvement with the text. Hodnett uses the word *distraction* – an image interrupts the flow of reading, it shifts the reader's attention by making her change gears. The reader moves from picturing what is written to reading what is pictured.

The illustrator's job is considered to be complementary to that of the author and somewhat secondary, at least in the publishing industry. The artist comes after the author, and is usually instructed by the publisher, or the author, on technical aspects such as the size and number of drawings and often style and colour. The illustrator is faced with a challenge: that of selecting when and where to place their intervention²⁰/distraction. Quite often the text offers this choice by its division into chapters, but it is ultimately the artist who chooses the scene/moment worthy of depicting in a picture: "Before an illustration can be drawn, therefore, two related decisions have to be made – the passage, in a limited sense, and the precise moment at which, as in a still from a cinema film, the action is stopped" (Hodnett, 7).

²⁰ One could perhaps compare this *intervention* over the text, to a medical intervention – the illustration could thus be seen to have the ability to *repair* that which might not be clear in the text. The illustrator's intervention could also be interpreted as care provided to improve the words.

Writers are also confronted with this choice, because to some extent they too are illustrating what they *see*, with the use of verbal imagery. They have selected the moments of the narrative from a number of possibilities, in the same way the artist has to select what they are going to represent visually from the multiple options afforded by the text. In this particular choice lies the potential accomplishment of the illustration's functions: to heighten the reader's perception and contribute to their understanding of the text, to ultimately reinforce the author's intentions. "Ideally, each illustration would reflect and sustain the tone of the work as a whole" (Hodnett, 8).

According to Hodnett, an illustration should accomplish three things: to represent, to interpret, and to decorate. There is a fine connection between representing and interpreting, when it comes to illustration the image is not always the visual equivalent of the text. "It is a parallel pictorial statement which can reinforce the author's intent without being strictly faithful to his words, somewhat as the photograph of a crying child might be inserted in a newspaper war story with no specific reference" (Hodnett, 15). For an illustration to be expressive it has to have a clear connection with the text – there is no other way. The artist presents her own creative vision and style, but these are inevitably informed by the words:

On occasion the illustrator is superior to the writer as an artist in the

broad sense of the word. Then there are those exceptional instances where the author is his own illustrator. But there remain a great many instances in which the illustrator meets his responsibility to the author with modest capability, and a substantial number in which he does so with distinction (Hodnett, 7).

Words without pictures are boring, as the quote from *Alice in Wonderland* suggests – particularly for a child. It is common knowledge that children are likely to be more intrigued by a visual story, one that is adjacent to the textual one. It is worth remembering, however, that pictures themselves tell a story, and children are in fact attracted by the story and not the colours or shapes as one might believe. A Cambridge study done by Jeanette G. Morrison (*Children's Preferences for Pictures*) shows that: “story interest was the most frequently mentioned reason for choosing a particular picture,” therefore children have a sense of the story, and illustrations (should) have the ability to sustain it.

This chapter will look at poem illustrations and picture-book characterisation with the aim of establishing the images' ability to narrate²¹, then it will move on to show the transformative effect illustration has on text and vice versa by focusing on the relationship between writer and artist, in particular that of Lewis Carroll and John Tenniel and their extensive collaboration for *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*.

²¹ This chapter will try to establish whether pictures have the same narrative power as words, if they too can make use of the narrative quality of words, in much the same way as a text generates images in the reader's mind.

III. 1 Image Serving Words

The pleasure when looking at a picture is rather emotional than intellectual. (Perry Nodelman)

Before examining the narrative tools that pictures possess, I would like to briefly look at William Blake's *The Blossom*, as a particular case in which both illustration and words come from the same artist. Blake designs whole pages in which he integrates the writing with colour and form – if anything he is the ultimate artist, the one who clearly understands and operates with both media. He traces bridges between the two up to the point of no clear distinction between text and image; the words become drawings that communicate within a (bigger and literal) picture.



Fig. 21 William Blake, *The Blossom*

In the above example, the poem ‘nestles’ in the frame of a tree’s roots, trunk and branches. A ‘merry, merry sparrow’ is seen by a ‘happy blossom’ which hears a ‘pretty, pretty robin’ ‘sobbing, sobbing.’ There is no visual presence of the robin, or any other bird for that matter – on the flame-branches of the tree we are presented with the figures of cherubs. Here the image, acts as a counterpoint to the words. The effect is to create conflicting images in the reader’s mind, which seem to be engaged in a back and forth dialogue between what is drawn and what is written: there is this mixture of sweet and sad, beauty and misery all in the space of one page.

So what can the picture achieve from the perspective of the narrative? What are its tools? Can it present a character? Can it convey psychological traits?

The function of pictures is primarily to represent whereas that of words is primarily to narrate. Words are essentially linear – at least in Western culture we read from left to right – whereas images are non-linear in the sense that they do not give us direct instruction about how to read them. There are a number of ways in which pictures and words communicate within a story: they can have a symmetrical interaction where both text and image basically repeat the information, they can complement each other – pictures amplify the meaning of words or the words can expand on the meaning of the illustration, they can contradict each other by challenging the reader's perception, sometimes a counterpoint might occur where both image and text may communicate meaning beyond either one's individual scope (Carole Scott & Maria Nikolajeva, 2001a).

Pictures obviously claim supremacy when it comes to illustrating physical traits. This is why in most picture-books, verbal description of the character's looks is omitted, unlike the conventional, non-illustrated novel, where the reader has to engage in that 'activity of production' identified by Barthes, and imagine every definitive physical detail.

It is the same with space: by positioning the character in relation to other characters, the image has the ultimate power to convey the status of that character – the setting of picture-books is usually communicated through illustration. In the case of Max from Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*, his room is far from being the representation of a child’s space. The book opens with:

The night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind
and another
his mother called him: “WILD THING!”
and Max said “I’LL EAT YOU UP!”
so he was sent to bed without eating anything (Sendak).

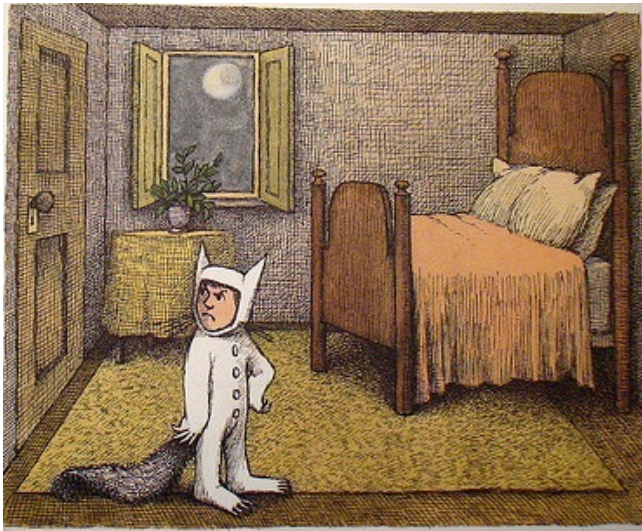


Fig. 22 Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*

There are no toys, no decoration, and no element in fact, that might suggest even in the slightest that this is a boy’s room. If anything, the room tells more about Max’s mother than it does about Max, but it can

also be interpreted as the boy's subjective view, his perception of the room as a prison, or perhaps just boring, unfit for his wolf/wild persona.

Sendak uses the same image to end the story, but he alters a few details: night time as opposed to day, there is dinner on the table which in the initial image only held the flower pot, but most importantly his rendition of Max is different. When he is sent to his room, Max is angry and disappointed – we can see that on his face, the corners of his mouth pointing downwards, his eyebrows raised.

Before we get back to the room where it all started, Sendak textually tells us:

And [he] sailed back over a year and in and out of weeks and through a day and into the night of his very own room where he found his supper waiting for him and it was still hot (Sendak).

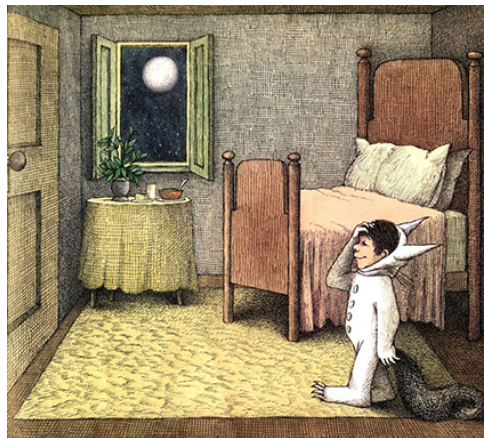


Fig. 23 Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*

The text does not explicitly state how Max feels, but the illustration shows him happy, hand to his head – perhaps a sign of relief, or even better, sign of an epiphany – he could have very well realised he has found the place “where someone loved him best of all” (Sendak)

When it comes to mental representation it would seem that pictures could not convey that which specifically needs words, like a character’s thoughts or state of mind, but Sendak’s illustrations give countless accounts of Max’s feelings. A detail as simple as the mouth or eyebrows can design a range of emotions from happy, sad, angry, scared and so on. In fact, recent advancements in the domain of special effects rely heavily on the mathematics of expression: there are a number of algorithms based on which facial muscles contract in order to draw on one’s face the result of a specific emotion. Visual images are often more efficient when it comes to showing the characters’ inner life, by making use of universal symbols, visual associations and colours, they manage to convey economically that which would require a lot of words.

In Sendak’s case as well as in most picture-books, words are not omitted – they add other layers of meaning to the visual story. For me, the most interesting aspect of picture-books is the alternation of text and illustration, their continuous mutual support, the play between them, all the while avoiding redundancy. Sometimes the words convey characters that are not present in the pictures, as is the case with the

mother in *Where the Wild Things Are*, a device of visual paralipsis, perhaps – the two ‘languages’ are complementary, working together without repeating the other’s message. It is their continuous dialogue which is fascinating and enriching, their support of each other in service to the story – an exact economy of collaboration which ultimately heightens the effect of the narrative.

III. 2 The Wonder of Alice

Don't give Alice so much crinoline. (Carroll in a letter to Tenniel)

Quite possibly two of the most famous examples of illustrated texts are Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, with their visual representations created by John Tenniel. Numerous studies have been conducted on the accomplishments of Tenniel's response to Carroll's imaginative story. With the support of the following: Carroll's own illustrations for *Alice's Adventures under Ground* (the original MS. Book later developed into *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*), the correspondence kept between Carroll and Tenniel, further documented accounts from publishers and from Alice Liddell herself, I will observe the particular readings offered by Tenniel's illustrations for *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* with the goal of uncovering elements of the writer/illustrator relationship and use these as the base for analysing my own collaboration with an illustrator.

As far as we know, Tenniel was a conscientious artist – he would proceed to illustrate only after having studied the texts very carefully –

and he had a specific interest in drawing animals. This is obvious in his works for *Punch* as well as in his rendition of Aesop's fables: he invests his animals with human expressions, being able to convey emotions like fear or rage as exemplified by the lion in *The Lion and the Mouse*.

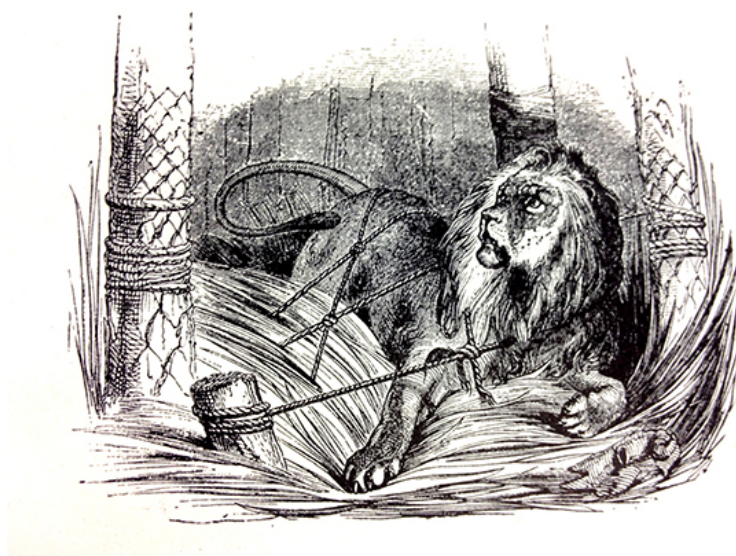


Fig. 24 John Tenniel, *The Lion and the Mouse*

Frances Sarzano's conclusions regarding Tenniel's style and technical skills, identify two flaws in his work. The first deals with the period's process of reproduction, and the limitations of the wood-block:

Tenniel's thin, grey, thistle-down lines printed thin, black and hard. When his work is etched on steel (as in *The Gordian Knot*), the difference is startling. The line becomes fluent and the drawings take on a persuasive charm that is wholly absent on wood (Sarzano, 14).

The following illustration from *The Gordian Knot* fully supports Sarzano's observations. By comparing it to that of the lion we can spot the clear-cut precision of the line, which lends a certain heightened realism that etching on steel seems to favour and the carving on wood-block does not.



Fig. 25 John Tenniel, *The Gordian Knot* Illustration: *Modern Druids*

Tenniel's second flaw as identified by Sarzano is the fact that he did not draw from life but chose to rely on memory. Sarzano goes on to argue that some of his drawings seem "pictures drawn from other pictures," devoid of personality. The issue came up with Carroll as well,

who advised Tenniel to draw from life and received a witty and definite refusal. “Mr Tenniel is the only artist who has drawn for me, who resolutely refused to use a model and declared he no more needed one than I should need a multiplication table to work a mathematical problem!” (Carroll in a letter to Miss Thompson as quoted in Sarzano, 18)

Tenniel produced ninety-two illustrations for *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, of which Carroll liked one: Humpty Dumpty. It was no easy task – Carroll was famous for his nitpicking. According to Harry Furniss, Carroll was “a wit, a gentleman, a bore and an egotist” who went as far as to use a magnifying glass to examine Furniss’s drawings, and thus was able to count the number of lines to the square inch and compare it to the number in Tenniel’s (Furniss in *The Confessions of a Caricaturist*. T. Fisher Unwin as quoted in Sarzano, 16-17).

Tenniel and Carroll’s match on paper seems flawless: as if the drawings have been produced by the same hand that has written the words. In truth, the two equally obstinate Victorian artists carried a long correspondence in which each would drive a hard bargain:

Carroll: “The White Knight must not have whiskers; he must not be made to look old.”

Tenniel: “A wasp in a wig,” he wrote, “is altogether beyond the appliances of art”; “Don’t think me brutal, but I am bound to say that the ‘wasp’ chapter doesn’t interest me in the least, and I can’t see my way to a picture. If you want to shorten the book, I can’t help thinking

– with all submission – that *there* is your opportunity.’ (The wasp chapter was removed [from *Through the Looking-Glass*])

Carroll: “Don’t give Alice so much crinoline.”

Tenniel: ‘I think that when the jump occurs in the railway scene, you might very well make Alice lay hold of the Goat’s beard, as being the object nearest to her hand, instead of the old lady’s hair.’ *In another moment*, reads the published text, *she felt the carriage rise straight up into the air, and in her fright she caught hold of the thing nearest to her hand, which happened to be the Goat’s beard* (As quoted in Sarzano, 17).

As far as evidence shows, Carroll had the final say on what narrative moments Tenniel would illustrate. Alice Liddell’s own account: “as a rule Tenniel used Mr. Dodgson’s drawings as the basis for his own illustrations,” (28) is quoted by Michael Hancher to shed light on Tenniel’s process. By observing some of Carroll’s own illustrations alongside Tenniel’s, I resolve to uncover the miraculous encounter of text and image as prompted by the author/artist dialogue. It is important to note that eighteen out of Carroll’s thirty-eight illustrations served as starting point for Tenniel – there is an obvious symmetry between these and I will now look more closely at a sample of these.

The following two illustrations (Fig. 26 and Fig. 27) depict Alice in the pool of tears – the first image is drawn by Carroll himself, the second by Tenniel.



Fig. 26 Lewis Carroll, Alice in the pool of tears, *Alice's Adventures under Ground*

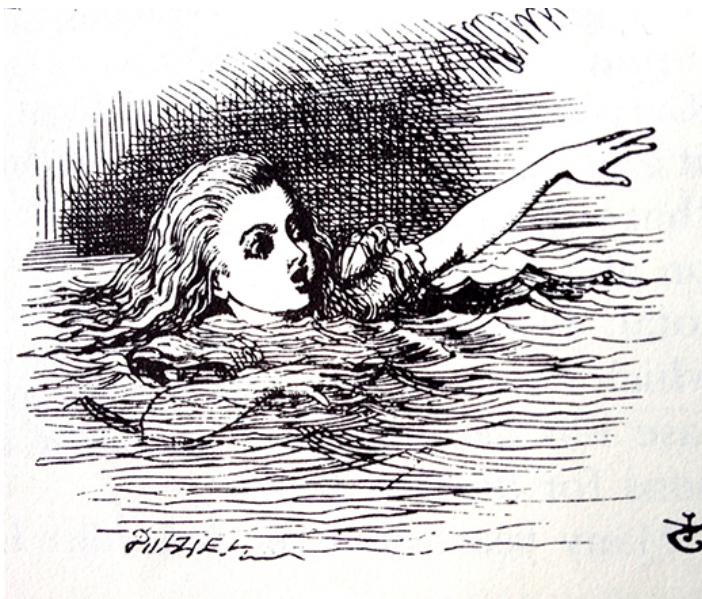


Fig. 27 John Tenniel, Alice in the pool of tears, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

There is a striking similarity between the two illustrations that show Alice having fallen into the pool of tears: the same point of view, same posture, and same angle. And yet, the two characters are significantly different: Carroll's Alice seems more like she is floating, almost like a lifeless doll – an image sustained by her black, hollow eyes – in comparison to Tenniel's Alice who is struggling to get out. The text tells us that she “swam about, trying to find her way out” (Carroll, 24) which Tenniel's drawing clearly illustrates by showing Alice's right arm engaged in the water, which Carroll omits from his image.

Each Alice has a different expression; calm, to some extent resigned in Carroll's drawing, whereas Tenniel chooses to portray a panicked Alice: her eyes are wide open, daring themselves to blink – she is fighting for her life. The reader eventually decides which version of Alice is more expressive and in tune with the written one, but what is important to note is the fact that Tenniel relied on Carroll's drawings, agreeing with the suggested moment of choice and gave it his own interpretation, in his own style – one which is complementary to the text and true to the author's intentions.

Tenniel was not just the illustrator of Carroll's words, he questioned them and offered alternatives when it came to the plausibility of either the story or characters, particularly when it came to animals. An example to illustrate his expertise is the drawing representing Alice at

croquet. The original text had Alice holding an ostrich, as evidenced by Carroll's sketch:



Fig. 28 Lewis Carroll, Alice at croquet, *Alice's Adventures under Ground*

Tenniel's illustration shows Alice holding a flamingo – perhaps because this bird matches the shape of a mallet and is smaller and considerably lighter than an ostrich, which a seven year old girl would find impossible to hold.



Fig. 29 John Tenniel, Alice at croquet, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

Presumably Carroll adapted the text to match the illustration: “Alice thought she had never seen such a curious croquet-ground in her life; it was all ridges and furrows, the balls were live hedgehogs, the mallets live flamingoes...” (Carroll, 83) Again Tenniel’s enthusiasm for drawing animals is evidenced here, not only in the representation of the flamingo, but in the case of the hedgehog. There are two of these in Tenniel’s illustration and only one in Carroll. The artist shows us how ‘the balls were live hedgehogs’ by placing a curled-up hedgehog under Alice’s foot.

In all of the above examples Tenniel follows Carroll’s illustrated examples very closely, and aside from Tenniel’s superior stylistic and

graphic skills, there is no significant departure from Carroll's vision – the scenes are depicted as he originally envisioned them for *Alice's Adventures under Ground*. I would like to make note of the following two examples showing Alice in conversation with the Caterpillar.



Fig. 30 Lewis Carroll, The Caterpillar and Alice, *Alice's Adventures under Ground*

The text informs the reader that:

There was a large mushroom growing near her, about the same height as herself; and when she had looked under it and on both sides of it, and behind it, it occurred to her that she might as well look and see what was on top of it.

She stretched herself up on tiptoe, and peeped over the edge of the mushroom, and her eyes immediately met those of a large caterpillar, that was sitting on the top with its arms folded, quietly smoking a long hookah, and taking not the smallest notice of her or of anything else.

The Caterpillar and Alice looked at each other for some time in silence... (Carroll, 45-46)

In Carroll's visual depiction Alice is not forced to 'stretch herself up on tiptoe,' since the drawing shows her standing with both feet flat on the ground, but we can see the caterpillar 'sitting on the top with its arms folded, quietly smoking a long hookah,' and the two of them look 'at each other for some time in silence.' Tenniel proceeded to make his own choice of the moment of disruption and he changed the point of view as well as the moment prompted by the text:



Fig. 31 John Tenniel, The Caterpillar and Alice, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

In his illustration, the Caterpillar is seen from behind, making it impossible to render 'its arms folded,' but unlike Carroll's choice of

facial features for the character – which make it severely unrealistic – Tenniel manages to merely suggest that the Caterpillar has human facial traits, by use of a profile that hints at a chin, mouth and nose. His drawing is much more faithful to the text; we can see the position of Alice’s feet as she stretches ‘herself up on tiptoe,’ as well as her eyes as she ‘peeped over the edge of the mushroom’ and his Caterpillar is in fact smoking a hookah as opposed to a pipe. Tenniel’s choice of moment comes shortly after the ‘Caterpillar and Alice looked at each other for some time in silence,’ being exemplified by: “at last the Caterpillar took the hookah out of his mouth, and addressed her in a languid, sleepy voice” (Carroll, 46).

While Tenniel excels at drawing all of the secondary characters, Alice for some reason seems to be the least realised, as if her expressions haven’t had time enough to ripen. Her facial mimicry is not as expressive that of say, the White Rabbit or the Cheshire Cat, as Sarzano notes: “As if by mistake, he strikes the perfect Wonderland unbalance: it is the small human presence which lacks conviction in the land where normality somersaults” (Sarzano, 19).

Tenniel’s choices in illustrating the character of Alice have given rise to a series of gender and feminist readings of Carroll’s books and the drawings are integral to an understanding of Alice’s gender identity. The narrator tells the universal story of growing up. Alice is bound to escape her reality from the opening lines in which she “was beginning to get very

tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do” (Carroll, 11) Alice the child starts the story by rejecting the most common Victorian feminine accomplishment, that of being still and pretty, and instead chooses to run and eventually falls. Nina Auerbach remarks that “Carroll’s peculiarly Victorian triumph lay in his amalgamation of the fallen woman with the unfallen child....the intact child is in securest possession of the mobility and power of her potential adult future” (Auerbach, pp.152, 156).

Tenniel’s illustrations contribute to presenting a maturing Alice whose identity is increasingly defined in terms of her gender, an image which is realised, firstly, through size.



Fig. 32 John Tenniel, Alice after eating cake, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

This is the third time we encounter the pictured Alice since the beginning of the book and we are faced with a monster: the body of a child stretched out into that of an adult – an unpleasant, disproportionate apparition, which seems to have taken over the little aproned girl to whom we were initially introduced. The fact that Carroll wanted Alice Liddell to stay young is now common knowledge and explains his contriving of a fictional Alice who will never grow (up). Tenniel manages to interpret Carroll’s desire: the body of the child is violently transformed, eating (cake) makes one grow fast and turn into a monster.

Tenniel has drawn the character of Alice from child to adult. We can trace significant changes in the appearance of Alice from *Alice’s Adventures* through to *Looking-Glass*.



Fig. 33 John Tenniel, Alice with Crown, *Through the Looking-Glass*

The picture in which Alice puts on the crown, no longer represents a child, her body has developed, her attire is different and creates the suggestion of breasts, her face is more angular, and she might be wearing lipstick. This is a grown-up Alice: there is little to no trace of Alice the child, she's wearing a crown and pearls – adult jewellery. And yet this Alice does not look happy, she's no longer inquisitive, in fact she looks frightened. Her hands holding the crown above her head could mean that she's adjusting it, but they might very well mean she's trying to take it off.

There have been countless reworkings of Tenniel's illustrations: coloured versions, modern versions which have Alice looking older than a 7 year old, and others in which she looks younger. As Jacqueline Labbe notes, "each illustrator attempts to delineate his vision of the true Alice, herself an idealised 'little' girl growing to be the perfect 'little woman'" (Labbe, 47). Every illustrator aims to enhance, represent and interpret Carroll's original text, but none seem to have the dream-like precision of Tenniel's vision. This is perhaps due to the fact that the artist and author resolved to engage in a continuous dialogue that eventually resulted in the pictures we have all come to know and love. Despite Carroll's reticence and his approval of only one of Tenniel's drawings, there is a perfect match on paper between words and pictures.

This brief analysis of a famous writer/illustrator collaboration has afforded a better grasp on the implications of artistic lending and borrowing which in turn prompt me to identify and explore them within the context of my own work.

IV. A View of My Own

*At first you are scared; you gain confidence and you get more ideas. You know what paintings are trying to say to you. It comes alive to you and starts talking.*²²

There is a rush, a moment of disbelief, associated with producing words for an image. It is a laborious process, and the pressure is even greater due to a double responsibility of advocating both words and pictures, images that are actually there, alongside the text, and not imaginary. But eventually the visual representation speaks – it conjures up language, making any sort of doubt or resistance, on the part of the writer, futile. This is not to say that every image prompts a response. There are a number of variables which determine the writer's *need*²³ to engage with a picture, like subject matter, style, or artistic affinities, to name only a few, but for

²² 9 year old pupil on the *Visual Paths* project (Carnell and Meacher, 2001:13) London based project in 2008 which encouraged children to write about art.

²³ Let us not forget that it is not only the writer who harbours this need, the picture – product of the artist – expresses its very own need to speak out/up.

the purpose of this research the focus should be on the production of the response rather than on its cause(s). The *need* implies something is *missing* which in turn enables *borrowing* which in (re)turn leads to *lending*.

This final chapter will focus on my own work alongside illustrator Via Fang, an on-going and varied collaboration, with emphasis on the evolution of the final product. My continued working relationship with the same illustrator affords this search a solid and fertile ground for examination.

For me, ekphrasis is a literary practice which enriches the text, but it is also a challenge; it is a matter of speaking the language of text-after-image with the confidence that the meaning conveyed is not redundant, but evocative and inspiring – to the writer first and foremost, and only afterwards to the reader.

The following incursion into my collaboration with Fang, will examine the evolution of the writing and of the joint work itself²⁴ with the goal of unveiling the miracle of producing a new and self-contained form of art which carries the distinctive seeds of both words and pictures.

²⁴ I have come to realize that even if the writing makes sense without a direct reference to the illustrations, even if it still retains the ability to generate meaning, the force of the two of them together – text and picture – is undoubtedly greater.

IV. 1 The Curious Course of Writing for Illustration

A narrative that itches vision. An image that tugs at language.

(Jane Irina McKie)

The Edinburgh University Creative Writing Master's Programme and the Edinburgh College of Art Illustration Master's Programme have devised a project, mutually beneficial to their writers and artists. Every year the students on the two courses are blindly paired to exchange words and pictures, write, and respectively draw in response to what they receive from their partner, with the goal of producing a publishable collection and ideally establish an on-going creative dialogue. The pairing of writers and artists is done by the departments, thus left to chance, particularly to enable everyone to be assigned a partner. Although Fang and I had not been paired, it was through this project that we became acquainted with each other's work and eventually began our continued collaboration.

The Cartoon Museum in London holds the *Young Cartoonist of the Year* competition open to artists under 26. Their main requirement is for the submissions to be accompanied by text – a short comic message, in the vein of satirical cartoons. Prior to submitting her work, Fang asked me to write some words to go along with the following illustration which was selected as runner-up for the 2011 awards.

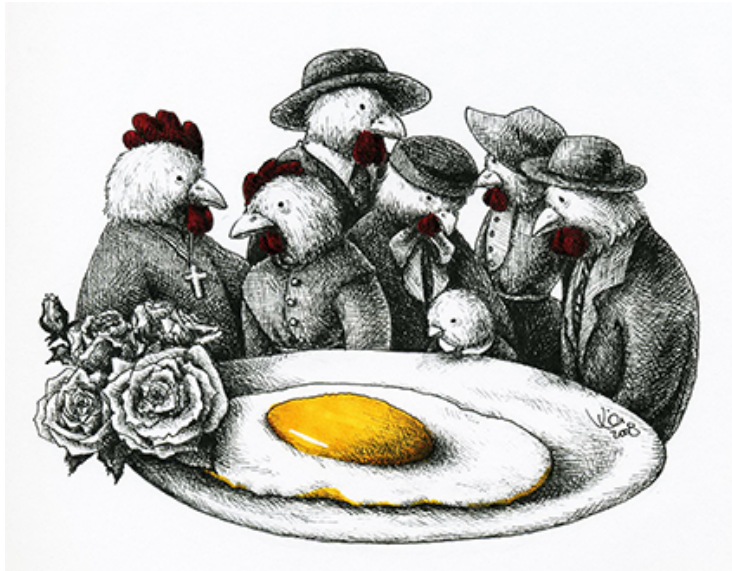


Fig. 34 Via Fang, *The Funeral* 2010

Fang has the ability to invest animals with subtle human emotions – unlike Tenniel’s lion which displayed forthright anger and fear; Fang’s characters, at least to me, appear to express a diverse palette of feelings. These birds dressed in human clothes are by no means

ridiculed, the rigid cross-hatching style gives them weight, and a certain naturalism which denotes a serious register. Because the image itself is so affecting and so powerful, words (or too many of them) would only clutter the message/meaning.

The phrase that went along with the above illustration was:

Not knowing so, we had buried breakfast that morning.

Not exactly worthy of a comic cartoon, but I still believe the image *buried breakfast* speaks loud and clear of the pain visibly imprinted on the characters surrounding the plate. Particularly the one on the right – the one with the slightly hunched back, hopeless, and bitterly resigned, looking at the contents of the plate, but also at the only baby chick, as if he seems to say: “That could’ve been you, son!”

In hindsight, I strongly believe that the words themselves hindered the drawing from winning. I did not possess (nor think I do so now) the humorous subtlety necessary to deliver a short and concise message for the purpose of comic relief. But in my defence, the image itself, despite its dark humour, is in essence, sad.

Similar in a way to the example of Van Gogh’s *Wheatfield with Crows*, the line underneath *The Funeral* addresses the viewer’s or better yet reader’s conscience. Although the presence of ‘we’ in

‘we buried’ apparently refers to the mourning birds, that ‘not knowing so’ concerns the supposedly ignorant eaters of breakfast, an external collective character, and not the family of birds who all look like they *know* exactly what/who they are burring. Prompted by the findings of this research, I now realise that the phrase could benefit from a comedic spin simply by changing it to: *We all gathered to bury Breakfast that morning*, or even *They all gathered to bury Breakfast that morning*. By capitalising the common noun ‘breakfast,’ turning it into a character, a dead one, as well as the main meal, the obvious dark humorous tone of the painted image is now suggested by the text as well.

It may not have won the award, but this first collaboration laid out the ground for a continuing dialogue between artwork and text.

IV. 2 Animalbum²⁵

[...] the more minutely you describe the more you will confuse the mind of the reader [...] Therefore it is necessary to make a drawing [...] as well as to describe it (Leonardo da Vinci)

Possibly the most fruitful collaboration has been the one for *Animalbum*: a series of nine portraits which Fang produced as part of her MFA Illustration degree, for which I wrote accompanying vignettes. The style of the illustrations is very similar to *The Funeral* – animals dressed in human clothes – but rather than depicting scenes, they are either individual or family portraits, among them being the portrait which inspired my first attempt at ekphrasis – the Baby Owl.

All portraits are realised in the crosshatching style using pen and ink to create layers of hatching at various angles – more elaborate than the linear, traditional hatching made famous by Albrecht Dürer – resulting in different shades and textures. The style is rather fitting for the period(s)

²⁵ A complete set of this series' postcards, containing both illustration and text, will accompany this paper.

suggested by these illustrations; two of the most flourishing British historical periods to date: Victorian and Edwardian. Black ink on watercolour paper, with one or two additional ink colours are used to bring together the animal, instinctive realm with the high-class Edwardian, rational one.

The narrative varies significantly from portrait to portrait and each particular voice is summoned by the image itself. The majority of the accompanying vignettes are monologues of either the characters themselves (baby owl, frog, hunting dogs and Hieland coo), or of the artist drawing these characters (father owl, mother owl and the Romanian black goat), while the remaining two texts are dramatic scenes (seagull family and the giraffes). I will comment on one from each of the three different styles.

Fang suggested she wanted to draw a frog, but could not decide what a Victorian frog would wear and what might be the context of its portrait. Prompted by my writerly obsession with wordplay, I suggested the title Forging Frog, and for some reason, the title conjured up the image of the Keymaker character in *The Matrix Reloaded* – an Asian man who wears thick rimmed glasses and carries a lot of keys.

A strange mixture of a popular culture film character and Edwardian aesthetics transpires from the following portrait:



Fig. 35 Via Fang, *Forging Frog Inc.*, Edinburgh (part of the collection *Animalbum* exhibited at Edinburgh College of Art, 2011)

I was present during the creation of Forging Frog from sketch to final product, but only after the illustration was complete did he develop a voice:

I personally don't like to talk about myself. Such a waste of time. For what? There will always be someone trying to discredit me. Out of envy, obviously. Like this piece in the gazette this morning. Said I always display this *I've got something you need and I know it* look on my face. Even if I did – which I'm not saying I do – I'm not ashamed of it. This is a tense present we're living. And where others fail, I prevail. But most of all provide. Here, let me give you my card...
(Irina Nedelcu, *Forging Frog Inc.*)

The Keymaker film character, on whom the frog was originally based, is a kind, honest man who offers to help others unconditionally, and even sacrifices himself, but since the creation of our character began with the title *Forging Frog*, the Keymaker's features became obsolete.

Thus, the illustration presents a somewhat devious character; the squinty eyes placed on a frog (biologically known to have exophthalmic eyes) denote a cunning nature which is explored in his monologue.

This particular response was very much ekphrastic – Fang’s choice to arrest her character in a pose which implies he is about to extract something from the inside pocket of his coat, is reflected in the final line ‘Here, let me give you my card...’ Along with the ‘*I’ve got something you need and I know it look on my face,*’ which translates the frog’s shrewd self-awareness, these two lines are direct textual links to that which is visually represented in the drawing. The seediness of the character is emphasised not only by its representation, but also by the background – the moiré effect of cross-hatching along with the Frog’s prominent shadow bring to mind the image of a shady Dickensian character on a London back alley. The relationship between the image and the words thus becomes inextricable – the title *Forging Frog* inspired the visual representation which then informed the verbal response which in turn provided insight on the character in the picture.

The portrait of the frog is reminiscent of Toad of Toad Hall, a character neither Fang nor I have been familiar with until after the work was completed. Fang and I come from different cultural

backgrounds; she is from Asia (Japan/Taiwan) I am from Romania (Eastern Europe). We share a common interest and passion for British history and culture, which most likely propelled this collaboration further.

After a trip to Romania where Fang visited Peleş Castle (the Romanian Royal Family residence) she learned about Queen Marie, the granddaughter of Queen Victoria and Princess of Edinburgh. After showing her the Romanian black goat – an elegant animal known for its extraordinary ability to climb rock mountains – she dressed the goat in regal attire:



Fig. 36 Via Fang, *Princess Marie of Edinburgh*, Edinburgh (part of the collection *Animalbum* exhibited at Edinburgh College of Art, 2011)

This portrait proved much of a challenge especially since it was directly inspired by a real historical figure – the *ekphrastic responsibility* I have identified as paramount when producing text for illustration was in this case augmented by a feeling of national responsibility on my part, in the sense that Queen Marie is to this day the only female myth my country has produced. Ironically she was not Romanian, but that did not prevent her from becoming one of the greatest Romanian icons of all time. The key word, if there was one, was kindness – as attributed to the real Queen Marie and emphasized by the eyes of the black goat in the portrait. Here, the reader is not presented with the thoughts of the character, but with words of the ‘artist,’ a humble and reverent discourse, to which the sitter – the Princess – responds:

Drawing portraits of royalty makes an artist feel like an angel. One that’s having tea with God. Etiquette is of utmost importance: carefully weigh your smiles, your words, your brush strokes.

Missy was only a princess at the time. Beautifully young and unawaresly Serene, she bowed the first time we met – a short, acknowledging kind of bow.

“You are the artist,” she said. “Then make me your art,” a playful smile stretching across her face. It was the smile of a princess, but she had the eyes of a Queen. One I could have drawn till the end of time. (Irina Nedelcu, *Princess Marie of Edinburgh*)

Thus the adjoining text covers the moment, or moments preceding that which is represented visually. One reads the words to find out how the portrait came to be – there is a three dimensional ‘picture’ we are presented with: the subject as presented by the portrait itself – a detached representation; the subject of the portrait in her own words –

a meta-textual representation ‘You are the artist/Make me your art’; and the subject in the words of the artist – ‘It was the smile of a princess, but she had the eyes of a Queen. One I could have drawn till the end of time.’

Aside from the title, which identifies the character as Princess Marie of Edinburgh, there is no other verbal association with Queen Marie of Romania other than naming the character Missy – Marie’s nickname before she married Romanian Prince Ferdinand. The wording is somewhat religious – after all she has distinguished herself as a saint in Romanian culture – but still the visual references are drawn from the portrait of the black goat: *a playful smile stretching across her face*. Most pictures of Queen Marie show her displaying a contemplative, often sad smile except for those taken in her youth – the ones where she was Missy, before becoming Queen Marie. Therefore in this piece, there is a continuous exchange between reality, illustration and fiction.

Of the narratives depicting scenes, I will comment on the accompaniment to the seagull family illustration. Unlike the others, there was no clear, singular voice, but a clash of points of view, possibly because it was the only image at that point (the hunting dogs’ portrait came much later) that depicted a scene with multiple characters.

I remember reading about Victorian marriage customs and high-society girls coming out, which is what the scene and its characters, particularly the stance of the three seagulls inspired. Not all of them speak; the main character, the one the title refers to, is silent all throughout the scene. The illustration denotes a certain reluctance on the baby seagull's face, a fear of the unknown, whereas the other two characters have a menacing look.

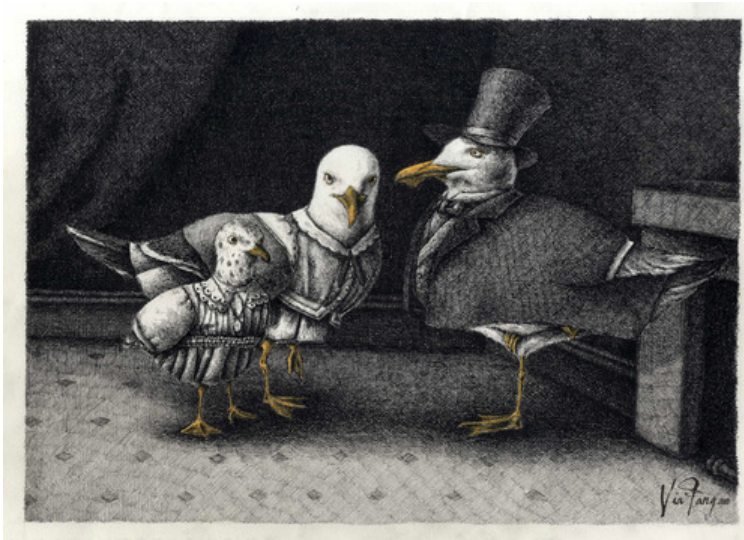


Fig. 37 Via Fang, *Imelda Gullifer's Coming Out*, Edinburgh (part of the collection *Animalbum* exhibited at Edinburgh College of Art, 2011)

The text illustrates a moment prior to that presented by the illustration, it is perhaps that 'behind the scenes' moment where we get to know the characters for who and what they really are – their true selves behind their 'pose':

Madam Gullifer inspected her daughter's appearance one more time and straightened the sapphire pendant around her neck.

“This is it, Imelda! The most important day for the rest of your life. You have to shine, and beam and radiate. No one will do that for you. Sit up straight, don’t look down, and whatever you do, don’t forget to smile. No one likes a sad face, even if...”

“And remember,” Sir Gullifer interrupted. “Intelligence is not encouraged, nor any interest in politics. Know your place, Imelda! And you shall be going places. Now off you go, make the Gullifer name proud!” (Irina Nedelcu, *Imelda Gullifer’s Coming Out*)

Although the characters’ attire testifies to their affiliation to nobility, I did not see the mother as a Lady – she is the only one to ‘look into the camera.’ She wants to be noticed, hence the use of Madam. Seagulls are loud and quite uncouth birds, and the mother gull has a mean/menacing look on her face. I did not attribute a voice to the baby gull, as neither the drawing itself, nor the society it depicts allow it to speak – an irony which comes in support of the title – Imelda’s *silent coming out*²⁶.

When the series was exhibited, I have had the opportunity to observe countless viewers and their reactions after reading the stories. There was an obvious smile or frown on the face of every reader, and almost always after having read the text they would go back to the drawing, and then back again to the text – the more they treaded the crossover between words and illustration their ‘picture’ became

²⁶ The phrase *coming out* is now rarely, if at all used in the context of making a formal social debut, but refers to openly declaring one’s gay/lesbian/bisexual preference. According to Dinitia Smith’s article in the *New York Times*, *Central Park Zoo’s Gay Penguins Ignite Debate*, recent “studies show that 10 to 15 percent of female western gulls in some populations in the wild are homosexual” so perhaps a ‘modern’ reading of the phrase could be attributed to the character of Imelda as well.

clearer.²⁷ I have noticed how the words came to inform a certain preference for one illustration or another, how people's perception and affinities were altered by the reading of the words making them 'root' for one character or another.

An image can be robbed of its potential if and when it lacks the proper words or story to accompany it, and the words I have produced for Fang's animal portraits have become a support for the image, like a pedestal on which the visual is placed, in order to be better observed – they represent and interpret the illustration, offering that which is not (yet) verbally uttered by the characters in each picture. In turn, the visual itself gives weight and authenticity to the words – the viewer-reader becomes aware of 'hows' and 'whys' by placing the character/s within a story frame, and is no longer faced with an interpretation of an interpretation, but becomes a link within a chain of interpretations which converge in the joint acts of seeing and reading.

²⁷ This ultimately convinced Fang and I to print the series inside cards, allowing for the text and image to be next to each other and not on either sides of a postcard.

IV. 3 The Style and The Novel

The *Animalbum* collaboration with Fang managed to cement a working relationship which has evolved in our current endeavour: an illustrated novel. I will keep this last section short, as it refers to work in progress, but I will make note of the significant changes which have occurred since in our process. *P in the Forest* [footnote pun on T in the park and briefly say what it's about] is a novel, with two main characters and a full story arc, unlike the animal portraits which were snippets into the worlds of different characters with no common link other than their historical period. Each chapter is accompanied by a main illustration in the vein of Carroll's *The Adventures of Alice in Wonderland* where layout is concerned, but our process is heavily influenced by a constant dialogue; what we want to say and how, as if we are both the hands of the same person except one draws and the other one writes.

The inspiration for the novel came from the success of the animal portraits, and it also features animals. I have chosen to play with formal aspects of the novel, by making it a hybrid of scriptwriting and fiction

writing. The narrative point of view is that of the camera, which moves along with the characters, and moves away in order to observe something else. Even the titles of the chapters borrow scene headings from screenwriting: e.g. EXTERIOR FOREST – MORNING.

The story grows and takes on a life of its own as we advance, even to the point of disregarding our initial plan. First we agreed on the illustrations – what they would depict, and which characters they would present, since they will be more like portraits than scenes. Once we came up with a substantial list of illustrations I started to build a storyline around them, but did not actively start to write it. I am (now) well aware of the power of image and how it can take language to unexplored territories, so I have decided to write each chapter after Fang provides the illustration – we are to that extent keeping the process which proved so creatively beneficial for the animal portraits. The process is thus ekphrastic, and the end product will ultimately be an ekphrastic novel, in which words and the pictures which inspired them cohabit.

After I wrote the first chapter something very interesting happened: I introduced a couple of characters we had not talked about – they just happened to pop up in the background narrative. Upon reading the chapter, Fang felt the urge to draw some of those characters – which in my mind were very secondary, in fact I had no intention of mentioning them again, except very briefly. And so the lending and borrowing

unravelling: the words changed the pictures which ended up changing the words.

The following section prompted the illustration which then changed the course of the story:

He leans forward to see the front of the queue.
HITCOCK: Check out the Tanukis! They got here three days ago. What a commitment! Always early, always setting out for front row. Always getting it. That's the power of music...Speaking of power: do we have enough ice for the polars? (Irina Nedelcu, *P in The Forest*²⁸)

This is the only mention of Tanukis – a species of Japanese raccoons – which I have used to describe the ardent music fans who sleep outside concert venues for days to make sure they get a front row seat (although they stand):

²⁸ The title of the book which is also the name of the festival attended by the characters is a pun on the famous Scotland Music Festival *T in The Park*.



Fig. 38 Via Fang, *P in The Forest*, Edinburgh 2013

The current work on the novel has managed to bring forth glimpses of miracle in its way of producing itself – informed by the writing and the illustration, but with a mind of its own, constantly shifting from illustration to text in terms of the overall story. The two forms heavily rely on each other and I strongly believe that neither would be as effective on its own. The story world has a dual, more powerful life, with the final aim of this duality to coexist on page as well as (ideally) in the reader's mind.

V. Conclusion

Nothing is lost...Everything is transformed (Anaxagoras, 450 B.C.)

We are living in a predominantly visual culture. With the arrival of digital media, there seems to be a departure from the written to the visual message, not only supported by film and animation but by language too – we have come to replace words that designate abstract feelings, with icons. Perhaps this is a natural transition heightened by the fact that words have innate imagistic capabilities: a word stands in for an object and vice versa. There is an organic interconnectedness between words and pictures as shown by the body of this research.

There can be no clear separation between the two art forms: the moment one attempts to draw any kind of dividing line, this is slowly but surely erased by considerations of purpose alone. Words and pictures essentially achieve the same thing, by using different means. Both evoke, suggest, create and offer alternatives to the reader/viewer who then assigns her individually filtered meaning. It is when the two art forms

combine forces that the work takes on a new life form, the meaning is amplified, the “activity of production” Barthes assigns to experiencing a text, is invested with clarity – we literally see that which we read about. Words and pictures engage in a dialogue for the sake of the viewer/reader who receives information from two distinct sources, and thus can generate meaning beyond a reasonable doubt.

I have come to realise that the miracle occurs in none other than their encounter in which the text cannot go back to being just text, and the illustration loses meaning if seen outside the context of the words. When successfully brought together, words and pictures feed off one another’s valences, giving rise to a new form of art.

When sharing the same space, the main differences between the two art forms, in both representation and perception, simply transform into similarities. Lessing’s restrictive distinction between the *male*, active word and the *female*, passive image along with Heffernan’s assertion that ekphrasis stages an ‘often powerfully gendered’ contest could be seen to invest words and pictures’ joint miracle of production with the genetic qualities of reproduction. It is the space they occupy together that heightens their traits and makes the two responsible for an amplified experience reflected in the reader/viewer. Each of the two art forms engages with a different receptor, both of which are stimulated

concomitantly in this communal space of words reading pictures illustrating words.

There is a distinctive miracle in this relationship of artistic lending and borrowing in the sense that nothing is lost: neither text nor image lose any of their individual traits (just as parents still keep their DNA features after having ‘lent’ them to their offspring) but these are heightened and transformed in that shared space on the page. Words make use of imagery which contributes and heightens the valences of an already given/shown image, and ultimately these converge within the viewer/reader.

In ekphrasis, most often the picture is the starting point – it invites/prompts the words to ‘say something,’ to help it speak – it is an expression demanding to express itself and what better way to communicate than through written language. But the ekphrastic text does more than simply to describe, as previously emphasised, Berger posits that “we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it” (3). It is only fair to assume that we would all make use of approximately the same words in order to express Panofsky’s ‘informational level’ of a picture – sunflowers, a baby owl, or two lovers embracing. But through the act of ekphrasis, words have the ability to make the picture vibrate, by meddling with time, by cutting ‘across the work, several works’ as Barthes remarks, they ultimately remove the stillness from within the image. What the text manages in

relation to the image is to make it move – by turning it not into a moving picture, but into a picture that can move²⁹ with the aid of words. In turn, the picture acts as warrantor for the words, being there as sheer proof that the message of the text is authentic, at the same time investing it with yet another supernatural ability – that of generating imagery from and on top of actual, tangible images.

The aim of art, according to Robert Venturi, should be “the difficult unity of inclusion rather than the easy unity of exclusion” (24). The successful unity of words and pictures is a laborious and quite often capricious endeavour, forcing the meaning to oscillate between visual and textual representation to the point where this becomes one complete static unit – the miracle of production.

For me, this search has opened a desire to further explore the miracle associated with the dialogue between art forms. This relationship of lending and borrowing is not restrictive to only words and pictures. Encouraged by the theoretical basis of this research I intend to take the miracle of collaboration further: experiment with visual narrative, set poetry to film, enhance the valences of the word, be it written, spoken, sung, or imagined. Because any act of artistic collaboration finds its roots

²⁹ This act of *moving* is both active and reflexive – with the aid of words the picture moves and reaches its destination – the viewer/reader who is in turn moved.

in the pleasure of play, and can ultimately be seen as a functioning seesaw³⁰ or as Francis Ford Coppola plainly asserted “collaboration is the sex of art”.

³⁰ Or *see-saw* – a direct Anglicisation of the French word *ci-ça* with its literal meaning of *this-that*, but I would stress the literal meaning of *see-saw* where artistic dialogue is concerned: one artist *sees* what another artist *saw* and thus they engage in a playful exchange of perception.

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