Lost in Eastern Europe

Memoirs of an American Girl

I remember that winter as through a veil of dark water. It felt like I was sinking in a jar—full of grime and muffled voices—a winter that wasn't a winter at all, but rather an evaporation of the soul. It was 2005, and we were landing at Otopeni.

I still see that green glow of the afternoon hovering above the runway, and at its far end, half-dissolved in fog, a billboard with salami shining in an eerie light. My mother was crying. She had cried almost the whole flight. In truth, she had begun crying at home, stroking the walls on Madison Street. But though Bucharest unreeled outside like a documentary about starvation, it was a new country and a new beginning, and I, for one, was tired of America.

For some time, New York had grown exasperating. It wasn't the New York of *Zegna* suits and thirty-dollar side parts, but a greyer, more sinister version—peopled by illegal nannies and sleepless office clerks. In comparison, Romania was Paradise. Not a country, but a pause in time. I would spend my vacations there, at my grandparents' home. When I pictured Romania, I saw endless summer—its breeze swishing through kiosks, moving the swings in the park, wrapping itself around the jasmine trees, climbing up the block pipes with the smell of tomatoes and fried oil. Romania meant freedom: the crack and spit of sunflower seeds, battered knees, and hide-and-seek with gypsies late into the night. Then came fall, and I'd return to P.S. 88, where the most exciting thing that could happen to you was a gold star on your homework.

Naturally, with the logic of the ripe age of fourteen, I concluded that a calendar year in Romania would be equal—if not superior—to a summer in Romania. And though the beginning still burns bright and orange in my memory, I can't say exactly when it all turned black for me. I can't search endlessly through the archives of humiliations—through every hurt, vulgarity, and

disappointment—until the very instance when the last illusion cracks.

I remember, not long after my return, someone told me in that typical happy fatalism so innate to Eastern Europe: *"Careful now, you're not on vacation anymore. This isn't America. It'll be hard for you."* And so it was. Under the shadow of this prophecy, the next ten years unfolded.

I came to know a type of bullying that distinguished itself from its American counterpart, which was softer, more sophisticated in its features, regulated by a type of street code. But Romania was a different world. Here, the decent order of things was reversed, and a boy could grope your private parts in class, but it was you who got punished for hitting him back. This risky brand of dignity—so shamelessly American—was scorned in a Romanian school, where a "good girl" was defined not by holding one's ground, but by giggling in the bathroom at obscenities.

I was a skeletal little thing, dark-haired, skin so pale it was almost see-through—with a penchant for hand flicks and phrases like "let me tell you what I think." And children here hadn't any nannies. Instead, they'd been raised on polenta with cow cheese and—with any luck—a summer in Bulgaria. And yet, those days were happier than the ones that came after.

High school I remember in fragments. *"Major depressive disorder,"* the psychiatrist had scribbled, *"due to environmental changes and social isolation."* But since my fifteen-year-old brain was swimming in paroxetine, I came out of that time with a kind of happy amnesia. Whatever I do remember feels like a deep dream—snapped threads with no time sequence that vanish on the wind just as I'm about to catch them. Mostly, there's a white salon. And a bouncy ginger girl, Maria. Perfectly normal, until a knife carved out her stomach from inside. She was a schizophrenic. My friend was what she was, far wiser and far kinder than the losers in high school who mocked my problematic cheerlessness. During our monthly check-ups—two days of various cocktails and therapy sessions—we'd laugh up a storm in the gardens. Embraced by the

clinical whiteness of it all, we felt peacefully released from our lives. Our drugged-up brains were perfectly synced to one another. Happy budding intellects discussing love and pain, Virginia Woolf, and the genius of Green Day. She wanted to work with children, to teach French. I wanted to raid tombs. My depression became unbearable after she died, and if it weren't for some English literature and an internal world of my invention, I think I would have followed her.

It's true that things went rather badly in my adolescence. I cried for most of those years, with a kind of biological regularity, like sweating or sighing—as if my eyelids had an automatic drainage system for psychic overload. I cried on trams and in chemistry class, I'd cry in supermarket aisles, over pyramids of cabbage.

Eventually, I lost track of why I was crying, though I suspected it had something to do with the darkness of the afternoons, when the sky loomed so low that it brushed over the crumbling balconies, and whatever was left of the light blanketed the city like a black shell. It was a dark world, indeed. A world where it was possible not to see a tree in half a kilometre, where you could live and die without seeing *The Nutcracker,* or tasting a fig—a place where a degrading poverty met and clashed with a demonic vastness.

Today, the memory of those hours' creeps inside me like a photograph. I see everything in a kind of aesthetic haze, so that sometimes I wish that memory would honour its tasks and not apply its ornamental tricks. Because back then there was nothing aesthetic, and if I make a deconstructive effort, I can recover the essence of that state. I can feel that atmospheric melancholy—sourceless, directionless—so deep and organic, seeping in your humours until it became a part of your identity. I feel it, but I also see it.

There is a photograph I carry within. I am coming home from school, through a parking lot I don't remember crossing—one perhaps invented from bits of other parking lots, or transitional spaces—but I have this parking lot in mind. Columns of cars buried under snowdrifts, and between them mud trails reflect a white sky. And then, in a gradual process of emergence, two colossal towers rise, and

I am standing very small in front of them, their windows pulsing with a television glow. It is true that mental pictures have a reputation for exaggerating the mundane. But there are smaller images that sadden me in the same way: green cellophane bags, old stoves, pots of begonias. And above all, the garbage chutes of apartment blocks, where I'd smoke at night in secret and sometimes bump into a girl—impossibly beautiful, with impossibly blue eyes—bent over a cock.

I suppose many of those who lived through Bucharest back then carry the same set of images. It was the era when the so-called "legal drug shops" swamped the streets, and you could sell rodenticide to any twelve-year-old with stolen cash. I remember one night when I ran away from home just so I could go out clubbing. My father was a stern, traditional man who saw in my chastity a sort of family heirloom. As such, I spent most of my time indoors.

From the high-school fragments that remain, I see Carina, Gabriela, and Raluca—a trio as obnoxious as their names—goth-pop Barbies torn from a *Rebelde*[1] scene, with black eyelids, scorched-straight hair, anorexic torsos, and blue tongues from those candy-rings that were in vogue then. And Carina knew some boys who had booked a table at *Bellagio*. And for the first time in my life, I saw a nightclub on the inside more extravagant than ancient Luxor, with Monica Columbeanu[2] sitting at a table, laptop open, a scene that haunted me with its unreachable nearness. She was so close, yet she inhabited another sphere. And though it was the dead of winter, we were wearing slutty pumps and tiny shorts, and eventually a man approached me who was very funny and charismatic, so I danced with him and gave him my number. Later, Carina would tell he looked like a flesh-peddler who did business with the Albanians.

It was a night of awakening. I still have the image of us coming home. I see myself running with Carina, hear our laughter breaking through the block—an endless corridor sunk in a blue dimness, with swinging lightbulbs and walls like an asylum. It was a metaphysical poverty, and the block was ready to collapse. But that morning—under the click-clack of our heels and with our shadows crawling on the

[1] *Mexican telenovela about high-school life*

[2] *Romanian supermodel*

walls—it had a kind of Russian charm. And later, I woke beside her as she moaned under the blanket with her boyfriend. And realizing the vulgarity of the moment, I felt such loathing—especially for her scruffy blanket—that suddenly I missed my parents. I remember walking into the kitchen and, opening the fridge, I found a collection of jam jars, a yogurt tub with bean stew, tins of cat food, and other scattered provisions lacking gastronomic logic.

Her mother had taken the drapes to the cleaners and the sun shone like a blast of acid. The light went straight into your soul, giving objects a terrible clarity—the yellowed grout between the tiles, the vinyl tablecloth, the soup-stained flowerpots—things that had to gain only covered in darkness. I felt crushed by guilt for spending my morning that way. From the kitchen, I could see the ugly city stretch as far as the telephone towers and the billboards at Iancului, flashing *Pepsi* over twenty-story panel blocks. Everything gave me a vague sort of dread—like evening winter walks, looking at the blackened snow, at people chasing buses, at the dead trees, the white air, at all the consequences of poverty and indifference and wrong decisions. And then I felt again that sadness of the humours, and—either because I had a migraine, or because the pimp had drugged me—but the cat began to speak in an archaic voice that told me all the dormant horrors from the feminine abysses of my lineage. And then I understood the moral of the story, and I called my dad to come and take me home.

It took me a few more years to understand that that damp, pale bleakness somehow matched the substance of the place. It was the very breath of Romania back then—the early 2000s—a country that wasn't trying to be any more than what it was, that was dragging itself through convalescence, with all the normal stumbles and relapses after the ravages of communism.

These were the days of Dan Diaconescu[3], when television meant watching a man get shoved in a dumpster, and it was possible for a mother and daughter to argue over a cemetery, and with ten lei you could get a bag of pastries and a *CoolGirl* magazine and, locking yourself in a bathroom, read about sex, breathless. When owning a Motorola meant the new world was approaching, and

[3] *Famous broadcaster*

flower-peddlers put it on speaker, and argued with their boyfriends on trams. Also, back when *Connex*[4] reigned over the city, its bright green pixels dissolving in the streets: in the wet asphalt, in the kiosk windows with corn-puffs, in the fiddler posters and the buses, where it was possible to see pyramids of people stacked atop each other, with the chassis sagging as the bus lurched forward like some cow. All of it was the panting of a country still discovering its face in the mirror, a country which, despite its bleakness, pulsed with authenticity.

Today, through the organising lens of memory, I remember those years with a kind of tenderness. Because, eventually, Romania did find its face—only it was a fake one, deformed in luxury restaurants and designer clothes. Malls sprung overnight, casting their shadow over balconies lined with pickle jars and sun-dried rugs. *Lancôme* commercials spilled their glitter in the old trams. Phones became intelligent, conversations became irritating. It was impossible to attend a reception without hearing the words "*globalization," "start-up," "change," "Europe,"* at least twenty times a night, in uniform progressions of thought beneath which panted the same Balkan insecurities.

The corporation cult was imported *en masse,* defined locally by the imitation of American TV. That was how socializing parties started, which no one in Manhattan had attended since the eighties. In fact, they were just an excuse for bald and failed entrepreneurs to hold a wineglass by the foot and hit on a girl from Moldova. By then, I hadn't understood what exasperated boredom meant, but that year I did. It seemed like everywhere I went I heard the same things and saw the same people. It felt like I was acting in some parody of *Suits*. It was plausible to drown in debt for a Mercedes, and the restaurant became a kind of ritual gathering. Basically, to eat a steak and drink a Cab encapsulated the great Romanian dream—the sum of all respect and power—although not much has changed since then. And beneath all this noise, growing like a swarm of flies, people still went back to the grim blocks and the shabby neighbourhoods. One evening, at a restaurant in the most expensive area of Bucharest, a terribly clever professor lectured me on Kissinger, devoured his steak with

[4] *Romanian telecommunications provider*

monstrous excitement, then, in the taxi, opened his belt. "Don't be scared," he said. "Just digestive problems." Later, I would see his face on political billboards.

But then something else happened, something that pierced the crust of boredom growing over me, something that would live for a long time in my memory. Because I had another summer in Romania—not an astronomical one, but an allegorical one. In fact, it was autumn, and I had just turned twenty-one, and that was when I fell in love.

I think it was then that I finally let go of whatever was left of my Western identity, with that osmotic instinct so typical of the lover. His entire history, his myths, his neighbourhood, the whole Dacian imaginary—I wanted to contain it all. New York belonged already to another life. Everything had collapsed: the skyscrapers on Park Avenue, Bloomingdale's, Christmas mornings, *Lion King* on Broadway, and that unique intimidation when you entered the city on Queensboro at dawn, with a red sun bursting through the monoliths. All those formative years—all of them exploded, millions of shards folding over each other until complete pulverization, until behind me was nothing. Only a mute, quivering black canvas.

And only then did Romania reveal itself to me, in all its poverty and myth. The trams rocking in the rain like prehistoric bugs, the decaying hospitals—matchboxes with pearly corpses—the brutalist blocks and their windows blazing in the dawn like furnaces. All this antiquity melted before me into a black hole containing all the mystery of life. My suffering, my struggles, now appeared to me as steps on a ladder. A ray of light piercing the darkness—pushing my spirit toward this crucial moment, in which Romania became my very body, my mirror. Here was my destiny. Here were all my lessons.

I liked giving money to beggars back then. Sometimes I even bought them food. Other times, I thought devastated that they too must've loved once. One day, a cunning old woman at Unirii[5] kept me for an hour with her life story. I listened to her with childish absorption. At the end, she asked for five million lei. I gave her two—which was all I had on me. When I wasn't giving money to

[5] *Train stop in Bucharest*

beggars, I liked riding the bus. I searched for reasons to prolong the time from one place to another; the distance between stops became a kind of corridor in time, where I listened to music and dissolved my body amid images of him. Upon leaving the bus, I liked the fumes that smacked me in the face with petrol.

I liked just about everything. Looking into universal shops—cataloguing pots, slippers, detergents, extension cords — just as I had once liked the eerie store displays of Second Avenue, twinkling *"Psychic Readings"* in pink. All the local smells I liked: wrinkled banknotes, tomato broth, fried dough. As I liked staying up late, reading Eliade[6], waiting for him to message me. How different was this country that had shaped my lover in its land. How good it had been to me, despite my criticisms. Walking through the University tunnel, in the flutter of posters I heard the breath of my unbroken homeland whispering through the elements. I felt a sort of pride in my new patriotic spirit. It sufficed for my phone to buzz with his name, and I'd gush with country love.

I presume, by now, you can guess the ending of this story. But it took me an extraordinary amount of time to outgrow these fairy tales and to begin learning my lesson, namely that it was *absolutely* possible to reside too long in Wonderland.

Part of what I'm trying to tell you is how Romania is experienced with a Western consciousness. The other part is what it's like to grow up. The rains of August trickle over playgrounds, over jasmine, over soviet kiosks, gathering inside my eyes, while I take off Runway B on a cold night in April, stripped of all illusions, the very runway on which, ten years earlier, I had landed full of hope. Because, more than anything, I think I want to explain why I left.

You see, I found myself in a rather strange position in Romania. Simply put, I never thought to build a real life there. It was too uncertain, too ugly, too irresistibly spectral. It never occurred to me that I could actually *live* there, only ponder the problem of living. In my mind, I had been "proscribed" to Romania to endure—to jump over obstacles like a mouse in a maze, and, one day, from all this

[6] *Romanian historian and writer*

accumulation of experience, to forge a literary voice. Of course, I knew all along that I wanted to be a writer. I wanted to write as a way of resolving my life—I knew this as clearly as one knows when one is in love, as one knows when one dies. My problem was that I had a nanny in New York, and I lived in a good neighbourhood, and wore a Catholic uniform to school, destined, by my father's projections, to land at Harvard. The problem was that writers have a different organism than normally adapted people. This capricious species—keepers of index cards and wordbooks—demands a different path, different specialization methods, wholly occult to, say, a history teacher or a CEO.

I *needed* Romania in order to become a real person. I used it in a way, as alchemists used the retort: as a corrosive medium in which the ego's matter could burn, then decompose, then transmute itself into a more durable form. And when the work was done, I left for New York, where there was nothing to suffer beside foot edemas after twelve-hour restaurant shifts. And there I could finally live a real life.

But somewhere within, I still carry the park I used to play in. A paradise that sparkles with a gold dust, and when it rains over the trees, the park lights up in jade. Just as I carry within that glassy vibration of gypsies laughing in the night. There, where the first loves and the songs of my nana are kept. But to grow is to suffer. He who journeys upward, suffers. And so, he climbs—with heavy steps, yet very certain, without hesitation, without losing focus—toward the light flickering above the jar. For behind him lie the ghosts, the golden illusions, drowned-out voices fading into songs, ready to seize you the instant you look back. The world of ghosts is the world that will remain unconquered. But it is the world of yesterday, never of tomorrow.

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