

Fiction

Flight from Father

by
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1

My father is a small, old man with glass balls in his eye sockets. At least he was the last time I saw him—and that's already a while ago, something like seven years ago—since then his eyes have gotten bluer and glassier and his mouth has become larger. And the silver in his hair has grown shinier. The color of his skin is healthier. My father believes in the future. My father lives in Romania and believes in the future of socialism. To carry my heavy suitcases—fully packed with stuff I brought back for him from the West—gives him strength.

My father doesn't believe in the West. The West with its profligate prosperity is a fiction to him. A fiction that no one will admit to when it proves itself as such. So that no one will laugh at them when it's gone. For this reason my father carries the suitcases with enormous strength and refuses to take a taxi. I have to fall into line. Because I've just arrived and still have no Romanian money. It's still early to change. I have to fall into line. After a twenty-four hour train ride, I schlep myself behind my father like a drunken hound. I'm the kid again. The good one. The one who will rebel soon.

2

He's standing by the station wearing his old leather coat and his Kyrgysian astrakhan cap waiting for me. His lips like the blades of a scissor.

His lips were always cutting. Unsparing: You are not worth anything. Nothing will ever come of you. And no one will marry you. For years I have heard these phrases. For years I have carried the scissor wounds within me. The deep scars of this unrelenting way of raising someone to perfection. You

are not allowed to make any mistakes, my father would take great pains to tell me. And I have always grasped very soon what was expected of me.

We were an exemplary family. I was proud of that. I was proud of every burden that I could share with my parents. I had to be self-confident, self-critical and responsible. To be able to influence others. So that the world would become a better place.

La valeur n'attend pas le nombre des années.

We lived in a settlement of the Partidul Comunist Român Im in “Block PCR.” That’s what our four story apartment house was called. It was the first highrise in our little city. A modern building with running water and bath for the most modern strata of the country. And we belonged to it.

All of the adult inhabitants of the PCR-Block were actively engaged in the well-being of the country. No, they fought for it. In the class struggle. They were also fighters for the well being of the Motherland and the efflorescence of the Communist Party. All fathers and many mothers in the building were party functionaries. Propagandists. I had the unspeakable fortune to have two politically conscious fighters in my own family.

We were an exemplary family. And belonged to one of the largest. To one tribe. The tribe of the PCR people.

Even for the children of our tribe I had to be a role model. Mother and Father expected it of me. And I could not disappoint them. Father, among other things, had taken it upon himself to produce the new human in his own family. I had more duties than the other children. My consciousness. My sense of responsibility had to be greater than that of the others. No childish excuses. No tricks. No playfulness. I can’t remember ever being forgiven for a mistake.

I never had time. I always had to do something. Something useful. Something that would advance me. Something that would help others too. My time had already been strictly planned since my childhood. Time to play was seldom. I had to struggle for the permission to be able to be with people my age. Many a time crowds of children stood in front of my door, wanting to free me from my chores. They begged my parents insistently. Tried to convince my mother. Now and again she would give in. With a reproachful

look. I knew exactly what it meant. Which lectures I would get to hear afterwards. About the regrettably stupid way I would waste my time. About how regrettable my views on life were. Because you lie in the bed you make. And my parents would sacrifice themselves for me. So that I would have a better life than they did. Because no one had sacrificed themselves so for them. They had to rely on their own strength to make something of themselves. And no one would have spent so much as a penny on them so that they could learn something. So they could have an education. With it.

My father always told me that. As far as Mother is concerned, she had been to a boarding school. A private school for well brought up daughters.

Piano. Violin. I got private ballet instruction. Even though ballet counted as the final relic of a petite bourgeois education. This was made up for with gymnastic training.

For this reason I hate gymnastics. And every form of athletic instruction.

Piano. Violin. Ballet. Gymnastics. Russian. French. English. Any type of lessons, I always had them. Whereas my friend Juliana was allowed to push her doll stroller here and there blithely.

I always enjoyed playing the piano. At least in the beginning. The small, old, deaf, fat man with the grunt pink ears, who always tapped on my fingers drove it out of me. He was supposed to be my piano teacher. Mother knew him from before. As she still received piano lessons. I didn't believe that this was Mother's way of getting revenge. It was her own stubborn way of conveying an image of life to me. I was supposed to learn to stand above things. In a certain sense I was also able to succeed at this. Because I still like playing the piano today.

With the violin it went downhill pretty early with Bach. When my teacher grabbed my sprouting breasts. And I came home shaking. Without my shoes. I'll give you a lion! He shouted after me. I'll give you more. Even more.

My parents had to see to it that an education was not achieved at any price. And found that one had to be very careful. So that the remnants of the former regime did not poison the children of the new era. In our presence the reactionary forces kept themselves hidden. And they had to be exposed immediately. Everyone had to contribute to that. We had to get better at

being careful. And what good fortune that we had managed to succeed at it this time!

Piano. Violin. Ballet.

Mother wanted me to take small steps. To eat taking small bites. To learn to move softly and elegantly. I also enjoyed ballet lessons. But suddenly I was no longer allowed to go. I would have gladly danced my whole life long. Expressed my happiness through dance. To express oneself. To dance. To lose oneself and forget. And to find oneself again. But that was not the point of it. Mother was accused of acting unpolitically. Father was furious. Horrified. Mother admitted to having made a mistake.

I was already writing back then. No one had to know. No one could take that away from me.

I always had some type of lessons. While Juliana played with her doll stroller. And the others played *••ri-ora•e-mun•i-•i-ape* or dodge ball. And we had made the rules so strict that by every ball switch we had to kiss each other. As a rule. And not out of sheer pleasure.

I had no time for kissing. I still had to take care of my pets. I always owned some sort of pet. So that I would not be so all alone. And so that I could also learn to be responsible for others. This responsibility could not kill my love for animals. I felt connected with their fate. I always owned a pet. And somehow it always turned out to be a catastrophe. My pigeon drowned in a hot oil tank in our courtyard. The rabbit wound up in the frying pan. The squirrels ate homemade soap. My tomcat got his testicles poked on a barbed wire fence. The fish. Their fat white bellies facing upwards. The smell of death lay over my childhood.

Piano. English. Violin.

Sometimes I stole some time. Forgot the piano lesson. I went down the Marosch to go fishing with the other children. I knew the gravity of my sin this was and what consequences would await me. The reddish swollen traces on the cheeks. The dark blue streaks on my bottom. I'd been able to guess Mother's reaction for some time now. Nevertheless I took my chances over and over again.

Lies were always complicated. In truth, I couldn't really afford to lie. Whenever Mother asked what I had done the whole day long, I could leave some stuff out, simply by not mentioning it. But when she asked expressly, if and when, then I had to admit to everything. And bring the strap. I would rebel in my own way. And brought the strap. Gave it to her without hesitating. Mother extended the strap. Struck with an ever-increasing fury. You will not shed a single tear. No. I didn't cry. I knew that crying was a sign of weakness.

Sometimes I stole some time for myself. My parents worked a lot, were seldom at home. Father least of all. They gave me chores. One of them was to work very hard at school. Every one expected me to be the best and to receive the first prize every year.

You're good for nothing, nothing will come of you. And no one on this earth will ever marry you. My father intended to motivate me.

My parents worked very hard. Father's life consisted exclusively of work. Mother often did overtime. As the director of the Communist Women's Organization she had to run around to and from the different villages all day long. With dusty boots. A real Natasha. For a short while we had domestic help. A rosy Swabian granny from Banat. I don't know if Father wanted to save again. Or if it was the Party that judged it to be human beings exploiting other human beings. In any case, I was already alone at age eight. I had to take care of myself. Clean the apartment. Keep things in order. Warm up my food. And cook for myself when need called for it. They left me with a shopping list and cooking recipes. I had to finish my homework. To go to extracurricular lessons. I was not allowed to have fears about being alone.

I was one of the first latch-key kids in our city. One of the first latch-key kids in our society. With the key on a string around my neck, I would be happy to spend some time at our neighbors. With their kids. While I was doing that I would listen attentively to hear if my parents were coming back. And would quickly sneak into our apartment before they got back.

I wasn't allowed to be afraid to be alone. I was afraid of being afraid. Hoped that people would not be able to see that about me.

Before my parents were due to come home, I would always look out the window. I wanted to have everything ready. I would pose. I hated being

surprised by them. Most of the time it wasn't good. When they were late, I would always look at the clock over and over again. At my list. If everything had been done. Ran from the door to the window. And from the window to the balcony. Took something from here and set it there. Organized this or the other thing. Practiced piano. I wanted them to catch me doing something useful. Each time, I never knew what they would find undone. I would check the kitchen. The bathroom. I would get increasingly nervous. I would start to shake. Sometimes they would delay by a day. Then they would finally come, and I had forgotten to empty out the garbage. I would go get the strap. Order had to prevail. As well as discipline. One had to be able to rely on his comrades in every situation.

I wanted my parents to like me. No. I was convinced of the importance of becoming a new human. All of the adults in our house were preoccupied with this. I was always considered to be a wonder child. My father liked to hear this. I was following his footsteps. It wasn't like having a son. But still.

In our tribe. No, in fact, in our whole city, all eyes were pointing toward me. Everyone took care to tell me so. I couldn't afford to disappoint all of these people. I grew up accordingly. My opinions were childish, but "healthy." I was even allowed to correspond with people in foreign countries. I had a friend in the Soviet Republic of Moldavia, Svetlana Vrabie, which means sparrow in Romanian. Svetlana Sparrow. A Russian-Romanian name construction. She conformed to all that Moldavia represented. I wrote to her in Romanian but in Cyrillic script. I also wrote Moldavian. Moldavian was a Russian invention. The war had been over for some time now. In the meantime the Party allowed it. And the Motherland demanded it. Patriotism should flicker in us too now. Next to internationalism. And without failing to show respect to the big brother in all things, the New Generation should not forget that Moldavia is Romanian soil. Even if on a long term loan. They tried to drum this into us, without straining our relations to the Soviet Union.

I had no idea that it had been a political decision to allow me to correspond with people from foreign countries.

My other pen-pal was from France. The Party allowed the western enemy to have a look at our reality. To be exposed to a healthy image of it. And everyone had to contribute his or her efforts to this end. I wasn't aware of my responsibility.

Our PCR-Block was the first high-rise on the Marosch. Over and over again we, the kids, would be told how the Marosch, the Mures, was the river that separated the seven forts from Banat. How even our city was separated by the Marosch. Maybe there was a reason for that. Everything had to have a possible reason. A political one.

Before, our neighborhood belonged to the multiethnic state of Kakanien. And today it is marked by borders. An area that borders with Hungary. A short distance from Voivodina, the Serbian Banat. A multicultural area with many “*nationalități conlocuitoare*.” A lively area neighborhood with mixed blood.

Shortly after our house got modernized, the residential block MFA next door got built, the “*Ministerul Forțelor Armate*.” An army settlement. A great rivalry existed between us kids from the PCR-Block and those from the MFA. Power struggles. We waged wars. Who’s stronger, the Party or the army. Brotherhood was seldom possible.

It wasn’t till later that I understood that the Communists had come to power during the war with the help of the king and had substituted a military dictatorship. The military dictatorship of Marshall Antonescu. The king called upon the patriotic duty of the Communists and removed them from the illegitimacy of Soviet exile, in order to save Romania. The same Communists, not more than a handful, who stood under the protection of the king, afterwards forced the king to abdicate.

Then these comrades brought the Russians to Romania. They brought the powerful, indomitable Red Army with its tanks. That were supposed to free Romania. In the end there was war.

Romania was freed. And cleansed of Romanians. Everyone became Russian. They spoke Russian. Read Russian. The bookstores and the publishers were called “The Russian Book.” Overnight Romania became a Slavic country. With a Slavic past. History was written anew. One discovered that Romanian was a Slavic language. So that everything would have its proper order, new letters of the alphabet were invented and introduced into the language. The orthography was changed. The spelling of Romania’s name was changed. So that as little as possible would remind one of Romania’s roots. The

introduction of the Russian alphabet was successful only in the part of Moldavia that was annexed to the Soviet Union after the war.

Who was stronger. PCR or MFA. This question was difficult for us kids to answer. Because with time the settlement of the MFA people grew larger and changed its name. The city's security forces that belonged to the internal ministry also moved into the city.

The security forces and the army were in the service of the Party. The Party served the ideology. And the ideology was supposed to serve the Motherland. The people. The coronation of creation. That supposedly was stronger than nature.

Or was it otherwise. Because one cannot imagine what kind of fights the two residential blocks drove us kids to. The army was in the service of the Motherland. And the security forces in the service of the Party. And the Party in the service of the ideology.

Or was it.

Man was in fact stronger than nature. Indestructible. And was supposed to outlive everything.

La valeur n'attend pas le nombre des années. That virtue did not depend on age was a known fact to all of us kids from the PCR-Block. We were aware of our duties. You are the new guard, everyone would take great care to tell us. You carry a great responsibility.

We had a great opportunity. We had every opportunity. Even one to have clean files. To erase the dark stains in our parents' past. We, the generation of a new world.

I can still remember Father's eyes lighting up whenever he spoke about our opportunities. Almost with envy. Envy and admiration. And much restraint. One had to earn this chance. Nothing comes for nothing, everything is tied to sweat. With sweat and sacrifice. Over and over again one has to sacrifice, when something important is at stake. And what could be more important than the new world, that we were going to build. Whose foundations our parents were laying down for us. No sacrifice was big enough to fulfill this duty. How privileged we were!

Oh well. That's how it went. And Father's eyes shined. And they were moist. His voice. The new times, which he would not experience. The new human. And our children. And the happiness. And our duties fulfilled.

I believe I was nearly six at the time.

No one could reproach Father. His position was clearly "healthy." He was loyal to the Party and wanted to climb high within it. I had the best future before me. No one doubted that they could rely on me. That it turned out to be otherwise is something for which Father has never forgiven me.

We, the children from the PCR-Block, were in the care of the Party and under the observation of the security agencies. They wanted to know how we were developing and to what extent we could be trusted. The experiment with the new people, the new era could not fail. I came to feel clearly the consequences of this fear. I felt watched. Followed. Shadowed. How much my parents know about this observation or wanted to know about it, I don't know. At least they didn't take me seriously. One could not speak of naiveté where they are concerned.

Father spoke of imagination and fits of hysteria. Mother always feared rape.

3

I was not yet sixteen as it all began.

By that time I had the pioneer time and an interrupted career as director of the "*Uniunea Tineretului Communist*," the Communist youth organization in my class that time already behind me. The war was over. The revolution had won. Communism had established itself. And in spite of all that I talked at assemblies about the importance of all young Communists to remain vigilant. To organize properly. To behave critically. To make it in society by virtue of their own strengths. Not only by duly paying the monthly membership fees.

It hadn't been so bad under the conditions of the time. The Party demanded criticism. Especially self-criticism. And demanded a certain degree of action. The word action excited us. It excluded the suffocating monotony. It was bound up with heroism and revolution. With violence. A form of violence of which we were not aware of at the time.

Back then one held the revolution for over. It was not until much later with Ceau•escu that the Communists would become professional revolutionaries. “*Revolutionari de profesie,*” he called it. The revolution continues. It is never complete. The class struggle never ends.

Everything that Father and Mother had taught me I wanted to apply. I felt obligated to include the others. At best I would have changed something in the organization myself. The possibility was taken away from me. I was released from my duties. Unburdened. Freed. Was condemned to passivity.

I was not yet sixteen when it all began. My performance at school was still good at that time. My talents diverse. I was the wonder child, spoke several languages fluently. I was self-confident and had some views that I also was able to defend.

I found that one didn’t have to necessarily thank the Party for the mechanization of agriculture. I said it out loud. One had to only look around at what was happening in the world. Then one knew that development and progress were the products of society. That was not received well.

Whether Father was informed of my pronouncements is unknown to me. Probably not. I was made to pay for all of that only later. All of that and much more, would later be found in my files.

My correspondence with foreign pen-pals also contributed to the assumption that I was harboring ideas as to how Communism could be reformed. At the time I wrote a novel about this, which can also be found with my confiscated documents.

I possessed qualities, which were desirable in the opinion of the party. A sense of justice. Compassion toward the oppressed and readiness to help them. They held me to be a fighting spirit and not open to compromises. It operated from the assumption that one could quickly eradicate the undesirable qualities from me.

Excellent psychologists developed behavioral profiles of us, the PCR-Block kids. So it was known early enough, that I wouldn’t go the middle way.