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O A N A S Î N Z I A N A P Ă L T I N E A N U *

During the War, Before the Marriage

All this actually happened. Yet how it really was can now only be approximated. It was more than sixty-two years ago, or about eighteen years from her birth, in an Orthodox family, in interwar Romania, latitude 46, longitude 27. On May 21, 1930, when the water broke, her mother was still convinced that she would give birth to her first born child through her armpits. Or so the legend runs in the family, from generation to generation, and I am dutifully passing it down to you. At this very moment, the first born looks at me with her light blue eyes, and the camera records in a Saturday afternoon light a strange flicker in her right eye due to recent eye surgery. Obeying the first rule of the “Vow of Chastity” proposed by Dogme '95, no props or sets were brought into her living room during shooting. The setting consists of an armchair and a few scattered files, documents, and typed poems, forming a semicircle on the floor. The walls are dusty yellow, the door is left open, the street noise remains in the background. The interview takes place on the fifth floor of a communist block of flats, in a common place with common people, with a replica of the Little Mermaid.

(the view is cinematic)

The woman in front of me, sitting slightly bent forward on the armchair, is now eighty years old. When I initiate flashbacks, there's almost a metallic quality to her eye quivering. Her eyes respond faster than her voice, her thoughts follow a set of narrative patterns to go back to the Second World War and its aftermath. In 1944, the year of the refuge, the entire family traveled by train to Lipova, where they remained from March to September. Afterward, she alone moved to București and stayed with her aunt and her first husband, Boris – a discreet individual in the family portrait, remembered for his Russian name and for his gift of music. Fifteen years old at the time, she finished the eighth grade in the capital city, at “Domnița Bălașa Brâncoveanu” high school. The enrollment at this institution started with a fraud. When she retells the incident, the camera records a cheerful glimmer in her eyes, as if

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she were saying “I was an ingenious and determined girl.” In the fall of 1944, the applicant had forged a letter from the Ministry of Education and admitted herself to that school. The forgery was clumsily committed, with the right hand of a teenage girl that used new ink and a blade to make the official letter read, “This candidate is to be admitted even if the number of places available is exceeded.” This brave act of fraudulence had not only turned the subordinate clause in the applicant’s favor, but it also enabled her to get her first job as a typist a few years later, after the war, due to the fact that she had learned typing and shorthand at that school, in București. By that time, however, she had to describe herself in more appropriate terms. “Endowed with democratic abilities,” the interviewee would write in a letter, “I am politely requesting to keep my job as a typist, despite the fact that I am not yet eighteen years old.” And so the job was hers for a little longer, until 1949, when she was asked to resign for religious and political reasons. She shook her head. “This is a difficult story,” she muttered, her voice fading, as if fearing the bad timing of a digression.

(an ambulance siren)

After living in București for almost a year, with her aunt and Boris, she returned to Iași and continued her studies at a commercial high school for girls only. It was her parents’ ambition to see her getting a good job as soon as possible and the commercial profile of the school, as well as the student fee, matched their idea of the daughter’s future: accountant at the train station. Meanwhile, the war had decided otherwise and the urgency of getting a job turned her into a typist. Having seen some of the documents she typed and the transcript of records from high school – all lying in a semi-circle on the floor – I can testify that neither typist nor accountant were the appropriate professions for the eighteen-year old.

(picture a blurred image of the war)

She remembers the last few years of high school, before she got married in October 1948, as dancing years. The first ball she attended was in a village, close to where her husband-to-be was living. They didn’t know each other then, they didn’t meet at that ball either, and the love story that is left from those few teenage years does not quite concern him. This scene had to be cut. (a picture of the green box on the top shelf) This first ball she attended was organized in a village school. “The

situation is clear,” she explains. “The school has two main rooms and the hallway in between serves as a bar. The ‘intellectuals’ go dancing in the room on the left, the ‘peasants’ on the right.” In the hallway, a student is nervously pushing a chair against the wall with his leg time and again – the hallway rhythm is a schizophrenic mix of waltz, tango, and horă.

In the city, however, they deal the cards differently.



In Iași, after the war, balls were hosted on occasion at the flamboyant, neo-gothic Palace, where not only high school and university students would come, but also the rank and fashion of the city. That one time when she went to the ball at the Palace, she received all these postcards as tokens of affection from suitors. The custom was to offer a postcard to the one courted. The greatest number of postcards received would determine the queen of the ball, and in turn, she would choose the king of the ball and dance together the queen’s waltz in the sumptuous ball room. The ball would usually end at daybreak.

(looking at the camera, she grabbed the green box and closed it)

“Many such balls I attended and I have lots of other stories to tell, but more than enough is too much,” she murmured and shied away. Her gleeful voice became slightly irritated. “I was not necessarily looking for a man to marry, on those occasions. It was a new world to me and I loved dancing. The conditions to marry a man – the conditions that my parents imposed – were two: the young man had to be enrolled at university and he also had to fulfill his military service.” There was a long pause in the discussion, initiated by the annoying ring of the phone, which she did not pick up.

All these young and hungry people had survived the war. They ate dog meat and bread with sawdust, they knew little of politics and romanticized their adolescence.

(the camera is shaking)

The questions are now different, yet the layers of the past seem to be made of brick. The answers are built in. Behind the wall, there's a boiling kettle. The mother pours the hot water into a small tub and bathes the smallest baby, then the next one, and the last one. In the same water, the father washes himself and the mother does the same. Once a week, always at the end of the week. Everything was used and reused – fabrics, water, shoes... There were no dancing shoes, only public bathhouses for common people. The railway company had a public bathhouse for its employees and family and it was free of charge. That's where she would go for a steam bath and a shower, together with her much younger brother and their mother. Usually, on Wednesdays. "Aaron also had a public bathhouse. My mother preferred his, because of the steam quality, but we had to pay so we didn't go there often." In the steam "amphitheater," the sturdy ones would sit on a board closer to the ceiling – "See, my mother, she was up there, holding a bunch of oak leaves she used for some sort of medical reason." The worker would come in every now and then to pour water over the heated stones in the oven. After showering, the clean customer could lie down for a while in bed.

(white sheets)

After she married and moved to Bacău, the family lived without a bathroom in the house for another fifteen years. The boiling kettle and the brick wall of the war period were transformed during communism. The kettle ritual would sometimes be performed at candle light, fault of electricity and hot water, whereas the brick wall would multiply greatly and ears would grow on them like ivy.



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